

# THE SWADDLING CLOTH

By Lynn Dennis

Maria, a favorite hospice patient of mine, died not long ago at age 96. I would visit her weekly in the brown-shingled home she shared with her son and daughter. Her bed had been placed by the side of large windows in what was once the dining room. From there she could look past a table filled with plants, her rosary and childhood pictures of her four sons and three daughters to her backyard. On the wall opposite Maria's bed was a tourist poster of the small, northern Italian city that had once been the fishing village of her youth. Maria's thin, spent body often seemed lost among her bed quilts. Yet, as she spoke of the past, her gestures still sparked with the strength of a woman who in an earlier life had labored daily mending fishing nets and carrying heavy jugs of well-water on her head.

My job as a hospice social worker was to track Maria's needs, to make palpable the thoughts that worried her and her family and to render peace with these thoughts when I could. When I first met Maria, her eyes would abruptly shut in pain. But, her suffering arose less from her body than from her memories of World War II, of bombs exploding outside the door of her home, of shrapnel tearing away the sight of one child's eye and of the loss of another child to disease.

Having never been a refugee, I worried whether my protected American childhood would be a barrier between Maria and me. But Maria dispensed with my uncertainty; instead she lightly stroked my hands as she assured me that my heart understood her because my family, too, had trekked across many borders on their way to America. I was wary of

Maria's confidence in me, but then thought of how powerfully a search for my family's roots had impacted me and of how the voices from the few mementos of that history truly speak to me of happy times and of times of displacement.

So I entrusted myself to Maria's presumption, but wondered silently if we might find some kinder, gentler paths of memory to travel together. The opportunity arose on the next visit when, caught up in the midst of shared memories of mothering, I giddily announced I was a new grandmother and confessed my befuddlement with the latest childrearing practices, particularly with the renewed popularity of swaddling babies.

Maria's eyes lit up and her head nodded with approval as soon as I mentioned swaddling. She quickly directed her son up the narrow steps to the family's attic. On my next visit, Maria pointed to me to sit next to her closely. From a package by her side she lifted the swaddling cloth she used for her own children. It was made of thick, white, peasant cotton, assembled with tiny, fine stitches; though slightly yellowed from its seventy years of existence it was otherwise in perfect condition. Then, Maria explained to me the proper way to lay a diaper within the cloth and then swaddle the baby securely within. Not surprisingly, Maria had other childrearing advice to offer. As I listened to Maria's advice and held the swaddling cloth, I felt the base of my neck, that place where a baby nuzzles, warm. And, watching Maria's face soften, I believe this memento warmed that same spot on her neck too.

As her hold on painful memories slackened and the sounds of war quieted, Maria's imagination invited me, in rich detail, to the seashore of her adolescence. And in turn she

joined her children and me on different sensory adventures as we planted imaginary gardens and envisioned perfect feasts of fresh fish and sun-sweetened fruit.

It seems to me we can be enriched by the treasures of our attics in four ways. We may, of course, discover a valuable heirloom that reaps a financial reward. We might find items which stretch our sense of self by connecting us to an historic event. Perhaps we find items that enable us to picture ourselves living in the past. But, sometimes our discoveries enable us to identify with transcending universal human aspirations that make life, under any circumstances, meaningful.

Maria's swaddling cloth, I believe, falls into this last category. Through it I learned that life need not be confined by memories of loss any more than Maria's life had been confined by geographic boundaries. Holding it, Maria forgave me my innocence of war and bonded with me instead in the very human instinct to nurture. The swaddling cloth, then, was both a memento of a particular life and an emblem of continuity and reason in time of chaos.

In her last days of consciousness, Maria recalled the feel of coarse, gravelly sand weaving between her toes as she slid into the sea. And when I heard this I, too, tasted the salty air above the waves.