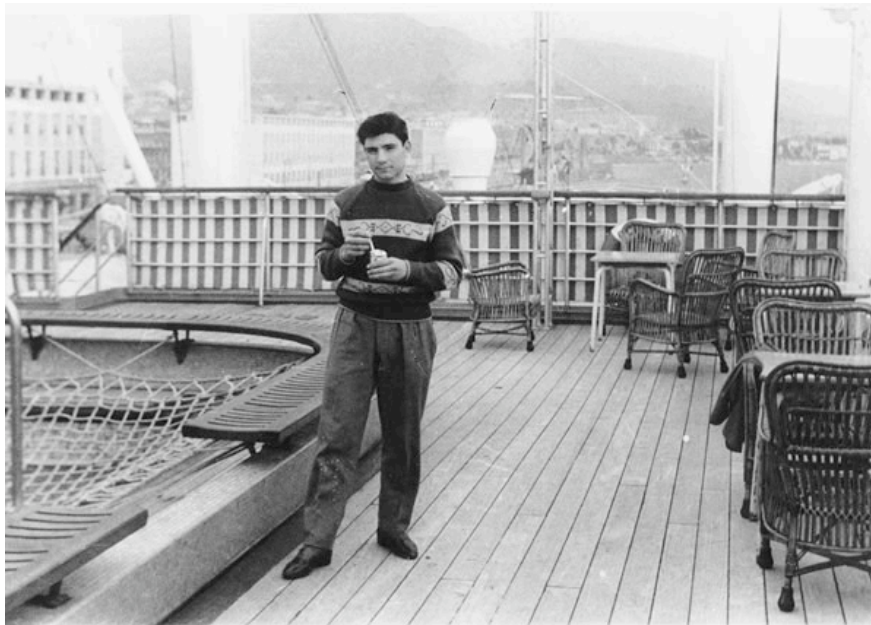


CHAPTER ONE

Excerpt from Liborio: My Great Love by Angela Napolitano

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Liborio leaving Italy on the Oceania March 1956

Liborio was eager to tell his story, in public. A humble migrant, he had taken on a corporate giant with more than a century of history, formidable legal resources and funds to survive any battle and a fearsome reputation for never giving in. He had been betrayed and sought justice to win a case no Wittenoom asbestos victim in Australia had won before.

He sat in the witness box, rigid and far forward, as if he could not straighten his back. He was breathing hard, his face was gaunt and pale and his woollen sweater hung in folds about him.

The court usher approached him with the Holy Bible. He seemed young for such a solemn job. His fair hair shone, his hands were pale and sleek. Liborio looked at the Bible: its weighty pages were edged with gold and bound in brown leather. He glanced at the microphone: it was matt-black and too far away. He brought his mouth closer to it.

'I swear by Almighty God that I shall tell the truth and nothing but the truth,' Liborio swore on the Bible. He could hear his own voice, but within the high white walls of this courtroom, it was only a whisper.¹

The judge turned to him, 'Mr Napolitano, before you answer any questions, let me know if you feel pain or need a break. And if you have trouble speaking up, we will sort something out.'

Liborio warmed to the sound of his voice: it was soft, yet very clear, with an English accent.

'Thank you, Your Honour,' he replied.

The other evening, Liborio's solicitor, Luisa, had phoned to inform him which judge would be hearing his case.

'It's going to be Mr Justice Seaman.'

Liborio had smiled to himself—the judge had a name with the sea in it. It had sounded like a good omen.

This morning, as he watched Justice Seaman command the court from his solitary seat at the bench, Liborio saw discipline in his slim build and wisdom on his furrowed brow. In his unfamiliar accent and assured courteous manner, Liborio sensed warmth and compassion. This judge, he decided, was a migrant like himself. He felt certain that Justice Seaman was a fair man who would believe what he was about to tell him. This certainty gave him strength.

Liborio needed all the strength he could muster because, as anyone could see, he had almost none left. Hearing his strangled voice, who could imagine how it used to charm? Seeing his ravaged body, who would think that it was ever splendid? Believe it or not, that sad bag of bones was once a powerful physique, all manly muscle and pleasing proportions. There was a time when those feeble shoulders had stood firm against the world, those weary arms had lifted great weights and those shuffling legs had strode lithe and lean. Once that sparse limp hair had grown dense and dark, that face of pain had glowed golden and those haunted eyes had held a mischievous glint.

But what of the heart and soul residing within these battered remains? This Liborio Napolitano—what kind of a man was he?

Some people are special. They give freely, expecting nothing in return. They cherish children and animals, the land and the sea, music, dancing, family and friends. They love with all their heart, and in return they are greatly loved. Liborio was such a man.

He was one of the thousands of men and women, who had fled the ruins of Italy after the war was over. With high hopes, willingness to work and a determination to succeed, they sailed across the Indian Ocean to start anew in a vast and arid land. They came with nothing; they dreamed of prosperity. Many fell in love with their new homeland and gave it all they had to give. Through their labours, Australia became a land of bounty, envied around the world.

Liborio believed in the Australian dream. Days, nights and weekends, for many long years, he worked without complaint to make that dream come true. From nothing he forged a prosperous life for his family, and this success gave him his sense of who he was and what he was capable of. Achieving the great Australian dream earned him respect, comfort and security, friends and good times, but it cost him dearly. The company he laboured so loyally for all those years ago betrayed him.

The asbestos that entered his lungs was the intruder. It attacked his defences, slowly and silently breaking them down from within. He was invaded by a

demon, which attacked by stealth until it destroyed him utterly.

Counsel for the plaintiff, Mr Lampropoulos, rose to begin his examination. Liborio glanced down at his barrister and was very impressed. He was at the first bar, on the judge's left and farther away from the witness box than Mr Mengler, counsel for the defence, just as Luisa had explained.

'Your Honour,' Mr Lampropoulos said, 'I ask that all witnesses, other than expert witnesses, leave the court.'

Justice Seaman raised his eyebrows and directed his gaze up to the middle of the front row in the public gallery where I was sitting.

'Mrs Napolitano,' said the judge, 'you may leave the building now, if you want to.'

Liborio remembered what Luisa had explained: that if I remained in court while he testified, it would give the defence an opportunity to discredit our evidence. I could simply corroborate whatever he said. He watched while I stood up and made my way up the shallow carpeted steps to the back of the court, bowed to Justice Seaman and then walked out into the waiting area.

Liborio reflected on the irony of his situation: he had loved me from the moment we first met. He had made a sacrifice to marry me and for that sacrifice he was doomed.

Mr Lampropoulos paused to give Liborio time, before he said, 'Mr Napolitano, you were born on the ninth of March in 1938, in Vasto, in Italy?'

'Yes.'

'You have five sisters and one brother, and you're the—'

'The fourth eldest.'

'Your parents are still alive?'

'They are. My father is ninety-four and my mother is eighty-eight. They live here in Perth, in their own house, just round the corner from me. They still look after themselves with a bit of help from their children.'

'In Italy you went to school until the age of fifteen?'

'That's right. I had to leave school to work on the family farm. A few years later, in March 1956, I left Italy to come to Australia.'

In the days when Liborio lived in Vasto, no road tunnelled west through the rocky mountains, to connect this city to Rome and the outside world. There were no roads at all, just dirt tracks. Perched atop a 144-metre-high steep hill, overlooking the Vasto Marina, this city of Abruzzo in southern central Italy had kept lonely watch across the Adriatic Sea over to the Balkans, as it had done for centuries. It had suffered earthquakes, sieges, occupation and bloody rebellion since Roman times. In the dungeons of the medieval d'Avalos Palace and Caldoresco Castle, which dominated the city, lingered malevolent shadows with a long history of imprisonment, torture and execution. The three narrow gates in the city walls were a

stark reminder of those dark days when no one could enter or leave Vasto without documents or money changing hands. Originally a Roman town known as Histonium, it boasts eighteenth century architecture, which features prominently in the city. Today Vasto, like Perth, is a popular holiday and beach resort. Vasto has a sister-city relationship with the city of Perth, a relationship and friendship agreement that was inaugurated on 18 December 1989. Fifteen years later, the City of Perth hosted Commandantore Silvio Petraro, worldwide founder of Abruzzesi Emigrant Association, and a delegation of officials from Vasto, to dedicate a lake in honour of the long-standing sister-city relationship. During that visit, the Lord Mayor of Perth, Dr Peter Natrass, was joined by the Mayor of Vasto, Dr Filippo Pietracola, in an official naming ceremony for 'Lake Vasto', which is situated on Ozone Reserve at the corner of Plain Street and Riverside Drive. Vastese families in Perth have sponsored trees and park benches around the lake that has been landscaped to provide a natural habitat for wildlife and recreation.

Six kilometres inland from Vasto in *Vallone di Cenere* (Valley of Ashes) lay the Napolitano farmstead, bought from a rich baron.

It was late winter and, after months of heavy snows, everyone remained indoors, huddled around their kitchen fires. For across the sea from the Balkans came icy winds and thick fog, bringing with them a cold that cut the face and a dampness that seeped into every crevice of this isolated impoverished place.

At this farmstead, in her kitchen with her mother in attendance as midwife, Maria sat on the edge of a chair to push forth into the world her fourth child.

'*E un maschio! E un maschio!*' (It's a boy! It's a boy!), the family yelled with jubilation. The infant's grandfather, Nonno Liborio, and his son, Cesario, cried with joy and relief, for they had waited ten long years for this moment of celebration.

Nonno Liborio finally took up his shotgun and climbed the stairs slowly. He entered his bedroom, went straight to the window and opened it. There he wiped away his tears with his sleeve and stood at the open window. He positioned his gun, and, as a salute to his newborn grandson, fired three shots into the air to announce the joyous news to neighbouring families in the valley. News that his son's wife had given birth; that finally the Napolitano family had a son and heir. In accordance with Italian tradition, the infant was given the name of his paternal grandfather. He was christened Liborio.

Nonno stood at the open window for a while and gazed out at the tranquil valley, nestled in the low hills, sandwiched between the Adriatic Sea and the forbidding mountains of the Abruzzo region of saints and mystics. It was such a restful panoramic view, with not a single piece of uncultivated land in the valley. With a sense of satisfaction, he surveyed the family property: land full of stones and clay, sloping down to the fast-flowing stream that ran through the valley into the Adriatic Sea.

Nonno thought about his son Cesario, and how he had sacrificed his youth toiling underground in the dark and dangerous coal mines of Germany. He had willingly given away the prime of his life so that his family could buy the holding that they had previously leased for many years. That sacrifice had proved worthwhile. Now the Napolitano family owned their own farm: precious fertile land to be passed on from father to son, from generation to generation, land that Cesario's newborn

son would one day inherit. Girls were seen to be a liability, for when they grew up and married they went to work for someone else instead of staying put like boys to help their aged parents.

Nonno Liborio's joy at the birth of his grandson was even greater, because he was an old man aged seventy-two. He had known much sorrow in his life—he had suffered the loss of his wife and four of their six children...and before that an unhappy childhood. An only child, he had watched his mother die and his father remarry. After that, life at home had become wretched. His stepmother had treated him so cruelly that he'd run away from home and worked on other people's farms. It had been a lonely life, but eventually he had found happiness when he married his sweetheart Maria Giuseppa.

During his childhood, Liborio learned a great deal from his grandfather. Nonno never wore a watch because he could tell the time by looking at the position of the sun or the moon. He also knew when it was going to rain. On many occasions he put his grandfather's skill to the test, but his predictions were always amazingly accurate.

Nonno loved the sea and, at a very young age, Liborio learned to love it too. Whenever they wanted some fresh fish, they loaded the donkey with some farm produce to barter with and set off for the beach before dawn along the track to Vasto Marina. The twelve-kilometre return trip was a long walk for a young boy, but Nonno always had interesting stories to tell and the time passed quickly. If he became thirsty, Nonno showed him how to keep a stone in his mouth so that the thirst would pass. In any event, Liborio did not care how long the walk was because it was always worth it, just to see the magnificent expanse of deep blue pristine water and watch the fishermen bring in their boats and nets loaded with fish.

Each morning Cesario walked into town to sell his produce at the market in Piazza Rossetti and for company took along his son, letting him ride on the donkey behind the two swaying baskets filled with fruit and vegetables in season. However, as soon as Liborio started school, Cesario handed him that responsibility. 'Don't be afraid, the donkey knows the way, just hold onto his tail and you won't get lost,' he reassured his son.

Liborio learned very early in life that hard work was the only way to survive. On the farm there were lots of animals to feed: the poultry, the faithful donkey, a wild chestnut horse, a cow, some sheep and two dogs named Jimmy and Leon. There were crops to cultivate, and wood to be chopped and stored. The farm produced an abundance of vegetables and fruits and the family made their own olive oil, wine, cheese, dried legumes, flour, pork sausages, preserved fruits and pickled vegetables. The family needed to sell produce in order to buy essentials like clothes, salt, sugar and matches. For this reason they grew an abundance of corn and tobacco. It was Liborio's three elder sisters. Pina, Elena and Anna, who picked the tobacco leaves late at night or before sunrise, when there was no heat to make the nicotine sticky. The leaves were then stitched together and hung in the shed to dry. Corn was another crop that had to be picked at night, when the leaves were moist and soft. During the day the leaves had sharp edges that cut their hands.

While they worked outdoors, they wore stockings on their hands and wide straw hats or scarves on their heads, to shield their hands and faces from the sun.

They did this to avoid looking like sunburnt peasants. When it came to marriage, as country people they were looked down on as lower class citizens, while those from the city were looked up to as upper class citizens who went to study at university to become a doctor or lawyer.

Cesario made a point of buying good clothes for all the family so that they could feel proud of themselves whenever they attended church, or went into town. He did not want his children to grow up feeling inferior to the city folk.

With their fair skin, hazel eyes and waist-length honey hair, Pina and Elena were very attractive and looked like sisters; whereas Anna and Lucia were both strikingly dark with brown eyes and thick black hair. During the day, the sisters fetched water from the well, stoked the fire and cooked in the cauldrons above the flames. They washed clothes on the washboard, made pasta, baked bread and scrubbed the kitchen. In the evenings, they sat in the kitchen and did ironing, sewing, embroidery, crocheting and knitting. Later when their siblings, Francesco and Grazietta came along, they took care of them too.

Cesario drove his children hard, but he was never cruel or violent like many fathers of his generation. Cesario was devoted to his family and made sacrifices to provide for them. His property generated sufficient income to support his household, but not enough to pay the land taxes the government demanded, so, to make ends meet, Cesario sometimes left home to labour on road or rail projects.

Both of Liborio's parents were illiterate, but thanks to Mussolini's commitment to improve literacy among the Italian people, all children had to complete five years of primary education. However there were many, like Cesario, who held the view that it was dangerous for girls to learn too much.

As the girls grew older they began to feel ashamed of being peasants, and resented their life of drudgery. They could see no future for themselves on their father's land, nor did they share his deep attachment to it. All they could think of was getting away. 'We have to get away from here. I'll never marry a farmer. I don't want my children to work like a donkey and suffer like me,' Elena lamented to her sisters. 'There's nothing here but work,' she said. Marriage was their only means of escape.

Those early years on the farm were happy times for Liborio. He was loved and indulged by all his family, but worked hard from the time he started school. As the family continued to grow, Cesario built a third bedroom onto the two-storey, mud-brick home.

In 1954, Mario Tolomeo, a dark handsome young man, was hired as a casual labourer on the Napolitano farm. He had completed his military service and was filling in time while his application to immigrate to Australia was approved. He fell in love with Cesario's third daughter Anna and asked for her hand in marriage. At first Cesario was reluctant, because it was not customary for a prospective husband to skip the elder daughters in favour of her younger sister. However, Mario protested and Cesario relented, consenting to a marriage by proxy. Mario had an army friend Michele Ratta, who was also waiting to leave for Australia. He fell in love with Cesario's second daughter, Elena, when he set eyes on her. So Elena's dream of escaping from the life of a peasant and drudgery on the farm came true at last. Sadly, for Pina, her marriage prospects had been damaged, when her cousin had

broken their engagement.

Within weeks of each other, Mario and Michele sailed to Western Australia. Elena and Anna were to follow after a marriage by proxy, a common practice due to the war and social confusion caused by the huge exodus of people. Marriage by proxy meant waiting until the fiancé arrived in Australia and paid a priest to issue a marriage certificate. Once the certificate reached Vasto, a wedding ceremony was held in church with a substitute bridegroom, usually a male relative. The church service was followed by a small family reception. The marriage existed only on paper, and could not be consummated until the woman was reunited with her husband. As a married woman, she could remain under her father's authority, or live with her parents-in-law while she waited to be summoned to Rome for a medical examination, and to be issued with a passport. The whole process could take up to two years, or more.

The following year, Liborio received a letter from Mario, his future brother-in-law, proposing to sponsor him to come to Australia before Anna. He said Perth was a wonderful city, with lots of opportunities to work. Liborio accepted his proposal immediately. 'But we need your help on the farm,' Cesario strongly objected. 'How will we manage when Elena and Anna leave too? How will I pay all these fares?' Cesario asked. 'Don't worry, Papa. I'll work hard and send you money. It will be better for all the family if I go to Australia, and if I like it there, I will sponsor you all one by one.'

Liborio left Italy before his eighteenth birthday, just in time to avoid compulsory military service. On that dismal day, 24 February, during the worst gale he had ever seen in his life, Liborio sat drenched and shivering in a horse-drawn cart on the dirt track, which ran through his father's farm. Slushy snow lay all around, fog smothered the valley and the relentless rain had weakened the cliff-top on which St Peter's Church stood in the city, and bit by bit the church had collapsed down the cliff into the sea, on to the bay of Vasto Marina below, until only its back wall remained teetering on the edge. 'I promise I'll bring you all to Australia, one by one no matter how long it takes,' Liborio yelled to his family, as a vicious gust of wind tore at his face, and his mother wailed and shrieked. His distraught sisters fought back their own tears as they tried to restrain her before she collapsed in the mud. His weeping father reached up and grasped his hands. 'My son,' cried Cesario, 'I don't know much about Australia, but you make sure you look after yourself. Always keep your feet firmly planted on the ground. Take any work, but never go down the mines or out to sea because those two places are dangerous.'

Liborio travelled with seven other young men by train to Naples and boarded the *Oceania*, one of three passenger vessels that continuously plied the Indian Ocean, transporting thousands of migrants via the Suez Canal to the Port of Fremantle and other ports of Australia. He celebrated his 18th birthday on the ship. Many passengers had been seasick, but he had enjoyed the three-week voyage. There had been music and dancing every night and during the day he had stood on deck savouring the sounds and smells of the salty ocean.

Liborio's arrival in Fremantle on Sunday 18 March 1956 was a day he remembered vividly. He had been full of hope about the new life ahead of him. Mario had met him off the ship and they'd taken a taxi into Perth where Mario lived.

It was early autumn and a dazzling sun shone all day, in the biggest, bluest sky he had ever seen. From the start he knew he was very lucky to live in this sparkling jewel by the sea. To the west, the Indian Ocean glittered deep blue, brilliant aquamarine. Along the shore, white-gold sands shimmered as far as the eye could see. To the east, sun-bleached buildings stretched along a broad and bending river and in the distance arose the escarpment of purplish hills that bore the brunt of winds from the desert beyond. Perth was a privileged city of wealth, for it was the capital of a state bigger than Europe, an enormous territory of rust-red earth and massive brown boulders, dry as could be, and immensely rich in minerals.

On his third day, Liborio found a job in a factory where he moulded cement into ornamental birds, fishes and frogs for the gardens and ponds of Perth. Mr Harold Brady, the owner of the factory, had started his business making cement troughs in his garden after returning from service in the First World War. Houses were going up all over Perth, and demand for plaster and cement products had never been stronger. Mr Brady took notice of and a liking to Liborio: he was a hard worker and clever with his hands, he got along with everyone and always had a smile on his face.

Those first few years in Perth had been amazing. Liborio had kept his promise to help his parents financially. Within two years of his arrival, his two sisters were married by proxy and joined their respective husbands in Perth.

For the first time in his life, Liborio had money of his own. He bought his first guitar and an outfit to go dancing. He earned extra money playing in a band, and then started an evening job at Alan Butcher's Dance Studio, teaching young Australians to dance. He had learned to dance as a child, when his parents taught him the tarantella in the kitchen. The dance floor was where he shone, and for his tuition he earned entry tickets to the big Saturday night dances. Liborio was a dashing young man, having the time of his life. His future seemed full of promise.

What happened to that promise?

**To find out more about *Liborio: My Great Love* or to
order yourself a copy please visit**

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