

Otillie

by Nonnie Augustine

Shhh. I am here. Otillie Augustine, from Trieste, an Italian city to you, but when I lived it was part of Austria. Such things as who flies their flags over a city? Not so important after all, after all the losses and the victory speeches. These were not matters we truly understood. We were busy with homes, children, the soup on the stove. We came through the bad times, were grateful for peace when we had it.

The mother you knew is with us now, but you are also my child. You have many mothers and I have many children. All the generations are yours and they are all mine. My mothers were Italian, Jewish, Austrian, French and Slavic. I gave birth and Maria gave birth and Solange did too, and on and on and so you live now. You are sad, I know. Take courage from us. Be comforted.

Chance played its part in our hardscrabble stories and faith helped too. You have no priest or rabbi, but you can have faith without all these authorities. Believe in us. We women who have been adored, scorned, rich, lawless, wise, foolish, live in you and we speak to you. When you listen to a violin, see your gypsy mother Mirela playing her fiddle in the mountain camp. Books were denied me, but they were life to your mother Rebecca, and she passed her love of stories and poems to you.

From me? Dancing. Yes. I waltzed with many young men and when it was time to marry I chose the best dancer. Yes. I was a foolish girl, too. Bah! It worked out pretty good. He took me to America. My Adolphe was unfaithful and I hurled my biggest platter at his head. I wanted to kill him. I missed. For two years we did not speak. Our children talked for us. Then we went to a wedding party and when they played Strauss, Adolphe took my hand. We danced and the good came back to us and I forgave him.

Your mother Carolina was a beauty. She picked a rich Italian who gave her a baby every year for eleven years. Four of them lived. Carolina outlived her husband Gianni and all of her children. She

was famous in Trieste because she lived to be ninety years old in her time and place when life was short for almost everyone.

Marie Celeste was delicate and had only one baby. She gave you her bad heart. I am sorry. Life has frightened you today, and maybe tomorrow you will have some other big catastrophe, but your mothers will help. Between us we have known every happiness, every sorrow. We will sing our songs in low voices. Make yourself a cup of tea and listen to us, your many mothers.

