

CHANTAL CORCORAN

## **EVERYTHING THAT MRS. PUCCI'S HOME WAS NOT**

ANGELA WAS GOING HOME. Lucy wasn't with her. Through the dust-coated window of the Greyhound, Angela watched for bears eating blueberries in the brush alongside the 401. It was hot. Her black hair stuck to the side of her face and the back of her thin neck. Beads of perspiration swelled amongst the downy hairs that grew a little thicker and darker now above her lip. She lowered the window four inches, as far as it would budge. Of course, she knew that blueberries didn't grow this far south in Ontario. There weren't any bears, either.

She yanked her penny loafers from her feet and tossed them to the floor. She wasn't wearing socks. Her toenails were polished a pretty pink to match her fingernails and the party dress Mrs. Pucci had imported from Italy. The dress was folded delicately and laid atop everything else in Angela's suitcase, stowed beneath the bus. Her new leather sandals, also Italian, were packed neatly beside the pink silk-cotton blend. Angela wiggled her toes, then pulled her knees into her chest to rest her chin against them. The polyester pants she wore—her favorite last winter, for warmth and comfort—were unbearable in July's oppressive heat, sagging in the seat and belly. With her hands, she shook at the hem of each pant leg, creating small breezes to cool her calves.

It was childish habit, this scouting for bears, and she silently berated herself, reminded herself that she was a woman now.

Lucy. She hadn't seen her in months.

Two months earlier, in the spring of 1967, in her room at Mrs. Pucci's home for wayward girls—sparse with textbooks, a few photos and Lucy's velveteen rabbit—Angela had pressed her forehead to the window. Her hand, fingers splayed white, also pressed at the glass, so hard she expected it would break, while she watched her father with Lucy on the driveway below.

May's bright sun lit the crown of his head when he leaned over to set the infant, sleeping in her new wicker carrier, into the station wagon. Angela noticed that his bald spot had grown wider since she'd studied it from atop his shoulders, as a small girl. He smiled up at her through the window, waved his short fingers as if in reassurance.

Further along, two teenage girls scrubbed at the graffiti that marked Mrs. Pucci's fence—*Sluts! Putanas!* The work of righteous locals, sprayed in crimson across white pickets.

Unwilling to watch them drive away, Angela pulled down the shade, extinguishing the afternoon sun, and crawled back into the single cot with its scratchy blanket. Above her a crucifix hung on an otherwise bare wall. From downstairs she heard talking and laughing and Elvis Presley singing gospel through the walls as she clutched Lucy's plush rabbit to her chest, rocking to the muted beat.

Angela held her knees, swaying back and forth to the memory of the cheerless ballad: *Precious Lord, take my hand. Lead me on, let me stand. I'm tired, I'm weak, I'm worn ....*

The bus slowed to take an exit ramp, another small town on this milk-run between Kingston and Toronto. *Welcome to Belleville.* Angela blew monotony out her mouth. Her cheeks puffed.

She looked up at the sound of the doors squeaking open. A young man of about seventeen climbed the stairs. She watched him looking for a free seat, saw him see her, a pretty girl with olive skin and dark eyes—she knew this much about herself.

He smiled.

Angela looked down, hugged her knees tighter. He might have thought she was being coy until he took the seat next to her and she turned abruptly to face the window, her head twisted so far right that her neck ached by the time they reached the highway again.

She could see in the window's reflection that he was handsome. Once she would have blushed at his attention and smiled, an invitation to conversation. Now, she folded her arms across her chest when she felt him watching her. From the corner of her eye she saw him put his hands on his thighs, push them toward his knees as if to dry moist palms on his blue jeans. Peter had done this, too.

Underneath the seat, she squeezed her sweaty feet back into her shoes.

*Do you*—he began to ask, but Angela stood abruptly.

*Excuse me*, she said, pushing past him.

The young man twisted his knees to let her by, looking confused as she tugged her schoolbag down from the overhead rack. It was heavy with text books, a few novels and an Italian translation dictionary—the pages curled with use, since Mrs. Pucci would hear no English in her home.

When she found another seat, across the aisle and closer to the front, she dropped her bag on the sun-faded cushion. She'd thought she might read during the four-hour ride home, but found herself staring out at the passing trees, fields, farmhouses.

Angela leaned her head against the window that smelled like dust, once again pushed off her shoes and yanked up her knees, and closed her eyes. For a while she drifted in and out of loose dreams about children and animals, mothers with crimson lips pushing carriages through the cobbled streets of Naples, the statue of David crying marble tears.

The smell of manure blew in at her with the warm wind.

In Cobourg, a woman waved from the platform to another woman, who settled herself in the seat behind Angela. Mrs. Pucci had not waved. She'd been reluctant even to deliver her to the station.

*Why I'm doing this?* she said several times during the short ride through town, her squat, panty-hosed calves and pilgrim shoes pumping fiercely on the brake for every yield sign.

*This is not the agreement*—breaking her own rule, speaking fractured English from her set jaw, to be sure Angela understood just how inconvenienced she truly was.

Angela knew of other girls whom Mrs. Pucci had driven and retrieved from the Kingston terminal, but Angela's father was supposed to fetch her. That had been the original plan. Despite her business, Mrs. Pucci abhorred the unplanned.

*This party, it makes your mamma crazy*, her father had said on the phone the previous evening. There were still the tables to be fetched from the rental place. The yard, too, needed work before the guests arrived to welcome Angela home. *The weeds, they come everywhere*, he said.

Angela let her bare feet fall to the dirty bus floor and splayed her toes in the grit, making little dirt piles like ant hills and then spreading them thin

beneath her feet. She wondered how many other girls had come from Mrs. Pucci's to ride this bus. How did they ever go home?

*I'm too young to be nonna*, her mother had said, when Angela could no longer hide her pregnancy. Her eyes were puffy with crying and she buried them in her arms at the kitchen table. Then, abruptly, she lifted her head. Her fingers dug deep into hair as dark and thick as Angela's, clutching at roots. Her feet stomped beneath the table. Her eyes narrowed to a glare.

*It's no right!* There had been disgust in her mother's voice.

Angela thought again of Mrs. Pucci's vandals, with their spray paint and toilet paper, eggs and rotten tomatoes, paperbag bombs packed with feces. Then, for no reason at all, she remembered the ruby-stained cigarette butts she'd eaten as a child, from a glass ashtray that adorned her parents' coffee table like a candy dish.

*Lucy*, she wrote in the dirt with the tip of her big toe. Her calf cramped with the effort.

Last fall, it was Peter's name she had doodled in her notebooks, on her desk, in the locked diary her mother ransacked her room to find after she'd caught them on the back porch, Peter's hand beneath Angela's blouse. It was Peter's name Angela had traced in the frost that formed on her bedroom window, where she'd been banished for weeks.

*Are you sure?* he had whispered.

*I love you*, she'd told him, in the backseat of his father's Bel Air.

Angela became aware of the bus vibrating beneath her. Between her legs, that pleasing sensation. She squeezed her knees together. The hot sun pressed at her cheek, her shoulder. She wasn't wearing a bra; none fit anymore. A droplet of sweat trickled alongside her breast, slid down and slipped into a fold of loose skin at her belly. She remembered Peter's hoarse voice, his hot breath in her ear. Her feet pressed flat on the warm floor. Her toes curled.

*School then home. School then home. Nothing else!* Her mother had slapped four knuckles repeatedly against the palm of her other hand.

*Finito!* she had declared of Angela's relationship with Peter. Too late. It was early in November when Angela's belly began to swell.

It wasn't long after that that Mrs. Pucci's name became the common murmur at the family dinner table. Angela's mother leaned past her plate to relay to Angela's father the details, as Mrs. Pucci had explained them to her.

*Just like Italy*, she said. *And nobody will know.*

*I'll know.* Angela poked at her potatoes.

Her father chewed slowly on his lamb.

*We all are winning like this*, her mother said. Trace lines gathered around her eyes.

Her father looked to Angela, to her mother again, then to the ceiling for answers.

That's when her mother threw down her napkin. *Why you no want me happy?* Her hands and her shoulders convulsed with sobs.

When the bus pulled into Bowmanville, the driver announced a ten-minute rest stop and the passengers unloaded.

The small rocks that covered the parking lot stung the soles of her bare feet as she walked in circles, stretching her legs and raising clouds of dust to hover at her knees, recalling the bocce ball competitions in Mrs. Pucci's gravel alley—as mandatory as the cooking lessons, the Italian classes, morning mass.

A few passengers stood in line at the side of the building waiting for the toilet. Others dropped coins into a Pepsi machine. The boy with the sweaty palms smoked a cigarette and watched Angela.

*Angela, she visit Italia*, her mother told friends, neighbours and the mailman, who delivered the postcards boasting of Angela's grand adventures—as dictated by Mrs. Pucci—authentic with Italian stamps and postal markings (an arrangement with Mrs. Pucci's sister in the old country). On the reverse: cathedrals and fountains, olive groves and piazzas, the Mediterranean sea under a brilliant sun. Everything that Mrs. Pucci's home was not.

Back on the bus Angela lifted her feet, inspected her soles. She'd need to scrub them before she put on her new sandals.

The sandals were to be considered her birthday present, her mother had written. The pink dress, too. *Mrs. Pucci, she is expensive*, her mother said at least a thousand times.

There'd been no cake, no homemade gelato, no young cousins to chase Angela around the yard, doling out paddywacks, when she turned seventeen. Some of Mrs. Pucci's girls did stop by the small room where she lay on sheets stale with the scent of depression, where the blind had not been lifted in the weeks since Lucy had left. The rabbit's pink flannel ears had been worn with rubbing when they brought Angela gifts of chocolate, cigarettes, chewing gum.

*A perfect inmate's celebration*, a tall girl joked.

The cigarettes and the chocolate she had hidden in the dresser drawer beneath the oversized clothing, the nightgowns and faded towels. Perhaps the next girl would have chocolate cravings. Angela had craved oranges.

Reaching into her bag, she found a stick of Juicy Fruit. It was soft with heat when she folded it like the accordion her father played at weddings, to push into her mouth.

Elvis had married a girl named Priscilla on the day Lucy was born, that same tall girl informed her.

*This boy, he no Italiano*, her father said, when Angela tried to explain that she loved Peter. That he wanted to marry her.

*Your mamma, she love you*. He draped his thick arm across her shoulders.

*Shh ...* He put a finger to her lips. *You are the bambino*.

Angela dropped her head back, slumped further into her seat. Even chewing was tiresome, so she spat out the gum to stick on the seatback beside another discarded wad—but, always a rule follower, she couldn't do it. She put it back in her mouth and swallowed it, where it would remain in her belly for seven years, people said.

Outside the window, factories squatted in wild fields lining the shore of Lake Ontario, then pockets of forest, an old school house, a cluster of farms, a graveyard.

The previous week there'd been a stillbirth at Mrs. Pucci's, one half of a twin set. Another, six months before that. Angela's own mother had twice miscarried before her doctor had cautioned against trying again. So Angela was grateful for Lucy's angry cries, her strong lungs.

*Ten fingers. Ten toes. Nine pounds, six ounces*, the doctor had reported.

*Grande*, said Mrs. Pucci, impressed.

When Angela's lip curled up on one side, Mrs. Pucci cleared her throat, tucked a loose strand into her tightly woven bun and smoothed down her apron bib. Then, in her curt Italian, she instructed the doctor to hurry up with his stitching.

Forty-three miles to Toronto. Angela became anxious. Under her breath she began to recite the Italian dialogues practised during dinner hour

at Mrs. Pucci's: *Do you have fresh fish? Yes, it was caught just this morning. You pay by the pound. Will you filet it, please? Shall I remove the head? The weather is splendid. Michaelangelo is my favorite of all the Renaissance artists. What time is mass celebrated?*

The many conversations she'd memorized melded into one, as Angela imagined the attention she would receive on her arrival. Aunts and uncles would crowd her, kiss her cheeks, squeeze her face. Her Uncle Giovanni would hug her, a smidge too tight for a beat too long.

In Oshawa the young man disembarked. *Slut*, he said, under his breath, as he moved past her on the bus. *Putana*, her mother had said.

The old woman rose, too, her knitting needles clacking together like uncertain applause.

Her grandmother would pat the couch, beckon her to sit and talk—as per Mrs. Pucci's script. *Tell Nonna, you like Italia?* And Angela would respond in the affirmative. With enthusiasm.

Angela's water had broken on Mrs. Pucci's plastic-covered couch. She closed her eyes again, saw Lucy's little red face as she had for the first time, all that black hair; her small nose; her perfect lips; the soft spot on her head that had made Angela's heart skip a beat.

Purposefully, she closed her eyes, and for a long time she thought of nothing, was aware only of her breathing, the weight of her eyelids. Then there was the growling of her stomach to solicit visions of the feast her mother would lay out in celebration: her father's homemade salami, pasta salads, pickled beets, deviled eggs.

From the back of the bus a baby cried and Angela startled at the twinge in her breast, the letdown sensation. She folded her arms across her chest.

*Can I feed her?* she had asked Mrs. Pucci, once the doctor had left.

Mrs. Pucci raised her eyebrows, her dry lips pursed at Angela's English. *No.*

Then a knock came at her bedroom door. *Torno subito*, said Mrs. Pucci, rushing from the room to tend to another girl in labour. Angela listened for her key in the lock before she opened her gown.

While Lucy nursed, Angela's fingers played in the dark hair that tufted her head. She traced the tiny features of her face: her delicate chin, the impossibly soft skin of her cheek.

*Perche la bambina non mangia?* Again Mrs. Pucci brushed the ugly rubber nipple at Lucy's cheek, but Lucy would not have it. Thrice Angela secretly fed Lucy in those two days before her father arrived with the papers.

*It's not for you to name her, Bambina.* Her father's smile had been apologetic.

*Where's Ma?* she asked, returning the pen. *Still in bed?*

Her mother had been hiding in her room for months. *Doctor's orders,* she claimed.

*One more,* her father said, flipping through the legal pages. *She's painting,* he said, handing her the pen again.

Angela hadn't been allowed to paint Mrs. Pucci's walls. Instead she straightened the small square room obsessively, spacing the metal hangers two inches apart, stacking her books, shining the faded mirror, the window, folding Lucy's tiny things and placing them just so in the drawer—these were her nesting urges.

She used her Christmas money to order a newborn's sleeper from the Sears catalogue, with a matching hat and the white flannel blanket Lucy had been wrapped in when Angela kissed her goodbye. And the velveteen bunny that Angela pressed first beside Lucy, then to her own chest every night once Lucy was gone. Until she woke up one morning and it, too, was gone.

The blanket would have been washed several times by now, Angela knew. It would smell of bleach and laundry detergent, not of baby spit or her own breast milk, which, despite the phantom letdowns, had dried up.

The lanes multiplied and the traffic increased as the bus neared Toronto. The heat intensified the smell of the city as they coursed past familiar scenes from her childhood: the highrises sprouting above majestic trees along the Don Valley Parkway; the shoreline littered with picnicking families; skyscrapers; billboards; train tracks—all of it made her sit up in her seat.

*Io dico, tu dico, lui dice, lei dice.* Under her breath Angela began to conjugate verbs over and over, as she'd done for sixteen hours while Lucy pushed her way out, first with her feet, then with her head, once the doctor had righted her.

There would be a cake big enough to feed a hundred people and a banner stretched across the living-room wall to welcome her home. Perhaps it would be in English, more likely Italian. Her little cousins would pull on

her dress, grab at her hands. They'd inundate her with crafts and pictures created these last ten months just for her, and she would tell them of Italy, stories she'd created just for them.

*Last stop, Toronto Union Station.*

Angela stood quickly and stepped into the aisle. Beside the bus she rolled her neck and pulled back her shoulders, waiting for her luggage to be unloaded before dragging it across the station into the women's bathroom.

A red-headed girl, slightly younger than Angela, leaned against the sink, smoking a cigarette. Angela could feel her gaze when she kneeled on the floor before her suitcase, but ignored her, hearing only the click, click of the suitcase clasps.

The dress was only slightly wrinkled. She removed it and the Italian sandals. Beneath these sat a man's leather belt, a lipstick case and other trinkets stamped *Made in Italy*, souvenirs to distribute to her family, courtesy of Mrs. Pucci.

In the stall she dropped her polyester pants and shoved them behind the toilet. She did the same with her shirt. She pressed toilet paper to her armpits, wiped the sweat from beneath her limp breasts and sprayed deodorant under her arms before stepping into fresh panties and snapping on the bra that didn't fit. Then, in her pink party dress, she approached the mirror, where the redhead smirked at her.

Angela proceeded to wash her feet in the sink, brush out her hair, and apply lipstick and blusher. Finally, she pressed her feet into the new sandals.

*Hot date?* asked the girl.

*Something like that,* said Angela, in the tough tone she'd used with Mrs. Pucci's girls. Then she reached for her bags and headed out to catch a cab to the airport.

High above airplanes charged in and out of Toronto's international terminal like great waves of thunder. Around her people hustled, scurried, hugged and wept in each others arms. Drivers held up signs, shouted names. Angela braced herself.

A small boy waved a flag—red, white and green, like the one in Angela's hand—and she realized that a plane must have just arrived from Italy—Mrs. Pucci thought of everything. Angela recalled the bulletin board in the old woman's office: bus and train schedules from all over Canada, flight information and a world map marking routes across the Atlantic in red.

Suddenly Angela became curious about the people around her. Who had actually seen the Leaning Tower of Pisa? *The construction of which began in 1173 and continued for two hundred years*—she knew this from Mrs. Pucci's lessons, this and so many other facts to back the lies. Who had ridden a gondola? *For centuries the chief means of transportation in Venice*. Who had seen the interior walls of the Sistine Chapel? *They were painted in an amazingly short period—only eleven months*.

Angela saw her father's car approaching.

*These paintings were executed by the premier painters of the fifteenth century: Perugo, Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, Rossellini, Signorelli*. The car is filled with uncles and cousins. *And their respective workshops, which included Pinturicchio, Piero di Cosimo*.

She took a bold step forward. Her eyes grew wide.

*The details are important*, Mrs. Pucci said, over and over.

All four car doors opened at once.

Angela's heart raced. If she couldn't remember this, how much more had she already forgotten?

She held up her Italian flag.

Then it came to her: *And Bartolomeo della Gatta*.

She breathed. And like the small boy, she waved her little flag as her family descended upon her.

*Sorriso! Sorriso!* Mrs. Pucci had instructed her, pushing Angela's lips into a grin, with chapped fingers that smelled of garlic.

*Ciao, ciao*, Angela repeated, as cheek met cheek met cheek.

*Bambina!* Her father elbowed past everyone else, squeezed her until her shoulder blades hurt. There was the tickle of his mustache against her ear, the familiar smell of his cologne, the thick of his arm to hold her up.

*Papa*, she said in a voice that was only vaguely familiar to her.

*How was Italy?* asked her cousin Enzo. When he winked at her, she wondered if he knew.

*Beautiful*, she said. Her smile was so much work.

More relatives waited in her parent's yard. Little cousins gripped homemade cards. Half a dozen aunts lined the driveway, arms wide for welcoming. Across the lawn, her Uncle Giovanni rose from his lawn chair.

*Angela!* her mother called from the front door, just as she stepped out of the car into the afternoon's glare.

*Vieni!* she said, when Angela freed herself from her uncle's embrace. The soles of her Italian sandals scuffed with each step toward the house.

*Vieni! Vieni!* And Angela ran. Couldn't help herself. She raced up the stairs into her mother's arms, the familiar slap of the screen door behind her. But the scent of sour milk in the fabric of her mother's cardigan stunted their embrace.

In the living room, the banner hung just as she'd imagined. Her grandmother sat on the couch beneath it, silver rosary beads entangled in her crooked fingers.

*Tell Nonna ...* she was saying, but Angela moved past her toward the corner, where a blanket's satin trim spilled over the wicker rim of a basinet.

*Angela, meet la bambina.* Her mother's words were practised, her smile pressed. *She come while you are away.*

*Lucy,* Angela whispered.

Her mother's eyes flashed panic. Her words were stern. *Rosetta Maria Lucille, your new little sister.*

Tears streamed a pathway through Angela's recently applied blusher. *Can I hold her?*

She was five that summer her parents rented the cottage in Northern Ontario. Angela was wedged between them in the front seat, dozing against her mother's arm for most of the long drive, waking as her father eased his foot from the gas to steer the car over the dirt shoulder.

*Look there.* He pointed to a mother bear and her cub feeding on berry patches that edged the two-lane highway.

Angela asked to be let out of the car. She wanted to get closer, maybe pet the young cub, but her mother said no, it would be dangerous.

Her father agreed. *La mamma would like to protect the bambino.*

*I would have painted the walls yellow,* Angela whispered to Lucy later that evening, once the guests had left and her parents had gone to bed.

She slipped her little finger into the sleeping baby's loose fist.

*I would have chosen daisies, not clowns,* she whispered. And she whispered. And she whispered. And she whispered.