

To Be Bestowed

It's all very well to paint jousting knights on a Renaissance wedding chest, or battle scenes, or even Greeks dressed as Florentines dragging in the Trojan Horse, but what about *Lisabetta from Messina*?

What is she doing here?

Who decided her story was fit for the contemplation of a young bride? What did the artist known as Lo Scheggia find edifying and worthy of his talent in the gruesome tale of "a beautiful and well-mannered lady" who dies of a broken heart?

We have only two panels from Lisabetta's wedding chest to patch together her story as told by Boccaccio in the fifth novella on the fourth day of the *Decameron*:

There were three young brothers, rich merchants living in Messina who had inherited all their father's wealth. They had a sister named Lisabetta, who "despite all good reasons was not yet married."

They also had a young man in their service, one Lorenzo from Pisa who worked in the warehouse and took care of all their business. "He was a handsome and graceful youth," and It didn't take long for Lisabetta to fall in love with him.

Lorenzo, for his part, "left all his other love affairs aside and began to give his heart to her." And so it was, "that as they loved each other in equal measure ... they gave in to their desire.

"This went on," Boccaccio tells us, "... for quite some time "to their great pleasure ... long enough for the two to become careless." One night, as luck would have it, Lisabetta was seen by her older brother entering Lorenzo's bed chamber.

The brother kept the secret to himself until he hatched a plot, admonishing his other brothers 'to keep quiet so that no infamy would fall upon their sister nor upon them, until such time that they could cleanse themselves of the shame."

And so they carried on, "making their usual rowdy jokes with Lorenzo." On the panel we see just how cunning and crafty they were, taking Lorenzo aside, hiding God knows what in their long sleeves, pretending that they had to leave the city on business and take him with them.

They lead him to a remote and empty place outside the city where they kill him and bury him in an unmarked grave. When they return to Messina, they tell their sister that Lorenzo has been sent on a business trip whereupon she begins her endless pining, and falls into a Slough of Despond.

Having cried herself to sleep one night, Lisabetta is visited by a dream in which Lorenzo appears, telling her of his fate, and where his body has been buried.

With the determination of an Antigone, she sets out to find Lorenzo and give him a proper burial. Guided by her dream, she makes her way into the countryside and stops at a place where the dirt feels softer. She does not have to dig very far before she finds the body "not yet broken down or decomposed." And here is where Lisabetta shows her true mettle:

Although “she was sadder than any woman had ever been,” as Boccaccio tells us “... “yet she knew that the present moment was not for crying.”

Lacking the strength to bury the body herself, she does the next best thing. Acting with a courage and resolve worthy of a warrior, she takes a knife and cuts off his head, wraps it in a towel, and gives it to her servant to carry. Nobody has seen them.

Together they make their way back home where Lisabetta “shut herself in her room and cried long and hard over the head so much so that she washed it with her tears and gave it a thousand kisses... Then she took a very large pot, the kind used to plant marjoram or basil...” and placed the head in the pot wrapped in a beautiful cloth which, we might infer, came from among the many beautiful cloths in her wedding chest which she herself had most likely embroidered. Next, she filled the pot with soil and planted it with basil from Salerno, the very best basil, watering it daily with rose water and her own copious tears.

In time, Lisabetta’s brothers become suspicious of their sister’s obsession with her basil pot. They investigate, discover the truth, and remove it from her room.

In the next panel, we see Lisabetta a prisoner in her own home, shut up behind a barred window guarded by her three brothers. Her eyes are downcast; she holds her head in her hand. One of her brothers is sound asleep on the ledge just below, his spear still in his hand, completely oblivious of his sister’s plight as she sits at the window, pining away until she dies of a broken heart.

“Such was the end of her disastrous love, but ... in the course of time, someone made up a song...

A thief he was, I swear,

A sorry Christian he

That took my basil of Salerno fair....

No other depiction of the story of *Lisabetta From Messina* is to be found on any other marriage chest. Little wonder in that.

But there’s another story, also from Sicily. This one has neither song nor marriage chest by which to remember it. In fact, it would have been altogether lost, buried in history, had it not been for the diligence of a journalist who wondered why there was an erasure under her grandfather’s name in his passport, and started digging.

In 1914, Francesca Costa’s father decided to move his family from Corleone, a longtime stronghold of the Mafia, to Detroit, Michigan, where they settled in Little Sicily. Francesca, his second daughter of four, pined for the barber’s son but was forcibly engaged at 16 to a neighborhood don twenty years her senior. Such an alliance would ensure that her brothers, who worked in the Ford factory and ran with rum-runner gangs, would get a leg up in the mob.

Things hadn't changed very much in the five centuries that separated Francesca from Renaissance Florence. Marriages in Little Sicily were still "of fundamental importance to the alliances that underpinned a family's... prosperity and future prospects."

Did Francesca consider her family's prosperity, or her brothers' prospects? Not at all. Like Lisabetta, she did not wait to be bestowed in marriage. Instead, she ran away and eloped with the barber's son, but she made a fatal error. She dared to return home a married woman, hoping to be forgiven, embraced, and restored to the family fold.

Her brothers waited. They ambushed their sister in an alley, shackled and murdered her, chopped off her hands and feet and threw her body in the river near Belle Isle. All this happened in 1919. But the honor killing wasn't the end of the story.

To save the family from disgrace, every trace of Francesca was systematically stricken from the record and destroyed. No photographs were in evidence, no birth certificate, no documents of any kind. Francesca's name was forbidden to be spoken. In the family annals, Francesca was a smear, an erasure, an empty space. So complete was her eradication, it was as if Francesca Costa had never lived at all. In spite of the efforts of her niece, Karen Tintori, to restore her great-aunt to living memory, many relatives to this day still have no inkling that she ever existed. So heavy was the lid that fell on Francesca Costa.

No wonder the wedding chest looks just like a sarcophagus.

On this vigil of the Day of the Dead, let us remember Lisabetta for her tender mercies, and Francesca for her miraculous resurrection, and let us not forget the lovers who also gave their all, Lorenzo from Pisa and the barber's son who shall remain nameless and stand for all those lovers torn from each other's arms, banished, tortured, sent into exile, murdered and buried in an unmarked grave, for whom there were no tears, no marriage chests, and no pots of basil.

--Jean Feraca

*Francesca Costa's story is told by Karen Tintori in *Unto The Daughters: The Legacy of an Honor Killing in a Sicilian-American Family*, www.karentintori.com.