

THE DIARIES OF CATERINA BRISANI, MERCHANT WIFE OF FLORENCE

By Meri Parker

1494-1502

6 April 1494

Today was Mother's funeral, buried with my youngest sister who never took a breath. I clutched Angela's hand on the way to the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, where the Requiem Mass was to be held. Her chubby fingers were sweaty in the unseasonably hot weather. I relish in this sisterly closeness, though she is nine years younger. Our brothers, Piero and Giovanni, have run ahead with Father - at seven and nine, they are too old to be coddled by a girl, making me appreciate Angela's small hand in mine all the more.

Mother's body had been in the cathedral since last night and had spent the time receiving prayer from the bishop who would read the Mass. Father had gone last night as well, but as the eldest, I was left home to look after the younger children. The Mass was traditional, and the bishop called us to prayer:

"Requiem æternam dona eis. Domine."

"Et lux perpetua luceat eis," we responded.

"Requiescant in pace."

"Amen."

16 May 1494

Father has hidden us away as King Charles VIII of France leads his troops to Florence's walls. Giovanni, Piero, Angela, and I are locked in an interior room until our leaders can understand why Charles has led his troops into Italy. We must protect our lives and innocence, lest these men relieve their urges on our persons. Angela is by my side, but Piero and Giovanni are complaining at the door that they aren't allowed outside to see the king's horses.

Later that day

Father has just come in to check on us, to ensure we are safe. I'm sure the stories he's

told us of the time after Cosimo's death, when the streets ran red with the blood of conspirators, run through his mind at this army that has marched to our gates. He's been with the other high-ranking merchants arguing how best to handle this siege. Many of them are hoping to appease Charles, as they do not wish to go to war, but there are some holdouts in the Settanta, particularly our leader, Lorenzo de Medici. I can understand his hesitation, as it seems Charles' demand is the exile of the Medici family. I hope it does not come to this, as I cannot imagine our beautiful city without Lorenzo's guiding hand, but Father says that Lorenzo will eventually yield to protect us, as a good leader should.

12 November 1498

After months of instability, Florence has finally restored a form of functional government with the restoration of our magistrate families to power.

I should clarify, of course. Back in May, Savonarola, our leader installed after Lorenzo accepted Charles' terms of exile, was executed by order of the Church. As a man who had attacked the Medici rule and declared that their exile had been an act of God, the Church turning against him in the final years of his life seems a cruel justice. He, of course, brought it upon himself, as he allied himself with the French pope rather than our true pope in Rome. He ignored the summons of our true pope, and was prohibited from giving any of his sermons, which were always meant to strike fear in our hearts. When Charles came to our gates, Savonarola preached that he was an instrument of divine wrath, sent to cleanse us all of our sins, beginning with the exile of the greatest sinner of all - Lorenzo - and claimed that Charles' arrival was as the flood of Genesis.

Perhaps I am harsh, but I do not believe any man should compare God's divine acts to those of a mortal king. His heresy was justly punished, even in its irony. Father did not want me to attend the execution, as he feels that women should not see such things - and I am a woman now, as Father has begun negotiations for my hand - but I could not stay away as this tyrant swung from the gallows.

I've said that Father has begun negotiations for my hand. While I am happy to fulfill my duties, it breaks my heart for Angela. While we were once the wealthiest family in Florence, second only to the Medici, Father says earlier losses mean that only one daughter can marry, as no one but the church would accept such a paltry dowry as what will be left for Angela. She has been talking of marriage to a merchant lord, despite still being a child, but she is only meant for marriage to our Savior.

I pray that Giovanni's apprenticeship in finance brings our family back to a more favorable state so that any daughters he fathers will be able to wed, whether to a man or to the faith. Piero is still too young to apprentice, but he

shows promise in his schooling in philosophy and mathematics, though Father says he despairs at his literature. But is literature truly important to becoming a merchant as Father intends? I suppose that's something that, as a woman, I will never truly know.

2 July 1501

Today was my wedding day. I'm taking a moment to compose my thoughts, as I have retreated to Angela's cell in the cloister, where she was placed upon my betrothal to Signor Antonio Brisani, a man nearly twenty years my senior. Father had apprenticed Antonio before I was born, when he was younger than Piero, and reconnected with him during his last voyage to the Ottomans. The last time the two had seen one another was 16 years ago, at Antonio's marriage to his first wife, Lucia. Father had not considered him for me, and would not have still if not for this chance meeting, when he learned that Lucia had died as Mother had, birthing a child - though this child, a boy named Riccardo, still lives. He is precious, younger than Angela, and his chubby cheeks remind me of Piero when he was that age, and he toddled on his little legs bringing the rings down the aisle.

I have been told what is expected of me tonight. I confess, I'm scared. Antonio is handsome enough, and I trust Father to not sell me to someone who would cause me intentional harm, but I remember how tired Mother was when she died. Will that be my fate, too?

Later that day

I tried reading a book Angela keeps in her cell. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, it's called, to see if I could take my mind off what's to come. It was of no help at all. It spoke of the suffering women experience during childbirth. I'd known Mother to be sick when she was with child, but will it be thus for me as well? I still fear for what is to come tonight, and for what will come as a result in later months.

Even later

I have finally emerged from the cell after reading more of Margery's book. She is not comforting but is honest. And her experiences in the marriage and birthing beds brought her closer to our Savior, which I view as a paramount importance. Perhaps this will not be so bad.

Father spoke to me as well. I could see his discomfort - normally it would be a mother having this discussion with her daughter, but we had to make do. Father says that above all, I must maintain a friendship with Antonio, for a strong friendship will make a strong marriage. I asked Father some more about

Antonio, but he said that I should ask my husband.

It's strange writing those words. My husband. I am married.

13 September 1501

A great artist has arrived in Florence - or, rather, has returned once again now that Savonarola is gone. Michelangelo fled near the same time as the Medici family, but has returned to complete a commission given to him to complete a statue begun in Donatello's day. It's said to be a statue of David, though only his feet were freed from the marble. It shall stand on the peak of our cathedral, and shall show all of Italy - nay, the world - that, though we are smaller than those who may go against us, we are still able to bring them down with our wisdom and strategy. What better message is there to send from the city of art?

My first two months as Antonio's wife have gone well enough, though I still awaken some mornings expecting to be back in my bed at Father's house, with Angela bringing me her hornbook to help her practice the Lord's prayer. The nuns have taken over her education, and I am to focus on bringing up Riccardo to prepare him for the apprenticeship he will have when he turns thirteen. It passes the time, though Riccardo is abysmal at his letters. He is only five, though, so there is time to learn before he begins his real schooling. Antonio is soon to begin a trade journey. As he travels, he has plans to leave me in charge of the household, a role I intend to uphold with the decorum expected of a noble merchant's wife. He will be departing in four weeks' time and will be gone for four months. He's asked me to pray for him daily, and I shall. Despite our difference in ages, he has treated me well since we married.

I am beginning to feel ill, so I will retire until our evening meal.

10 September 1502

Our magistrates have seen fit to elect Piero Soderini to the role of gonfaloniere - a lifetime position - in an attempt to stabilize our city after Savonarola. He is another French supporter, though, so I doubt he will last long in power. Like Savonarola, the pope will call him to Rome, he will refuse to go, and then he will be executed I should not write of such things. Imagine if Antonio were to get a hold of this diary! My words would bring him shame. I'm sure that Signor Soderini will rule aptly. Surely my doubts are from interrupted sleep as the twins fuss from hunger in the night. Their wet nurse is competent, coming at Antonio's recommendation from her experience with Riccardo, but sometimes I feel like I should be caring for them myself, even though it is not my place. My

time with them will come when it is time to teach them their letters and their feminine duties. I hope to be around for them longer than Mother was for me.

Tomorrow I am taking lunch with my dear friend Lisa del Giocondo. Her husband is commissioning a portrait for her by a genius, Leonardo da Vinci, as an anniversary gift. Perhaps Antonio will commission one of me when we've been married as long as Lisa has been. I believe that providing such artists with our patronage will allow them to create more great works, and it is refreshing to have a friend who feels the same way.

1509-1519

25 October 1509

I take back all the foul words I have said about Signor Soderini. Our war with Pisa has reached its end, with Florence emerging as the victor and claiming the Pisan territories for ourselves. His appointee for the oversight of Florentine defense and war is a young man by the name of Niccolo Machiavelli, who, surprisingly, looks with favor upon Savonarola's preaching, but there is no denying his strategic mind. It is such a relief to know that we are once again at peace.

12 May 1513

I cannot believe I am writing these words. The Medici family has returned to Florence, and Signor Soderini has been exiled. Father had told me that the Medicis had been exiled to Seville, in Spain, after Charles laid siege to our city nearly twenty years ago - has it really been so long? Lorenzo was unhappy with his displacement but did not have the power to make a triumphant return. But his son - Giovanni - could make this return. With our last pope, God rest his soul, taking his seat in the hall of our Most Holy Father, Giovanni could put forth his bid for the highest office of the Church, and he has won it, becoming Pope Leo X. His nephew, Lorenzo, now controls our republic.

Despite our standing army, installed by Signor Soderini, Medici's Sevillian army made short work of our defenses, though much of the bloodshed was avoided by Soderini's quick surrender.

As a child, I'd hoped for Lorenzo's return, for I did not believe the demand for his exile was just. But now, I cannot justify Signor Soderini's exile any more than I could Lorenzo's all those years ago. Despite my initial misgivings, he was a wise, fair ruler, and did not deserve to be driven out of Florence to Dubrovnik.

Perhaps someday, like the Medicis before him, he will find a way back into our city.

My brother, Giovanni, is pleased by the Medici return, however. He plans to find employment with them as a banker, now that his apprenticeship is complete. I pray for his success and his safety.

22 July 1519

I write in place of my mother, Caterina Brisani, who passed away this past week at 37 years. Plague swept through our fair city, sickening rich and poor alike. My twin sister, Francesca, and my sweet baby sister, Anastasia, also perished. Father and Agnolo survived, by the grace of God, though I fear Agnolo is much weakened, and Father's business is bordering on ruin. Had my dowry not already been paid to the del Giocondo family, I would be bound for the cloister with my aunt, Angela. Fortunately, Father was able to borrow enough from my uncle, Giovanni, a banker in service to our Prince, Guilio, to ensure I wouldn't become a spinster or a nun. My heart is broken at our family's losses, as I know it was Mother's greatest wish to see us travel down our paths in life, but it was simply not to be. I thank God that her words will live on.

Caterina's ever-faithful daughter,

Gemma Brisani