

THE QUEEN OF CUPS

By Michael Ventura

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Everyone has many mothers, and they don't all die at the same time. The Clelia Rosalie Scandurra who stands in the wedding photo beside Michael Luciano Ventura—she died before I was born. That photograph could have been taken at any time from the invention of photography in the 1820s to the day they actually posed for it, in 1940. It was taken in America, though it doesn't look it. ("I don't think Ma ever *really* lived in America until she entered a mental hospital," my sister told me once.) The beautiful, dark, oval-faced woman of twenty-two in her white gown and the intense, handsome twenty-four-year-old beside her look innocent of America, innocent of many things. Innocent, especially, of each other. Their intelligence is apparent (she was the first woman in all the families of all our relations to graduate college, the only one of her generation, while he, to this day, writes me long letters analyzing books and dissecting politics); yet theirs seems a nineteenth-century intelligence, unsuited to their time. I was born only five years after that photograph was taken, yet Clelia would tell me, "By the time you were born I had given up on adult love." How many Clelias and Michael Lucianos had to die in order for her to speak that sentence?

She took a long time dying. Her Red politics started to die in the 1940s, along with some kinds of sanity; other kinds began breaking down in the 1950s; by 1980 her sweetness came only in flashes and her generosity was dead; then all that was left were the memories that fed her visions, the pride that kept her secrets, and her fierce and merciless Sicilian cunning. These, and her dignity—which I never saw her lose, no matter how afraid or how cornered she may have been. Even her panics were so formidable that her dignity was implicit within them: it could take four or five people to hold that little woman down. Then, when the "episode" was over, it was as though her composure had never been interrupted.

Like anyone of real dimension, Clelia (pronounced KLEL-ee-ah) was haunted less by others than by herself. Ideas, moments, emotions and even facial expressions of long ago would rise within her, displace her sense of the present, and play upon her mind and in her eyes. And always there was something of the little girl about her—not in a playful way, but with that mix of reserve and whimsy that you see in dark Catholic girls sitting stiffly in their first Communion dresses. That tiny woman, not five feet tall, walking down the street, looking like a little girl grown somehow suddenly old! Sometimes even strangers knew that you could ask her a question about God or the devil and she'd have an answer, for she'd spoken with both many times. "We speak with every cell," Clelia told me once. "Sometimes we don't know what it is, but we speak it."

Thirty years ago, when life demanded much more in the way of decorum than today, Clelia could take her blouse off on a subway platform and tell the crowd that anyone afraid to see a woman in only a brassiere "is not fit," then improvise (or rant) a kind of poetry about "an essence that combines beauty with venom," which led to the knowledge that "the Kingdom of Heaven is within you." She was about the age that I am now, and still quite beautiful. Perhaps her beauty was how she got away with it, that day, long enough for one of her sons to find her and lead her home. We, her children, were

often frightened, but never ashamed. It never occurred to us not to be proud of her. Even if her “breakdowns,” as she called them, hadn’t had such grandeur, we had seen the years she held them off, struggling to keep her vision at bay, working crummy jobs to keep us together, trying to live a motherhood she knew she had no talent for—a motherhood that, in fact, her true talents worked against.

If I could have told her what she did to me sexually when I was little, she would have been amazed, surprised, shocked, hurt, disbelieving. The condition of some crimes is that they can be committed only if the perpetrator is unaware that they are crimes. “They call that ‘abuse’ these days, Mama,” I might say, and her eyes might harden into brown stones and she might say something typically Clelia, something like, “What people call things and what things really are, are not often the same.”

And who can say she’s wrong? Not I. Abuse, or initiation? Abuse, or baptism? To be submerged in a mix of sensuality and madness that opens a door into the Other World, the world where we *do* speak with every cell, and where the gods talk back—I call that both a baptism and an initiation. She opened that door for me, and it’s remained open, and that’s been worth whatever it cost. But yes, abuse, too: a one- and two- and three-year-old does not know inside from outside; it feels a darkness coming at it from without as an inherent unfathomable black hole within; and, running from what it believes to be its own darkness, that child splits inside, and those parts grow up (if ever they do grow up) separately, at different rates, with different needs, even with different names. It is of such stuff that murders are made. Murders of others. Murders of yourself.

Comes a time, often at forty or so, that something within releases the lock on the memory. But the memory doesn’t say “abuse,” certainly not at first, not until you label it. The memory is just itself; it stuns in a way nothing ever has. When it hits it’s like putting an ax through a beehive in your mind: you’re filled with a maddened buzzing, the beating of so many tiny wings, the pain of so many stingers, the smell of fresh honey. Things shatter—marriages, friendships, jobs, ideas, whatever happens to be around. Or rather, the falseness in things shatters, and anything made of too much falseness shatters for keeps. Still, even falseness is a hard thing to lose, it gives such protection. And it’s such a shock to find that all this time you mother, uncle or whoever it was lives inside you in the form of a sticky, stinging, too-sweet, terribly purposeful thing buzzing at the quick of your sexuality.

In these realms, phrases like “survivor of abuse,” so popular in the new abuse-industry, sound hollow. It’s harder for the spirit to survive a family that watches the American average of six to eight hours of television a night than it is to survive many forms of overt abuse. It’s harder for the mind to survive the brutality known as public education, or years on a meaningless job. There *are* morally deformed parents who actively crucify their children; that’s a deeper lever of crime, and, with these, one may speak with accuracy of “survivors.” But the beating, sexuality, abandonment, alcoholism and the like that’s gone on in families for as long as we know about—it’s so much a part of life that I’ve come to think it may *be* life: possible to redeem, perhaps, but not to prevent or cure. Light is the boundary of darkness, darkness the boundary of light, each cups the other, and from those cups we drink.

I read over the last sentence and think: if Clelia had said those words on a subway platform, with or without a blouse, or if she had talked about axes cracking beehives in her head, she’d have been hospitalized again, medicated, straitjacketed, electroshocked. I

write them, and I get a paycheck. Even back then I sensed that both of society's responses, the hospital and the paycheck, were basically arbitrary. Later I would read R.D. Laing, Doris Lessing, James Hillman, C.G. Jung and others, and they would help me learn what I'd already sensed, what I'd even written down while still in my teens: that Clelia was a priestess (a Cassandra, was how I put it then), and that in another time and place, with another people, her visionary and sensual capacities would have been seen for the gifts they were, would have had a context, a purpose, a use, and she would have had no need to lavish them in such private ways upon a little boy. How did she put it one morning, during what the doctors called a "psychotic episode"? "This is legend, that they have forgotten! I bear a legend, a forgotten legend! I have a legend, it is here for the taking!"

Even now, with her dead two years and more, I feel her priestess power. And she comes in dreams to women who have never met her, standing outside one friend's window and staring in, or asking another to intercede between us.

In the last eight years of her life I saw her for one day, and then when I knew she was dying, for another five. A love that had once been measured by closeness was, for those eight years, measured by its distance. That was the sort of thing Clelia understood in her bones, no need to explain between us.

There she was, a ravaged seventy. She'd often gone hungry, especially as a child. And as a mother she'd had the furious agony of seeing her children go hungry and be put in waifs' homes—for which she felt a crushing guilt, especially since she'd sacrificed the security of her family to her political activities. She'd seen the inside of jails and hospitals often enough; had, often enough, been interrogated by shrinks, bureaucrats, cops and even, on more than one occasion, the FBI; had lived to see her daughter graduate from one of the most prestigious colleges in the world, and had also lived to see her sons (whom she worked *hard* to drive crazy) in hospitals and prisons too, one handcuffed and beaten by the cops in her own kitchen, then taken away in a straitjacket. And never, not once, not ever did she speak, act or feel like a victim. To have dignity is nothing less than to have the sense of being a full participant in your own destiny.

She'd disappeared utterly a couple of times, just walking the streets and sleeping anywhere, showing up sooner or later in some shelter, phoning one of her four now-grown children, going into another hospital, for weeks or months or years, getting out, getting another job—file clerk, nanny (I often wonder about those children), domestic. And she disappeared even more often into what I would call the Other World. I don't know what she called it, but she said, "Once in a while I trip, trip, trip, but then I come back, back, back—and the world . . . is a much larger place than we thought."

And hadn't she taken us to zoos, museums and the planetarium, over and over (back in the days when they were free), as though to drum into our heads that the universe was bigger than New York, and that the possibilities were wider than poverty? Hadn't she taught us to read and urged us to read everything, pressing on us books like van Gogh's letters (to help us to understand *her*, I realize now)? Anything to get it into our heads that the streets, the television and school were nothing but tawdry fragments of a limitless world. If mothering is comforting, protecting, feeding, housing, she wasn't much of a mother; but she was a *great* teacher, and we were her class, her pupils, her disciples, loyal to her teachings long after we could no longer afford to be loyal to her.

The teaching came in many forms, like always telling me, when I'd show her my writing, "Remember, what's most important about words is their *music*." And like when she was pacing up and down that Decatur Street flat with a pot of water in her hands, screaming, screaming, and ten years old, I got on my knees and begged her to stop, and with a full swing she brought the water and the pot crashing down on my shoulder and said, "Don't you *ever* get on your knees to *anybody*."

I heard you, lady. Don't worry about it.

Ill, near death, sitting on my brother's couch, she said little, smiled occasionally, laughed now and then unaccountably, and sometimes got that cold, distant, almost angry, *somehow* urgent look that was impenetrable as ever—all this while listening to her beloved Caruso or watching the umpteenth rerun of her favorite show, *Star Trek*. And still, her oldness and illness were like a veil through which you saw so clearly a girl of maybe ten with hands folded on her lap, suspicious, bewildered, in a stiff, white ceremonial dress. My brother put words to our feelings when he said: "That's my mother, Mike. Nobody's ever gonna look at me like that again."

Happy birthday, Mama.

You're too fucking fantastic, as usual.

Thinking about you makes me tired. Don't take that personally. I mean, tired of our big, crude culture that has to simplify everything. The therapeutic community simplifies abuse and would classify you as a child abuser. Psychology simplifies and denies transcendent states and calls you paranoid schizophrenic and generally dysfunctional. The men's movement simplifies initiation (one of its doctrines is that a woman cannot initiate a man) and would say that I'd been sucked in by the Great Goddess; the feminists simplify the function of the priestess and matriarchy in general, speaking as though those things never cost blood. Only the FBI (of all people!) was accurate: it called you a communist, and you were—a Bible-reading commie who believed equally in Stalin and the Virgin Mary. To paraphrase Mr. Orson Welles, "It's a bright, silly world," and, as usual, the waters part before you, Mama. You were always larger than anything that tried to describe you.

And that's what you taught, with every cell: that we are, every one of us, larger than the things that attempt to describe us.

I wanted to die when you died. Tried to, as you did too on a couple of occasions. I got saved by two of my brothers, a lover and some friends. One of my brothers, who worked with the dying for a living, who's sat by hundreds of them, told me, "Everyone—*everyone*, Mike—doesn't wanna go alone. They wanna take somebody with them." And the other, our Aldo, said, "Mike what you are you do not own, you only visit—and you do not have the right to end that." (What happened with the lover and the friends . . . we'll get to that some other time.)

Sweep the books off the shelves and stuff the diagnoses. I would have done better to reread your letters. Especially that one letter. How often, over the years, has its last line spoken to me? "Just live it, suffer it, delight in it." Over and over. Those words. That was twenty years ago, you and I were still in love, I had disappeared into the West, and we didn't speak by phone, couldn't afford it, but you sent me a greeting card that featured a wonderful shot of Jean Harlow's breasts (what were you trying to get across, Mama?), and you wrote: "All that's important is to have a dream and to give your whole life for it. Give your whole life for the dream." You had given your sanity, your children and the

very clothes off your back for yours—so you had the right to say this. “You’re not like me, you think too much. It’s not so important to think so much about your dream. Just live it, suffer it, delight in it.”

A Reader’s Response

Dear Editor:

Re: Michael Ventura’s column “The Queen of Cups.”

. . . Clearly it is his own life, his own dream to live, to suffer, to delight in. However, to my mind, and my body, no adult—regardless of how unique, mystic, gifted or visionary that person may be—has the right to act out their sexuality on a child. That can only be the deed of an oppressor, one who uses power, knowledge and position to pursue his or her own interests at the expense of one less knowledgeable and powerful. What about each person’s right to choose his or her own initiation? To decide for themselves when and how and with whom to cross the boundary between receding innocence and the experience of our sexual completion? To rob someone of that choice is wrong, and no amount of romantic mythology can make it right.

Michael Ventura replies:

The idea that there are such fixed rights and wrongs, and that choice is ever so clear-cut, is “romantic mythology” in the extreme. More accurately, I would call such compartmented thinking the “psychological fantasy” that the abuse industry now sells. For instance, it is a simplistic fantasy to imagine that people who commit abuse are exercising much volition (not to mention “power” and “knowledge”). Most are driven by compulsions beyond their understanding and therefore beyond their control—compulsions they themselves fear terribly. In many cases, what they are doing is so shocking to *them* that their consciousness literally switches off during and after the act. Then the memory becomes as buried in the abuser as in the abused, and the truth of either is virtually impossible to know with certainty. When you factor in that in most cases (my mother’s included) the abuser, when a child, was the victim of abuse as well—then you have to search high and low for your rights and wrongs, for you live in a world where the oppressed oppresses the oppressed, where compulsions dictate the terms of choice, and where nothing is sure but that every human heart is torn and deserving of mercy.

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