

Carmelina

by Patricia Russo

Italian Words:

Beretto da notte: A frilly nightcap worn by women.

Farina: A warm, creamy wheat cereal.

Cara: means “dear”.

Carmelina lay motionless in Mama and Papa’s big bed. A few hours ago, she’d been fussing and crying, trying to throw the covers off. Now she lay deathly still, her face waxy and white. “She looks like a wax statue,” Gianna thought.

Mama touched Carmelina’s forehead and whispered, “She’s as hot as an oven.”

“Is Carmelina going to be alright?” Gianna asked.

“I don’t know.”

“She has to be alright,” Gianna said. Carmelina had been born in the middle of the war. She was only two; she couldn’t die now that peace was so close.

“I don’t know what to do,” Mama said. Her voice was tight and shrill. Gianna could tell she was fighting back tears.

“We have to get the doctor.”

“The doctor won’t come, Gianna,” Mama said.

“He has to come,” Gianna insisted. “Carmelina’s sick!”

It’s too dangerous,” Mama said.

It was 1944. Italy had surrendered to the Allies a year ago. Immediately the German army had occupied much of the country. Italy and Germany had been on the same side; now they were enemies.

A squad of German soldiers had swept through the town of Garzano just a few days ago, looking for men: young, old, middle-aged— it didn’t matter. Some were held hostage. Some were forced to join the German army. Some were simply shot.

Gianna’s papa and her uncle Luigi had been hiding in the woods for almost a week. Most of the other men who lived in Garzano were hiding, too. Some were in an old barn a few miles outside of town. Some were in the school. Some were even hiding in the cemetery. Many, though, just stayed indoors and hoped the German soldiers wouldn’t search their houses.

Gianna stroked her sister’s cheek. Carmelina was burning up. She’d fallen sick two days ago and just kept getting worse.

“I’ll fetch Dr. Fornaro,” Gianna said. “He should be home. He’s too old to hide in the woods. When I tell him how sick Carmelina is, I know he’ll help.”

Her mother frowned with fear. “No, Gianna. It’s not safe.”

“I’ll take Papa’s bicycle. I’ll be quick.”

“But the soldiers...”

“I’ll be careful,” Gianna said. “If I see any soldiers, I’ll pedal away as fast as I can.”

Mama gazed at her. Gianna knew what Mama was thinking: No matter how fast Gianna pedaled, she couldn't out pedal a bullet.

Gianna turned toward her little sister. Carmelina was breathing so shallowly the blanket barely moved. "I'm going," Gianna said. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Mama bit her lip and nodded.

Papa's bicycle was heavy. Gianna wrestled it down the steps, panting. The seat was too high for Gianna, so she stood on the pedals. Pumping furiously, she tore down the street.

Garzano was silent. All the stores were closed, and the street was deserted. Gianna saw an old woman peeking from behind a curtained window. It was Signora Tozzato, her friend Maria's grandmother. The old woman must have just woken up. She was wearing a robe and a *beretto da notte*, a frilly cap that some old women wore to bed.

Gianna waved at her as she pedaled by. Signora Tozzato was keeping watch. Maria's house had a cellar, and her father and older brother were hiding there.

If Gianna looked over the roofs of Garzano, she could see a mountain in the distance. At the summit was an abbey called Monte Cassino. Benedictine monks had lived there for hundreds of years. Then the German army had taken it over.

Night after night, Allied planes bombed Monte Cassino. The bombs sounded like thunder. The sky lit up like a fireworks show. Carmelina was so scared of the bombs she would cry whenever a plane flew overhead. Then Papa would take her on his lap and say, "Don't be afraid. Those are American planes. They're our friends. They won't hurt you."

Gianna wished Papa was home. She knew Mama wouldn't be so scared then.

Dr. Fornaro lived in a small white house at the top of Via Pascoli, Garzano's main street. Gianna hopped off the bicycle and leaned it against the inside of Dr. Fornaro's garden wall. She dashed up the path.

Gianna knocked softly on the door so Dr. Fornaro would know she wasn't a soldier. When the soldiers came to search a house, they beat on the door with their fists. If nobody answered, they kicked the door down.

A curtain twitched in the window. After a long moment, the door opened a crack. "What is it?" the doctor whispered.

"My sister, Carmelina, is very sick," Gianna said softly. "Mama is afraid she's going to die."

The door opened a little wider. Dr. Fornaro stuck his head out and peered up and down the street. He was an old man with stooped shoulders and sparse white hair. But that wouldn't stop the German soldiers from arresting him. "Did you see anybody?" he whispered.

"No Germans saw me. Please, it's an emergency. Carmelina's fever is very high. Mama doesn't know what to do.

Dr. Fornaro sighed. "I know your house. Go on. Tell your mother I'll be there in a few minutes."

Gianna grinned. A wave of relief washed over her. "I knew you were a brave man, Dr. Fornaro," she said.

“Brave?” he said. “I’ve never been so frightened in my life. Now hurry. Your mother will be worried.”

Gianna pedaled home furiously, hauled Papa’s bike up the steps, and stowed it in the closet.

“Mama?” She ran upstairs to her parents’ room. Mama sat on the bed, holding Carmelina’s hand. “How is she?”

“I can’t wake her up,” Mama said, wiping away tears. “She’s even hotter now than she was when you left.”

“I talked to the doctor,” Gianna said. “He’ll be here soon.”

Mama looked up and her tight face suddenly relaxed a little. “Thank God,” she murmured.

Fifteen minutes passed before Gianna heard a gentle knock at the front door. She rushed to answer it.

Dr. Fornaro slipped in quickly. He banged his medical bag against the doorjamb and swore under his breath.

“Carmelina’s upstairs,” Gianna said. “I’ll take you up.” She turned to shut the door, then froze.

Four German soldiers were coming around the corner. A lieutenant followed at their heels. The soldiers wore combat uniforms and carried rifles. The lieutenant held a big black pistol.

Gianna shut the door very quietly and locked it.

“What is it?” Dr. Fornaro hissed.

“Germans.” Gianna began to tremble. It was a search party. They were going from house to house, hunting for men to take away.

She looked at Dr. Fornaro. He had turned pale. “Upstairs, quick,” she said.

Her mother met them in the hall. “Doctor—“

“Mama, soldiers are coming,” Gianna interrupted. “They’re searching our street.”

“Oh, no.” Mama covered her mouth. Her eyes grew big.

Gianna felt sick. If the search party had shown up an hour ago, it would have been all right. The soldiers might have stolen food, or taken Mama’s ring, her last piece of jewelry. But they wouldn’t have arrested Mama, Gianna, or Carmelina. A mother and two girls— one of them sick— were of no concern to the German army. But now Dr. Fornaro was here. He was in great danger.

There was no place to hide in the house. If there were, Papa and Uncle Luigi would have stayed.

“If the soldiers take Dr. Fornaro away, it’ll be my fault,” Gianna thought.

Dr. Fornaro sagged against the wall. He shook his head slowly, as if he’d already given up.

“We’ve got to do something,” Gianna said.

Mama straightened her shoulders. “I know. He can hide under the bed. Dr. Fornaro, it’ll be a tight squeeze, but —“

He shook his head again. “Don’t you think the Germans know to look under beds?”

Gianna grabbed his hand. “No, not under the bed,” she blurted. He was right: the Germans would know to look there. He needed a disguise. The Germans would surely arrest an old man, especially a doctor. A doctor was an important person. But they wouldn’t arrest an old woman. That’s why Signora Tozzano dared to keep watch out her window. “In the bed. Mama, quick: get an old nightgown and a *beretto da notte*.” Gianna knew her mother kept one of the frilly caps in the clothes cupboard.

She pulled Dr. Fornaro up the hall to her own room and yanked the bedcovers down. Mama hurried in, carrying a long-sleeved nightgown and a *beretto da notte* trimmed in white lace.

“Do you think we can fool them?” Dr. Fornaro asked.

“I know we can,” Gianna said. “Now hurry!”

Dr. Fornaro stripped off his jacket and kicked off his shoes. He rolled up his pant legs and shirt sleeves, then pulled the nightgown over his head. Gianna jammed the *beretto da notte* over his wispy hair, and he climbed into bed.

“Wait,” Gianna said. She laid Dr. Fornaro’s jacket, shoes, and medical bag on the bed beside him. The jacket and shoes could be easily concealed under the blanket, but the bag would make a lump. “Curl up around it,” she said. The doctor turned on his side and clutched the bag to his stomach. Gianna pulled the covers up to the doctor’s ears. “Good,” she said. “You can’t see it. Now remember: whatever happens, don’t say a word.”

Dr. Fornaro nodded. Just then, fists pounded on the front door. Mama gasped.
“Go back to Carmelina,” Gianna said. “I’ll let them in.”

She ran downstairs. The pounding was thunderous. She quickly unlocked the door and there it open.

The lieutenant stepped back, lowering his fist. His face was red with anger.

“There’s nobody here but me and my mother and my little sister and my grandmother,” Gianna blurted.

“We’ll see,” the lieutenant said. He spoke Italian with a thick accent, but Gianna could understand him. He stepped in, followed by the four soldiers.

“My little sister and my grandmother are very sick,” Gianna said.

“Sick, h’m?” The lieutenant sniffed.

“Very sick,” Gianna said.

The lieutenant said something in German, and the soldiers spread out to search the house. The lieutenant gestured to Gianna to go upstairs. He came after her, his boots clumping loudly on the steps.

She took him to her parents’ room. Her mother was sitting beside Carmelina, who was moaning softly. The officer peered at Carmelina, and frowned.

“Where’s your father?” he asked Gianna.”

“Dead,” she lied.

The officer frowned again. He stepped into the hall and pointed to a closed door. "What's in there?"

"That's my grandmother's room," Gianna said. "She's sick, too."

The lieutenant flung the door open and peered in. From the doorway, Gianna saw Dr. Fornaro huddled under the covers. Only the top of his *beretto da notte* peeked out from beneath the blankets.

"H'm," the lieutenant said. He went back downstairs and barked at the soldiers. They shook their heads. He snapped an order and the men marched out of the house.

The lieutenant didn't even glance at Gianna as he left. She locked the door behind him, then raced upstairs. "They're gone!" she announced.

"Thank heaven," Dr. Fornaro said, stepping into the hall and tugging off the nightgown. "Now let me see what I can do for the little one."

Dr. Fornaro sent Gianna to fetch a basin of cool water. He poured some rubbing alcohol in the water, and washed Carmelina all over with the mixture. "That'll bring the fever down," he said. Then he took a small brown bottle from his bag. "We'll give her a teaspoon of this every four hours. She should be feeling better soon."

Dr. Fornaro sat up with Carmelina all night. At dawn, Carmelina's fever broke, and soon she was sitting up in bed eating a bowl of *farina*.

"I'd better get home," the doctor said. "I hope the Germans aren't early risers." He smiled as he left.

Two days passed with no more German raids. On the third morning— suddenly and wonderfully— Papa and Uncle Luigi came home.

“Papa!” Carmelina cried. He scooped her up and hugged her hard. Then he hugged Gianna and Mama. Uncle Luigi hugged everybody, too.

“Monte Cassino has fallen,” Papa said. “The Germans are retreating.”

“Is the war over?” Gianna asked.

“No.” Papa’s face darkened for a moment. “Not yet, *cara*. But the German soldiers are gone. We’re safe.” He kissed Mama tenderly. “Hungry, but safe.”

“I’ll get you some food,” Mama said. “You must be starving.” She looked at Gianna. “While I’m cooking, Gianna has quite a story to tell you.”

“A story?” Papa asked.

“Gianna saved Carmelina’s life,” Mama said. “And Dr. Fornaro’s.”

Papa and Uncle Luigi stared at her.

Gianna smiled. She took Papa’s hand, then reached for Uncle Luigi’s, too. “Let’s go in the kitchen,” she said. “I’ll tell you all about it.”