

The Seven or Eight Deaths
of Stella Fortuna

A Novel

Juliet Grames


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To my immigrant grandparents,
Antonette Rotundo and Serafino Pasquale Cusano,
and especially the nonbiological one,
Concetta Rotundo Sanelli



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Preface

This is the story of Mariastella Fortuna the Second, called Stella, formerly of Ievoli, a mountain village in Calabria, Italy, and lately of Connecticut, in the United States of America. Her life stretched over more than a century, and during that life she endured much bad luck and hardship. This is the story of how she never died.

Over the course of her hundred years, the second Stella Fortuna (I will tell you about the first in a little bit) would survive eight near-death experiences—or seven, depending on how you count them. She would be bludgeoned and concussed, she would asphyxiate, she would hemorrhage, and she would be lobotomized. She would be partially submerged in boiling oil, be split from belly to bowel on two unrelated occasions, and on a different day have her life saved only by a typo. Once she would almost accidentally commit suicide.

Was it fantastically bad luck that the second Stella encountered such danger or fantastically good luck she survived it? I can't decide. In either case, it is rather a lot of adventure to pack into a single life story, but the Calabrese are a tough people. It is what we are known for, being stubborn beyond any reason and without any care for self or well-being. For so many centuries of our history we had so little we were able to fight for that this instinct is irrepresible: when we have set our mind on something, the force of our will is greater than the threat of disorder, disgrace, or death. What Stella Fortuna fought for so stubbornly was her life, seven (or eight) different times. I wish I could say no one ever faulted her for that.

* * *

[fo]Most of what I know about Stella's extraordinary life story I learned from her little sister, Concettina, who is also still alive. She is in her late nineties now and goes by the name Tina Caramanico, "Tina" because "Concettina" was too old-fashioned for America, and "Caramanico" because here in the United States, she was told, a woman takes her husband's surname instead of keeping her father's.

Auntie Tina lives alone in the marshy lowlands of Dorchester, Connecticut, in a house her husband built for her in 1954. Her husband is dead, of course, so the only person she has to cook for is you when you come to her house. You probably don't come to visit as often as you should, and when you do come to visit, it is offensive to Auntie Tina how little you'll eat. All this seems like an Italian grandmother joke, but I assure you Tina Caramanico is quite serious. There are two ways to handle this overfeeding situation. You can yell at her to stop putting food on your plate, then feel guilty about yelling at an old woman. Or you can avoid the conflict, eat quietly, and suffer only physically afterward. The first time I brought my husband to meet her, Auntie Tina told me admiringly, "He eats so nicely." This is a thing Italian grandmothers say about men who don't yell at them during dinner.

It is hard to remember that Auntie Tina is in her upper nineties; she seems as pink and sweaty and vigorous as she was at sixty-five. Her brown eyes are milky but bright; her knuckles bulge with strength and the tendons of her hands stand out angry against the carpals, yearning for something to grip—a wooden spoon, a meat tenderizer, a great-nephew's cheek. She shines with the perspiration of frantic activity at all times; she wears a mustache of sweat beads. She has shrunk with age—she is five two now, although she was once five seven, a tall woman in her day—but her arms are thick and muscular. She famously came over to "help clean" my cousin Lyndsay's house when Lyndsay was pregnant and beat the braided kitchen rug so

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energetically that the rug uncoiled itself all over the back porch. At least, in the end, it was truly clean.

Family memory is a tricky thing; we repeat some stories to ourselves until we are bored of them, while others inexplicably fall away. Or maybe not inexplicably; maybe some stories, if remembered, would fit too uncomfortably into the present family narrative. One generation resists them, and then the generation that follows never knew them, and then they are gone, overwritten by the gentler sound bites.

I think this is why I was already grown up before I first heard the story of Stella Fortuna's seven (or eight) almost-deaths. I was sitting at Auntie Tina's table eating zucchini bread one afternoon when she first counted them out for me.

"Everyone knows about the Accident," I remember her saying, "but do you know about the eggplant?"

"What eggplant?" I said, suspicious.

"The time Stella was almost killed by an eggplant."

"By an eggplant?" I glanced out the window at the four-foot-long Sicilian zucchini hanging from the trellis in Auntie Tina's backyard. I hadn't heard of anyone's life being imperiled by a vegetable before, but it didn't seem out of the realm of possibility.

"Where you think she got those scars on her arms?"

And then there were six other times she almost died, too—six or maybe five. Auntie Tina ticked them off on her knobby beige fingers: the pigs; the schoolhouse; the boat, which was controversial; the rapist; the stupid doctor; the choking.

As Tina rattled through the litany of traumas, I was overcome by a warm nausea. How many times Stella had come so close—what surreal violence her body had endured. How statistically improbable that she should have survived. I listened to Tina's list while the saliva dried from my mouth; the zucchini bread, which was quite dense to begin with, became difficult to swallow. I had

that same helpless, dreadful feeling you have when you are sitting next to a coughing person on a bus and you know, you just know, you've caught whatever they've got. I had been infected by Tina's story, the story of the life and deaths of Stella Fortuna.

"Auntie Tina," I said when the list was concluded, "will you tell me again? So I can write it down?" I was already rummaging in her pencil-and-coupon drawer for an old phone bill envelope to take notes on.

She hesitated, looking at my poised pen. Later, when I knew the whole story, I would wonder what went through her head during that long moment. But the hesitation ended and she said, decisively, "I tell you again, and you write it down."

"Yes, please," I said. She was watching me out of her watery pink-rimmed eyes. I couldn't tell if her expression was excited or doleful. "Tell me everything you remember."

"Some parts of the story, they no nice," she warned me, in all fairness.

But who ever understands or believes a warning like that?

Among my many sources, Tina Caramanico is the most important. I think finally, after all these years, she wanted to set the record straight. She knew better than anyone else, alive or dead, all of the details, because she had been there at Stella's side the whole time. She has the most at stake—the most compelling reason to tell me the whole truth, but also the most compelling reason to hide it.

She is still there at Stella's side now, although the sisters have not spoken to each other in thirty years.

Across the street from Tina's little white ranch house, not forty yards away, Stella sits in an armchair by the picture window in her own little white ranch house. The arrangement is ideal for the estranged sisters to spy on each other, watching each other's driveways to tally up which relative is coming to visit whom.

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Stella will sit in this window for most of the day, crocheting then taking apart the beginnings of blankets she'll never finish. She is trapped in the prison of her mind, and so is the rest of her family, although no one but Stella knows exactly what the inside of that prison looks like.

Around 11 a.m., Stella will disappear from the picture window to go lie down for a while. At this time, Tina will fetch whatever food she has prepared for Stella's lunch—a vegetable *minestra* or a plate of pork cutlets—hustle across the street, and let herself in through the back door. Tina will deposit the food on the stove and leave as quickly as she possibly can, what with being almost one hundred years old. Stella will only eat her sister's cooking if they can all pretend she doesn't know who made it. Later, Tina's nephew Tommy will wash the pot or plate and walk it back across the street.

Stella Fortuna's eighth almost-death, the one referred to as the Accident, occurred in December 1988, and resulted in a cerebral hemorrhage and a lifesaving lobotomy. This particular procedure was experimental at that time, and the surgeon said it was unlikely Stella would live; if she did, she would spend the rest of her life in a wheelchair with a feeding tube. The surgeon, as we know, was proven wrong; Stella, the survivor, survived yet again. But with thirty years of retrospective wisdom we can see that the Accident ruined lives—is still ruining them.

The hardest break—the most enigmatic—was between Stella and Tina. For sixty-seven years they'd been best friends, constant companions, but when Stella woke from her coma she refused to speak to her sister ever again, for reasons she hasn't been able to explain. Or maybe it's that no one has been willing to listen when she's tried.

From the time they were children, Stella's and Tina's lives were stitched together, the warp and weft of the same fabric. For twenty-four years the sisters slept in the same bed, until marriage

split them apart. After that, they lived in neighboring houses that overlooked the same swampy backyard, sharing meals and gossip every day for another forty years. What in Stella's tampered-with mind made her turn on her sister? Tina, the sweet old woman who has cooked for Stella, cleaned up her messes, cried her tears for her for the ten long decades of their lives?

What could it be?

Auntie Tina's lonely story—the selfless spurned sister, invisibly taking care of her lost best friend—has always drawn me to her. A human tragedy, I thought. As I have gotten older, though, I have realized there's another tragedy, one in plain sight: Stella's. The people who remember Stella Fortuna will remember the person she was for this last third of her life, demented and resented. I have seen how this thirty-year chore of looking after Stella has eroded her own family's affections; when they tell stories about her, they remember the worst ones, although I don't think they realize they are doing it. And I don't blame them—it has not been an easy thirty years. Stella is not even dead—may never die at the rate she is going—but all the good she did in this world has already been forgotten and buried.

This is the reason I had to set my life aside to write this book. I hope the fruits of my obsession will be the disinterment of Stella Fortuna, an explication of her too-strange life and a restoration of her besmirched good name. I have tried to reconstruct here the pieces of her legacy that are missing from what is remembered by the living. What follows is my best effort, an effort that has relied heavily upon anecdotal recollections as well as my own research. To the family, friends, enemies, well-wishers, victims, neighbors, and other *conoscenti* of Mariastella Fortuna who have been so generous to me with their time and contributions, my most sincere gratitude. Any error in fact or judgment is entirely on the part of the author.

Brooklyn, New York, 2019

Part I



CHILDHOOD



I ligna cumu su fhanu e vrasce, e l'agianti cumu su fhanu e cose.

A fire is as good as the wood being burned; work
is as good as the people who do it.

—CALABRESE PROVERB

Quandu u gattu un c'è i surici abbalanu.

When the cat's not around the mice dance.

—CALABRESE PROVERB

DEATH I

Burns (Cognitive Development)

The village of Ievoli, wedged into the cliff face on the highest plateau of a moderately sized mountain in central Calabria, was never very large. When Stella Fortuna was a little girl, in the days when Ievoli was at its most robust, there were only six hundred inhabitants crowded into the abutting stone cottages. But when I tell you Stella Fortuna was a special girl, I hope you aren't thinking small-town special. Other people would underestimate Stella Fortuna during her long life, and not one of them didn't end up regretting it.

First, there was her name, which no lesser woman could have stood up to. She'd been named after her grandmother, which was proper, but still; "Stella" and "Fortuna"—"star luck" or maybe even "lucky star"—what a terrifying thing to call a little girl. There's no better way to bring down the Evil Eye than to brag about your good fortune; a name like Stella Fortuna was just asking for trouble. And whether or not you believe in the Evil Eye, you have to admit Stella had plenty of trouble.

"I've gotten out of plenty of trouble, too," Stella would often remind her mother, Assunta. Assunta was a great worrywart, if not a great disciplinarian.

Yes, Stella Fortuna stuck out, and not only for her name. There were also her looks. At sixteen, when she left Ievoli to go to America, Stella Fortuna was the most beautiful girl in the village. She had grand breasts that trembled when she laughed and jounced hypnotically when she tramped down the steep mountain road that cut through the village center. Stella had inherited these breasts from her mother; her younger sister,

Cettina, had been less successful in the heredity department and acquired only her mother's derriere, which, it should be said, was nothing to sneeze at. Stella had clear, tanned cheeks as smooth as olives, and her pursed lips looked as pink and yielding as the fleshy insides of a ripe fig—essentially Stella was a fruit salad of Ievolitan male desires. She had her scars, it's true, the crescent cut into her brow and the stitch marks up her arms, but scars become alluring when you know where they came from, and in a village the size of Ievoli everyone knows everything. Stella was effortlessly provocative and categorically unaccommodating. When she stepped into the street for the evening stroll, the *chiazza* fell silent, breathtaken, but Stella Fortuna didn't notice or care. The soft curves of her figure distracted ambitious men and boys from the ruthlessness of her dark eyes, and she cut down and made fools out of the unwise.

Stella's desirability mattered little to Stella herself. She'd already decided she would never marry and didn't care to use her looks to attract suitors. She scandalized good, obedient Cettina with her rough treatment of the hopefuls. Later the sisters would spend thirty years locked in a blood feud, it's true, but no one in the world saw that coming, and when they were girls they were the best of friends. Prospective suitors approached them together, because they were always together.

"You have to be nicer, Stella!" Cettina would tell her sister fearfully. She was the younger of the Fortuna girls, but she worried about Stella almost as much as Assunta did. What with Stella's bad luck, it was no wonder. "They call you a bitch!"

"Whose problem is that?" Stella would reply. "Not mine."

Stella wasn't exactly vain about her appearance—she had never even seen her reflection in a mirror—but it did give her great satisfaction to know she was the prettiest. Stella liked power, and her charisma was one of the greatest powers available to her, one of the few powers a young woman in a southern

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Italian village could possibly wield in these years between the wars.

Third, she had natural smarts. Stella liked to be the best, and she was the best at most things. She was the best needlewoman in the village; her silkworms produced the most silk and she could shuck the most chestnuts during a harvest day's piecework at Don Mancuso's orchards. She was quick with numbers and could make combinations in her mind; her memory was keen and she never lost an argument because she could always quote back what her opponent said better than they could themselves. She was gentle with animals and even the damn hens laid more eggs when she was the one to feed them in the morning. She was not the best cook, so she did not cook at all—it was important to know your limitations and not waste time attempting to do poorly what you could have someone else do for you. Stella was quick-witted and self-sufficient, not to be trifled with or taken advantage of. She had inherited her mother's discipline and her father's pervasive distrust, which made her hardworking but wily. Stella Fortuna got things done. You hoped she was working with you, not against you.

Fourth—and this is what her Calabrese village respected most about her and the thing that got her in the most trouble when she left—Stella Fortuna was tough. Life had tried to take her down, and Stella Fortuna had resisted. Each bad thing that happened to her only made her more stubborn, more retaliatory, less compromising. Stella allowed for no weakness in herself and she had no tolerance for weakness in others. Except, of course, in her mother, who required special dispensations.

By the time she was sixteen, when she left Ievoli, Stella Fortuna had already almost died three times—hence all those great scars. I will tell you about the Ievolitan deaths now. They have been referred to affectionately by her family as “the eggplant attack,” “that time with the pigs,” and “the haunted door.” They're the weirdest of Stella's death stories, in my opinion, but of course

they would be; everything was a little weirder in a remote mountain village a hundred years ago. Modernity has stripped some of the magic out of the ways we live and die.



Ievoli was a secret that had kept itself for two hundred years. Like most other Calabrian villages, Ievoli was poor and deliberately inaccessible, with no roads to connect it to any other village, only donkey paths cut into the mountains' discreetly bushy mimosa and mistletoe. The Ievolitani didn't have much, but they were safe from the barbarians, the invaders, the outside world—from everyone but one another. Well, and the brigands who lived in the forests, stole the occasional goat, and accosted travelers. Another reason not to leave the village.

The men of Ievoli were *contadini*, day laborers who followed the sun to whatever field was in harvest, whichever rich landowner was paying. They had no land of their own. The men earned just about enough to keep their families alive, as long as their wives provided all the food from their terraced mountain gardens and as long as their children went to work in the fields as soon as they were smart enough.

Calabria is a land of improbable mountaintop towns like Ievoli, their streets so steep that to walk up them is nearly to crawl on one's hands and knees. The Calabresi built these inaccessible villages defensively. For two thousand years, Calabria was besieged—by Romans, who stripped away all her timber; Byzantines, who made the whole region Orthodox; North African Saracens, who made it Muslim; castle-building Normans, who made it Catholic; Bourbons, Angevins, Habsburgs; and, finally, Italians. Each wave of conquerors slaved, pillaged, feasted, and despoiled, thrashing their way through the lush olive and citrus groves with their swords out, splashing blood and DNA over the fertile hillsides. Our people fled the pirates and the

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rapists and the feudalists, taking refuge in the mountains. Now nesting in these absurdly steep villages is a way of life, although the threats of malaria and Saracens have abated somewhat these days, depending on whom you ask.

There is evidence of the conquerors' passing in the faces of the Calabresi, a many-colored people, in their languages and their cuisine. The landscape is studded with Norman castles as well as the ruins of Greek temples built three centuries before the birth of Christ. The Calabresi carry on, unmoved, among these remnants of past conquerors, for they have never been masters of their own homeland.

Stella Fortuna is like most women in that you can't understand her life story if you don't understand her mother's. Stella loved her mother more than anything in the world, though Stella with her cold stony heart. But everyone loved Assunta. She was a saint, as every person who remembers her will tell you—and there are people who remember her still. In Italian mountain villages, hearts are strong, and those who survive life's surprises live a very long time.

Assunta was born in Ievoli on the feast of the Assumption of the Most Blessed Virgin, Santissima Maria, Madre di Dio, August 15, 1899—hence her name, Assunta, from the word *Assunzione*. She was a devoutly religious woman, the kind who prayed extra to make up for the fact that her husband did not. There were lots of such women in Ievoli; I suspect there still are. Assunta was raised by her mother, Maria, to have pure, all-sustaining faith in Jesus Christ and in God's heaven, where she would someday ascend after death if she did exactly what the priest told her to. Assunta was no casually obedient churchgoer; she *believed*. At mass, especially when she was in her early teens, in those hormonally violent years of incipient womanhood, she was often overcome with emotion when she contemplated the suffering heart of the Most Blessed Virgin and would begin to

sob in her pew. Assunta had voluminous, spectacular emotions that only grew more impressive as she got older. Her weeping displays were one of two reasons her daughter Stella would vow never, ever to cry, and kept her vow for forty-eight years.

Now the reason Assunta married Antonio Fortuna when she was only fourteen years old—on the young side even back then—was because her father died suddenly, leaving his women in a tight spot. No matter how hard a *contadino* works the *padrone*'s land his whole life, he owns only his labor; when he dies he most likely has nothing to leave behind for his wife. Assunta had very little dowry, and the longer she lived with her widowed mother, the less they would both have. It would be better if Assunta were the responsibility of another household.

But it also seemed that she was ready for marriage. She had a matronly aspect about her, not least because of the aforementioned bosoms Stella would inherit from her. Assunta had a nurturing presence and an assuredness of carriage. She had a memorable face, with large dark eyes shaped like upside-down crescent moons that cupped her round cheeks. She was a striking womanly girl. When neighbor ladies came to visit they started thinking about which of the young men in the village she might marry, or maybe a young man from Galli or Polverini or Marcantoni, where so-and-so had an eligible cousin.

In the end Assunta married a young man from Tracci, an hour's walk south. Antonio Fortuna was seventeen years old, a stone layer who came to Ievoli to build the new schoolhouse. Assunta saw him often, lunching with the men under the single fat, ancient tree in the church *chiazza*. Antonio followed Assunta with his lascivious eye when she came to the well to get water. She liked the look of him, broad-shouldered and strong, a meaty young man with a crazed cap of shiny black curls, and she liked that he expressed interest in her. She never gave him her handkerchief, however. Assunta was shy of boys and had been successfully trained to channel that groin-tightening teenage energy into

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concentrating on Mother Mary's virginity while reciting the rosary. She was the kind of girl who liked love songs but never thought of herself when she sang them.

Assunta didn't say anything about the handsome young stone layer to her mother, because what was there to say? But it all came out in the way things do: one of the Ievoli stone layers mentioned to his wife that Antonio Fortuna, son of Giuseppe Fortuna from Tracci, had been giving the eye to Assunta, poor dead Francescu Mascaro's youngest daughter. Then the wife went over to pay a visit to Assunta's mother, and mentioned the boy from Tracci—and then, well. When you talk about something enough, pretty soon it comes about. Even though Assunta and Antonio had never spoken to each other, everyone else had spoken to each of them about the other so much it seemed like they had already decided everything without saying anything at all.

That was the whole of the courtship. It doesn't sound like much, but it was very exciting for Assunta, who spent that winter sewing her nervous energy into her rather rushed trousseau, warming up to her mental picture of herself standing in her own kitchen surrounded by babies, enduring the premature and stomach-curdling mourning of her soon-to-be-lost virginity. There wasn't a long formal engagement because the young men had started to be called up for obligatory military service. It didn't suit anyone for the couple to wait until whenever Antonio might be allowed to come home, so Assunta and Antonio were married in February 1914, three months after first speaking to each other.

On the day they were married, a rare snow came down from the Sila mountains. As Assunta climbed up the hill to the church for the ceremony, her sister Rosina used one of the table runners Assunta had embroidered for her trousseau to protect the bride's black dress. Hailstones collected like salt in the baskets of

mustazzoli cookies the flower girl, Assunta's nine-year-old sister-in-law Mariangela, handed out to the mass-goers.

The couple's wedding night was spent in their new home, a basement apartment of a stone house terraced into the mountainside on the third alley off via Fontana. The basement apartment faced the olive valley, and wooden boards had been jammed into the hillside to form a steep stair leading down from the street. Antonio had arranged to rent the basement from the owner, a widow named Marianina Fazio, for terms that included Assunta's help with the cleaning and the garden. The apartment was difficult to fumigate because there was no chimney, only the wide windows, which, when thrown open, looked out directly onto the widow's hens and two spotted goats.

The newlyweds' first night in the basement apartment, the wet air was thick with the smell of chicken feathers. The exposed stone walls were damp to the touch, and Assunta lay awake for a long time, picking at the mortar with her fingernail and thinking about the strangeness of being so close to a snoring man, the strangeness of the night shadows in the unfamiliar corners, the strangeness of what hurt.

In the middle of the night, there was a screaming outside their window, a human but inhuman shriek that woke Antonio and Assunta from their awkward first shared sleep. Antonio pulled on his trousers and scrambled to light the lamp.

The awful scream sounded again before they had reached the door. It took Assunta precious heartbeats to understand what she saw through the gauze of falling snow: standing over the still-heaving carcass of one of the widow's white goats, two gray, long-faced wolves. They must have come down from the Sila forest because of the snow—they were driven to these parts only when they were starving. Their mouths were red and their eyes small and black in their pointed faces. A gelatinous white fog filled the courtyard between them like a cloudy aspic and snowflakes caught in the wolves' ruffs as the four of them stood looking at one another.

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Antonio, man of the house, was frozen in fear or perhaps disorientation. Assunta, who was, rightly or wrongly, not afraid of wolves, grabbed the iron fire poker from the floor, ducked under Antonio's arm, and ran outside barefoot. "Go away!" she cried, lunging at the closest beast, who crouched and growled but gave ground before she did. "Away!" It was just as well she didn't stand by, because for the rest of their fifty-five-year marriage her husband would almost never be around to drive the wolves away.

Luckily for the newlyweds, the screams of the dying goat had woken the neighbors, and men rushed to the Fortunas' aid with their own shovels and axes. By the time they had driven the wolves off, plenty of witnesses could tell the story: Assunta in her matrimonial nightgown and Antonio bare-chested in the snow, fighting off the wedding-night wolves. There might be other beasts about, so while Gino Fragale from two houses down helped Antonio gut and skin the goat carcass for the dismayed widow Marianina, Assunta brought the chickens inside and shut them in her kitchen. Then she tried to scrub away as much of the goat's blood as she could with only snow and her broom; she didn't want the scent luring the wolves back. Assunta and Antonio spent the rest of their wedding night listening to the flustered chickens scratching at the stone floor.

Eight months after the Fortunas married, Antonio left to join the army regiment in Catanzaro. An army enrollment officer had come through Ievoli in the summer to make sure all the eligible men had been registered for the draft. The young nation of Italy was building an army to reassume its rightful place as a world power—you remember, that rightful place it had relinquished sixteen hundred years earlier, back when those Visigoths sacked the great imperial city of Rome. Not that Assunta had any notion of Roman history or the cataclysm that was already tearing Europe apart.