

Anchored in the Adriatic is the idyllic island of Sansego whose population of almost 3000 is reduced to less than 300. What caused the islanders to leave en masse and where did they go? Antonia Burgato charts their course across three countries and three cultures. Themes of rebelliousness and love found and lost recur throughout the novel.

Canaries Can't Cry:

Living with Two Flags in One Heart

by Antonia Burgato

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CANARIES CAN'T CRY

Living with Two Flags in One Heart



ANTONIA BURGATO

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PROLOGUE

I was born on a three-square mile island in the middle of the Adriatic called Sansego, as well as my mother and her mother, and who knows how many generations of mothers before her. We were the Sansegoti,¹ a proud group of people with our own language and culture, unique from the other islands that dot the Adriatic, where the bora wind blew cold in the winter, and the sirocco blew hot in the summer. The winds came and went with the unbroken regularity of the seasons.

The men of the island fished the sea and worked the land as their fathers and forefathers have done, and that was enough to bring food to their tables and music to their hearts, for few people left the island and even fewer ventured into it.



World War II had set in motion a diaspora that reduced a population of almost three thousand to one of less than three hundred. Most Sansegoti found their way to Hoboken, New Jersey, where one followed the other attracted by the work at the Lackawanna docks. They formed their ghetto and practiced their customs and culture, and life went on in Hoboken as it did in Sansego but without the bora and the sirocco. The wind they encountered in this city wasn't visible like it was in the roiling sea and the swirling sand of Sansego, but the Sansegoti felt the subtle pressure from behind that pushed them into an unknown that promised prosperity

provided they renounced their ways. This provision wasn't written in any contract nor was it voiced in any border. It crept furtively into their new lives—an antiseptic that cleansed the ways of the old world to host sumptuously those of the new.

The Sansegota spoke with a loud voice by necessity to shout salutations and gossip from open windows and across red-tile rooftops basking under the Adriatic sun. There was a saying in Hoboken that you could hear a Sansegota before you could spot one a mile away. What separated her in looks and sound from the other residents were her clothes, her mannerisms, and her loud, gritty voice that rose from the shallowness of her throat, with the full volume of a broken chord. She wore a black dress with black wool socks above the knee, and a black headscarf tied under her chin. There was no color in the face, and the contrast of her anemic skin against all that blackness gave her a ghostly appearance. She walked with a proud gait, an erect back, and a steadfast swing of her arms. There was pride in her demeanor with head held high from years of balancing grape-filled barrels on her head.

While walking home from school with a Hobokenite friend one day, I happened upon a Sansegota. My friend whispered to me something to the effect that this woman approaching us was a living fossil, resistant to the change of time and place. We laughed as I turned my face away not to be recognized by the kind Tetka Duma, my mother's aunt.

My mother wore modern clothes and spoke with a soft voice. When she talked, she told story after story of a childhood with a loving mother who died too soon and replaced by a heart-hardened stepmother, a tyrant father, her escape from Sansego, the war in Italy, and her recurrent nightmares that woke her up in the middle of the night gasping

for breath. I heard her stories told and retold through five decades, each time adding a little detail, omitting others. I felt the pain and struggles in her distant voice, as she trampled on the past that was forever present. But in my present, I was an American teenager, and my world was as different from hers as the music of Claudio Villa, whom she loved, from that of Elvis Presley, whose name alone could make me swoon. The rift in our differences was cause for many acrimonious exchanges across the dinner table.

I was in my third marriage when she died. An ex-boyfriend, in between marriage one and two, a psychotherapist from India, told me I had low *élan vital*. I didn't know what he meant. Dictionary definitions were of little help. The best I came to understand was that I lacked the creative force responsible for my emotional and intellectual growth. I refused to believe that. I had worked myself through college. I had jobs, although I changed them frequently. I had boyfriends, although even those were short and frequent. Reflecting on that now, I can see that I never stayed in anything long enough to make it grow. Yet, there was nothing more I wanted in my life than to grow, to accomplish something, to make something of myself, to love and be loved. But I couldn't break through the fortress inside me that I had built through years of rejection for not being the child my mother wanted, for not being her little housekeeper, and for not embracing her values. I didn't want to be her; yet, I admired her exacting moral codes, her courage to leave Yugoslavia and her tyrant father behind, to start again in Italy and then again in America.

I wanted to be something different for myself, as she had wanted from her father. I rebelled against her as she had rebelled against him. I wanted out of the family. I left home

many times, but she always found me, and I returned, yanked out from the proverbial mouth of the asphalt jungle, which I found preferable to the safety of a stifling home.



I exhaled a sigh of relief when I heard my mother's last breath leave her body, and, with it, out of my mouth escaped three little syllables, a soft sound, inaudible to anyone—they were "Fi-nal-ly." I felt the weightlessness of a fledgling bird ready to take flight. Such a little word, "Finally," slipped out of my mouth and jettisoned so much weight that I became free, free, free of my mother and of my guilt. There'll be no more guilt for failing to meet her expectations of me, no more guilt for breaking her rules of conduct, no more guilt for rejecting her god. I will no longer hear the disapproving voice that quashed my *élan vital*. The voice that said, "You're good for nothing" was Finally silenced. The cord that snapped me back to the womb that birthed me was Finally broken. And I was free.

But was I? Her tales haunt me. They spin in my head like a prayer on a spindle.

I hear her voice, sometimes kind, sometimes strident, and often heartbreaking. And I, like the Wedding-Guest detained by the Ancient Mariner, am beguiled to hear her yarn all over again and doomed to tell her tale.

CHAPTER 1. VALEDICTION

1944

The boat rocked gently against the waves of the night and lulled the thirteen-month-old Antonietta, who lay asleep below deck. This same calming motion, however, brought an unease to Anita that rose from her stomach to the back of her throat. She sat on her traveling trunk, next to Otto, whose crutches leaned upright against the hull of the trawler. His head fell on his chest, not asleep and not awake, leaden with the trapped air of salted fish, overused fishnets and engine fumes. Two boys sprawled on the floor heavy with the sleep of the night that only four- and ten-year-olds can enjoy. Anita raised one hand to her mouth to suppress the meager contents of her stomach, while the other held a small package wrapped in brown waxed paper tied with twine. A nauseating breath billowed from deep inside her, compelling her to seek fresh air.

“You must stay below deck,” Virgilio had warned before they boarded the trawler which was his father’s before he was killed in the same bombing that crippled Otto.

Then another heave. She dashed up the ladder and cracked open the hatch. The sea air eased her nausea. She opened the hatch more, just enough to poke out her head. No one was on deck. The only sound was the rhythmic chugging of the engine. She stood in the middle of the ladder, with the upper half of her body exposed. *How far am I from Sansego? It*

hasn't been an hour since I left. Could I still see it? The urge for a last look at the place that was her home possessed her. She must see it one more time. She moved her head left and right. Still, nobody. She opened the hatch more and climbed the last few rungs to the outside. Piles of fish nets, coiled ropes, and tubs of fish cluttered the way to the stern. The bobbing motion of the aft churned her stomach and forced a fetid heave. She hung her head over the gunwale and a miasma escaped out of her mouth, taking the sickness with it. She dried her lips with the sleeve of her arm, her fingers still clasping the twine around the box.

Virgilio watched her from the bridge, called his mate to take over the helm and walked to her. "Feeling better?"

"What time is it?"

"Almost two."

"The night is so dark."

"It's a moonless night. It's dangerous for you to be up here."

"There's not even a shadow of Sansego."

"You mustn't look back."

"I will never return, Virgilio. There's no one left there. Everyone I love is buried on that island."

"Don't forget your son. You left him with your father."

Indignant, defensive, confused, shook up, and ashamed—her rampant emotions gushed out with fiery, resolute urgency. "What else could I do? Everybody was hungry, and I have a

crippled husband and too many mouths to feed. I wanted to leave Christian behind. What good is a three-year-old on a trip like this? He doesn't understand danger and could put us all at risk. Everybody wanted Gino now that he's old enough to work. What am I stupid? Finally, my father agreed to take Romi. In a couple of years, he'd be of some help. Any wife or mother worth a fishbone would have done the same." She tightened her grip on the package. "You don't despise me for having married Otto, do you?"

"Stefano would have approved."

"He called me Titina when I suggested leaving one of the boys behind—a callous and uncaring mother and pairing me to Marshal Tito, when I'm the one who suffers most. I had to do it; you know I did, Virgilio. Don't you?"

Virgilio was a practical man. Like many other Sansegoti, he concerned himself with the day-to-day routine of putting food on the table. A little more today, a little less tomorrow; no one went hungry until the Partisans confiscated the fishing boats to build Tito's naval force and abducted the young men to fight against Italy. He understood Anita and didn't pass judgment. "It's the war," he said. "It makes people do things they'd never do."

"I was desperate, Virgilio. I'm desperate now. What's ahead of me? Otto says he has an apartment in Marano Lagunare—not his, but the company's. Well, he can't work anymore. Will the company let him live there? And when he dies, what then? What am I getting into, Virgilio? Take me back to Sansego."

"You've got four children and a sick husband. You will starve there."

“I thought things would change when the Germans arrived and threw out the Partisans. But with the Nazis on the ground came the Spitfires in the sky. Why did the British bomb the cannery? What threat was it to them? The airplanes circled above our heads like a swarm of killer bees. Two men died and Otto hit by shrapnel that crippled him forever. What threat could canned sardines possibly have?



Anita stared at the darkness. “My mother and Stefano are buried there. And all my little brothers and sisters I never knew. My mother had nine children; did you know? That’s what drove her crazy, they say. Only me and Romolo survived.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“I was nine years old when she died. That’s when my father sent me to live with other families.”

“That’s the way it was with orphaned children.”

“I’ve been told that before, but I wasn’t orphaned, Virgilio. I had a father.”

A light flashed in the distance. It skimmed the surface of the water like a flaming snake, then burst into a silent explosion. “I wonder whose boat they got this time. Better go downstairs and make sure the children stay quiet.”

She clawed the gunwale with iron knuckles and kicked the side of the boat. “No. No. Virgilio. I can’t leave Sansego. My whole life is back there. Take me back.”

“There’s no going back. There’s nothing left.”

CHAPTER 25. NOSTALGIA

We visited her brother, whom she had not seen since the days before the first crossing. He had married a Sansegota and had nine children—eight females and one boy. They greeted us in Slav with a tone that sounded like “What’you doing here?” I had never heard my mother talk of an uncle, an aunt, and so many cousins, and I was baffled by how comfortable she was in this company. They spoke the Slav dialect of Sansego, they laughed and sang, and I couldn’t understand a word. But this was Romolo, my mother’s brother, my uncle. That was his wife, my aunt, and all these others were their children, my cousins. They spoke little Italian and none of us were fluent in English. I sat at the table, watching them and eating sweet fried dough called *galani*. They talked heatedly and loudly with my mother, punctuating sentences with *da* and *ne*, which I took to mean “yes” and “no” but with the cadence that meant “no way...” and “really?” They were catching up on their years of separation speaking a language foreign to me but native to them, my mother’s primary language, and I felt like an outsider.



That evening, the round-the-table conversation centered on my mother’s estrangement from her brother. They had never been close. Junior had worked for their father wherever he was

needed, construction or farms. She went to boarding school, then got married. "He was a harsh man," she said about her father, "with no love in him. Just did his duty, and that's what he expected of us." When she talked about her past, she had a habit of shaking her head and saying, "Poor me. He was such a hard man!"

"Is my grandfather alive?" I said.

"He's almost ninety."

"And your stepmother?"

"She died long ago impaled on a fence after falling from the balcony." She paused, shaking her head again, then continued, "Like a big bad witch. My heart celebrated. He remarried and had another girl. I guess she's my sister."

"What? We have another aunt?" We all wanted to know.

After another shake of the head and a sigh, she said, "That mean, old goat fathered another child! And they tell me that she's here, too and the same age as my youngest, your little sister."

"How come you never talked about your brother?" Romi asked.

"It never came up. We left and he left, and we all went our separate ways."

"You once said that your father wanted him to beat some sense into you when you wanted to marry Otto."

"That was another time, another place. It means nothing now. In this foreign place we have to stick together."

And every Sunday she dragged us to board a bus for Hoboken to visit families with whom she could speak the language of her island. They were cousins, second cousins and cousins who weren't cousins but were called cousins, and friends of the cousins. They drank Gallo wine poured from a gallon jug and ate *galani* and spoke Sansegoto. After their catching up on the latest scandal and commendation, the conversation always found its way to money. Who made how much? They opened their savings book to show the balance that grew every week. Their eyes opened wide to the last number stamped in the book. She wanted to know how the Sansegoti in Hoboken could grow their savings so fast. They compared money earned and money spent. When Anita told them she paid ninety dollars a month for rent, they gagged, "You spend how much? Our rent is only thirty dollars."

When they had caught up with the gossip, seen the checkbook exhibit, and emptied the jug of wine, they belched their repertoire of songs at full throttle of their throats. They were the same songs I had learned at school for Dalmatian refugees in Rome, and I joined them in their singing. The most popular ones brought nostalgia. *Se il mare fosse tocio e i monti de polenta* conjured a mountain of corn meal rising out of a sea of the most delicious tomato sauce; *Quel mazolin de fiori* set forth the vision of a bouquet of field flowers picked by a young woman betrayed by love, and there was always *Va pensiero*, Verdi's chorus of the Jewish prisoners in Italy longing for their home.

After a Sunday afternoon of wine and *galani*, dinner was not more than a bowl of home-grown radicchio, which the Sansegoti grew in their backyard and never failed to give her a bagful. She made a salad with a boiled potato and thinly sliced onion and placed the bowl in the middle of the table for us to

spear our supper with fork tines in the communal bowl while recapping the day's events and planning our day and week ahead, as we always did.

There were so many refugees living in Hoboken that we didn't visit the same family twice. Each time we returned to West New York, my mother lambasted the friend-of-a-friend for getting us such an expensive place and vowed that we, too, would move to Hoboken, save money on rent, and watch the bottom number in her savings book grow, just like they did.

She asked the more established Sansegoti to help her find work for Romi. They were quick to trumpet malicious gossip about each other, but they were also supportive. "*Benedetta l'Anita*. What courage she has to come to this country with five children! She's looking for work for her second. Do you know anyone?" The word got around town in three languages.

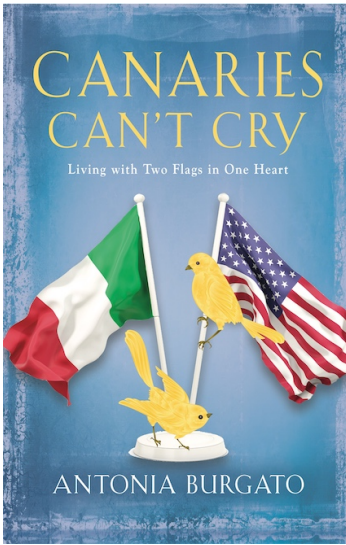
An electrician responded and Romi became an apprentice, making forty dollars a week. Anita snatched his first paycheck out of his hand. "Let me see that check."

"What's this?" she asked. "You're supposed to get \$40.00. This here check is for \$32.58. *Quel disgraziato* boss of yours cheated you, one of his own *compadre*! Didn't you see that when he gave you the check?"

"Mamma, you're looking at the net. The gross figure is forty dollars. From that is deducted taxes and social security."

"*Stupido*. You're supposed to take home forty dollars. Taxes and everything else is taken out before that."

"Not in America. Here they take taxes out from the pay you get."



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