

The Advice Giver

By Patricia Crisafulli

In all her seventy-three years, it had never been a mystery to Angie Constantine that she lacked any physical beauty. No one, not even her mother who had loved her, would have called her handsome. Her dark eyes were hooded like a hawk's, an impression that intensified with the hook of her nose. Perhaps in her twenties, she might have regretted her looks, as her six younger sisters married and had children. But early on, long before age would have connoted wisdom, Angie settled into her true role in life. She was the advice giver.

It started with her sisters, each of whom confided in her the secrets of their hearts, the flirtations and longings, the worries that Mama and Papa would not like their choices. Donata, the youngest, had eloped with a boy their parents hated because of who his father was. It was Angie who heard both sides and brokered a truce, winning a reprieve for Donata and Frank. She'd been thirty-two then, able to stand up to Papa with good reasons for giving Frank a second chance, starting with the fact that accepting his new son-in-law would prove who the bigger man was. "Frank's father will look like a fool after this. People will say he is hardhearted and stubborn," Angie argued, even though those two qualities applied more to her father than anyone else she knew. Her father agreed, and Donata and Frank named their first child, born a year later, after her.

Over the years, Angie settled family disputes, advised businesses, and counseled couples. Sometimes she would be stopped on the street; at others times they would show up at her parents' apartment, or her uncle's bakery where she worked behind the counter, writing orders on the side of a white paper bag with a thick carpenter's pencil. Many times she took a young woman into the back, behind the area where the flour and pastry mix bags were stacked, to sit in privacy as she listened to tales of a philandering husband ("It's the way some of them are; see if he grows out of it," she'd often say), or, worse yet, those who took off, leaving their families behind ("Move in with your parents and take care of your children. If he comes back, spit on his shoes and send him packing. Then, maybe, he'll realize how good he had it before").

No one wondered how Angie who had never left her parents' home ever got so wise; they simply took her advice and followed it to the letter. If they had asked her, she would have told them the truth. "I listen, I see. When you know what's going on in life, you understand how it works." Immersed in their own problems and limited perspectives, people became horses with blinders--can't see what's happening on either side and with only their own noses to follow.

Angie retired from the bakery when she was sixty with a party that included the entire neighborhood. Nobody would have guessed it from the modest car she drove or the fact that she never traveled much, other than to visit two of her sisters who lived in California and Florida, Angie was a wealthy woman. A young man with a gambling problem whom she'd helped put her in the stock market many years ago. She doubled her nest egg in the 1990s, invested conservatively in the 2000s, and stayed out all together during the financial crisis. "Maybe I should tell that Mr. Buffett a thing or two," Angie would joke with the man, who was no longer young and had traded dice and cards for stocks and bonds.

When her mother died at 84, Angie sold the three-flat where the family had lived--too many people in too little space, but in the end just mother and daughter. She gifted the proceeds of the sale to her sisters, ignoring their protests that she should take a share herself. That's when she bought the house on Harper Avenue, just four streets over, one of the original clapboards in a sea of brownstones. Painted a Dutch blue, with white gingerbread trim, the house boasted a wide, deep porch that Angie swept twice a day.

It was on mild day in early December, one that took away most of the snow that had shrunk to gray piles pitted with street grime, that she spied them. They lived in one of the four apartments in the brownstone three doors down. The girl had a pretty face, with short blond hair and a ring in the side of her nose. How Angie shook her head over that one: If God had given her a cute little button instead of a rhinoceros' horn she wouldn't do anything to it, other than give it a pat of Coty's pressed powder a couple of times a day. The boy had dark curly hair, a real mop top, and those whiskers the young men have these days. But at least he had carried groceries for her one day after she got out of her car with bags in both hands. "Let me help you. I live next door," the boy had said. She'd given him the once-over before releasing her grip. He'd introduced himself as Kyle and his girlfriend as Dee, short for Dorothy.

Now, she saw them every week, at least once or twice. At Christmas she'd made them Italian fig cookies, and then invited them in for a glass of wine. They were graduate students and worked part-time. Dee was from Iowa, which suddenly made sense to Angie since the girl's coloring resembled corn silk. Kyle was Chicago born and bred; Angie suspected that somebody in his family tree had been Italian. They lived together, which she didn't approve of, but all kids these days seemed to like playing house. Then one day she saw Dee wiping her eyes as she hurried down the sidewalk, head down and shoulders slumped. Although it could be anything--a

lost job, a sad call from her sister, maybe her mother was ill--Angie knew from five decades of listening to problems that women only walked that way for one reason: men.

As she contemplated what Kyle could have done to make Dee so upset, deciding that maybe that smile of his made him a little too slick, she saw the young man. His head hung like a dejected dog's (*serves him right*, she sniffed to herself), and he dragged his feet along the sidewalk. She noticed the earplugs hanging out of his curly hair and knew she'd have to be loud to get his attention. Angie used her broom instead.

"Hey, what's going on?" she yelled, as she swatted Kyle on the backside with the bristle end.

The young man jumped and nearly stumbled. In one motion he yanked the earphones out of his ears; the wires dangled like fishing lines from his hand. "Why'd you do that?"

"I see her crying because of you. I see you, looking like a dog. What d'you do?" Angie gave the sidewalk a pound with the broom for emphasis.

"Nothing. She's over-reacting." Kyle took a step away.

"I'll over react you with my broom." Angie glowered at him. "This you don't know about me. Where I grew up, about four streets over, I listened to everybody's problems for fifty years. I'm like Ann Landers, but I don't need no newspaper to give advice, you follow me? So I see a girl walking like that, I know there's one reason-- you."

Kyle shook his head. "Listen, I appreciate your concern. But I really don't have time."

"You love her?" Angie interrupted.

"Excuse me?" Kyle shifted his backpack on one shoulder.

"You heard me - you love her?"

"Of course."

“Then you got time.” Grabbing his sleeve, Angie dragged Kyle into the house and set him in the kitchen where she made espresso and set two anise cookies on a plate. “I don’t gossip. I never told anybody anything. I’m like the priest in the confessional--only better, because I really know what’s going on.” She took a seat opposite him and sipped the thick, bitter coffee. “So talk.”

Kyle sighed deeply, said nothing for a half-minute, and then began. “We had a fight last night. I have a chance for a fellowship...”

“What’s that? Like a fraternity?” Angie took another sip.

“No, a fellowship is a grant to do advanced studies. I’m getting my Ph.D in neuro-linguistics.”

Kyle poured it out: the fellowship would take him to California, while Dee would stay behind working on her master’s in education. When she’d asked what would happen to them while he was gone, he hadn’t given a very good answer.

“For a smart boy you’re pretty stupid.”

Kyle took a bite of the anise cookie, which crumbled into a trail of morsels down the front of his shirt.

“Dip it first in the espresso and it won’t do that.” Angie shook her head; Mr. Ph.D didn’t even know how to eat a cookie. “So she thinks the fellowship is going to break you up, not because of your answer, but because you’re scared to commit.”

“No, really...”

“Don’t interrupt! You say this thing because you don’t know your heart. My sister Celeste, when she was dating Tony, they were apart for three years while he was in the Army.

She never doubted him, and when he came home they got married. Now it's nearly forty years. But you can't even go to California without knowing what's what with the girl you live with."

Kyle looked up with tears in his eyes. "So what are you saying?"

"Commit or get off the pot. No more wishy-washy Mr. Ph.D. man who thinks big thoughts but doesn't know his head from a hole in the ground."

"Are you saying we should get married?" Kyle dipped the cookie and took a second bite.

"What does it mean what I say? Know your heart and figure it out." When he finished the cookie, Angie took the dishes away. "Now go, you're going to be late."

For four days, Angie saw nothing, even though she swept at all the right times when Kyle and Dee should be going to work or school, or leaving on Saturday to go to the gym. She wondered if maybe one of them had moved out, or if Dee had gone home to Iowa. As much as she wondered and worried, though, she couldn't chase after them. The advice seekers came to her and then they went off to do what they needed to do. Only once had she stepped out of that pattern, with her brother-in-law Jimmy, when she caught him with another woman. Her sister, Carlotta, never knew that happened and never would.

On the fifth day, the doorbell rang. Getting up from her chair in the kitchen, Angie hurried to the front door. Seeing a delivery man, she frowned; had to be the wrong house. The man read her name and address twice to her before she opened the door and accepted the bouquet of flowers in a vase wrapped in brown paper. There were two cards attached: one from Kyle that read "thank you" and one from Dee that said "come for dinner on Sunday."

Even though she knew the meal would be store-bought, right down to the salad, Angie accepted the invitation with pleasure, and brought along a pan of lasagna as a side dish so these two kids would have something decent to eat.

“It’s a long way up,” Kyle apologized after meeting her at the front door.

The three flights winded her, but she quickly caught her breath. The apartment was messy, but in a clean way, as her mother would have said; the floor swept and the rugs vacuumed, but books stacked everywhere, a guitar and music stand in the corner, and plants sprouting wildly from their pots in the window. Suddenly she could see it: toys on the carpet, a baby blanket spread across the rug, a dogs leash wrapped around the door handle--not this place, but a bigger apartment or maybe even a house. They’d make it these two, as well as Donata and Frank did.

“A glass of wine?” Kyle offered.

“As long as it’s red. Better for the blood.” Angie adjusted her cardigan sweater around her shoulders and sat down in an armchair.

Dee passed her a plate of bruschetta on slices of toasted Italian bread. “I made that myself,” she explained. “I found the recipe on the Internet.”

Angie took a bite; tasted the garlic and the basil--at least the girl had used fresh herbs. “You cook?”

“Not much, but I try. I like it actually.” Dee sat on the arm of the chair opposite Angie.

“You come over to my house, I’ll teach you.” Angie polished off the bruschetta and wiped her fingers daintily on a napkin. “Then Kyle, you’re going to have to get a bigger belt. No more too skinny for you.”

At the end of the evening, Angie embraced Dee and extracted a promise that she would come over the following Sunday for a lesson in making meatballs. Kyle slipped on a hooded sweatshirt to walk her home.

“You think I don’t know the way next door?” Angie joked.

He hovered protectively, as if not sure whether he should take her arm, as they descended the stairs slowly. At the sidewalk, she laced her hand into the crook of his elbow as they walked three doors down to her house. “So, everything’s good?” Angie asked.

“Yeah, really good. I wanted to thank you,” Kyle began. “We--Dee and me--talked a lot. We had always hinted about the future, but never really addressed it before. Now we know where we’re going.”

“Which is?” Angie stopped one doorway from her house.

“I’m going out to California for the fellowship. Then she is going to finish up here and join me. We plan to get married after we graduate. The only problem now is having two apartments--one there and one here. Dee is going to have to get a roommate.”

Angie gave him a gentle swat on the shoulder. “So you give up this one. Dee moves into my house until she’s ready to go to California. What’s the big deal? If that landlord gives you any trouble, you tell me. I know him from the time he was a snotty-nose kid who wet his pants in church.”

“That’s great. I’ll talk to Dee about it, but it would really help .” Kyle turned quickly toward her and put a hand on her elbow. “But we’d pay you something. We don’t want to take advantage.”

Angie threw her hands up in the air. “Keep your money. Just let me teach Dee to cook. That would be payment enough.”

Kyle led the rest of the way to the front door. “So why are you doing this for us, Angie? It’s not like we’re family.”

Angie looked around the neighborhood, thinking of all the people she’d known over the years--those who had moved away, those who had passed on. She’d saved marriages and

consoled divorcees and widows; she'd helped troubled kids and counseled worried parents. Sometimes it worked, and sometimes it didn't, and all because she had the time and the space in her heart to care for others. They were all her family, she realized.

"Family," she explained as she extracted her key from her purse, "is what you make as you live. Me, I gotta big family--and now, I got two new kids." She kissed Kyle on the cheek and patted his shoulder. "You do right by Dee." She pointed a finger at him. "You don't, and you'll have to answer to me."

Kyle laughed and stepped away. "Okay, Mom," he joked.

Angie closed her eyes for a moment, savoring the one word she'd never heard directed to her, in all these years. Her vision swam through tears as she turned toward the door. "Tell Dee next Sunday, one o'clock. You come for dinner around five for meatballs."

Angie turned on the lights inside and shooed Kyle away, assuring him that she was fine, and, with tenderness in her heart, watched him walk away.