

Angela: Love one another like it's your last day

I'm early. I want to unpack my writing materials and take a quiet moment to focus my mind on the upcoming interview with Veronica. I've secured a room in the public library for us; the room is quiet and has a bank of windows on one wall. I spread out and choose a seat at the table with my back to the windows; I want Veronica to be able to face them, to see the light and life outside as she tells me about the tragic loss of her cherished little girl, Angela. I don't have to wait long. Veronica soon joins me, armed with Kleenex and an unquestionable belief that her daughter's life and death continues to strongly influence her own. Though we start quietly, the depth of emotion this mother feels and then expresses through brief details of more recent losses of others dear to her, often by unnatural and violent means, soon rise to the surface – as do her tears. Funerals are on her mind and in her heart. "When my daughter died, my son used to say that we're cursed. Everybody around us dies and it's kind of feeling like that to me now So many who are kids to me are gone now. . . . It's taken a toll." And so begins our conversation, setting the stage for the complex and unimaginable story of the death of sweet Angela, a lively and engaging five-year-old who earned the title, La Reina De Barancas: Little Queen of Barancas.

Veronica begins to detail the life story of a daughter who "from the day she was born til the day she died until now," is very much alive in her family's life. In the early 90's when she and her husband, Guillermo, decide to have another baby, they carefully plan for its safety. Veronica quit smoking and drinking for a full year before they try to get pregnant. The result, born on March 14, 1993, is Angela Gaucin, a truly treasured gift. Veronica affirms, "After she was born . . . it's like God really talked to us through Angie" A child lovingly planned for, her life is expected to be special, filled with significant events. Even the very young Angela fearlessly believes in her own bright future. "Angie was the only one of my kids that really had a plan in life." Veronica continues to say that her little girl knew what she wanted and who she wanted it for. Angela was so excited to look ahead to that time when she would be Quinceanera; she wanted it for her whole family, especially her father. She planned to celebrate her fifteenth birthday with Guillermo walking her into the reception and dancing that traditional first dance with her. Her brothers would be close behind and her mother would help her find that beautiful, deep purple dress of her dreams – a dress fit for La Riena De Barancas. Another dream of the five-year-old was to become an Olympic ice skater and bring home the gold for her mother. "Some day, Momma, I'm going to bring you home the gold medal.' And, I really think she would

have,” Veronica affirms, tears shimmering in her eyes with the memory. But regardless of the dreams and plans, Angela is never able to take ice skating lessons or celebrate her fifteenth birthday because before she turns six, life turns upside down.

Veronica’s story shifts throughout when she recounts events she believes were premonitions of her daughter’s death. “The signs were there; we just didn’t see them.” She continues, “We wouldn’t have believed her if she had told us directly.” One example she gives is that during the year before her death, Angela is randomly featured in the local paper. Her mother regards Angie’s surprising “fifteen minutes of fame” as a worrisome sign. In both June and December of 1998, the little girl’s picture appears, once even on the front page. Neither of these public events where her daughter is highlighted are planned and Veronica wonders if the unexpected focus on Angela is a sign. A second example occurs early in 1999. Veronica and Guillermo decide to visit his recently-widowed mother in Mexico. Angela creates a picture representing her grandfather’s passing as a gift for her grandmother. It was put in the glove compartment of Veronica’s car in preparation for the trip. After Angela’s death, the picture is found and Veronica says, “I really think she drew herself.” The last sign Veronica reveals happens not long before Angela’s death. Veronica, Guillermo and the four children drive to a small town close to Guillermo’s family Rancho. While there they visit a beautiful, local church. At first Angela fights the idea of entering, but eventually she does join her mother inside the church. Veronica remembers the two questions she asks: “Mom, do you think God is going to take good care of me?” “Will I be all alone?” Veronica reassures Angela that God will always care for her. Though her daughter couldn’t explain why she reacted with such dread at the church door or why she needed to know the answers to her questions, Veronica now believes Angela was wondering about her own future. Still today, Veronica considers that her daughter, a burst of happy light, bright and full of loving energy, might have somehow felt she was going to die young. Wiping tears from her eyes, she admits she might not have understood it then, but now she thinks Angela “was trying to tell us good bye.” A short time later, her daughter is dead.

It is January, 1999. Guillermo’s father passed away on Christmas Eve, 1998, and Guillermo and Veronica decide to go to Mexico to make certain his mother is alright. Veronica’s mother is expected to stay with the children, but things change and the parents find they must take four of their children with them. Jose’, fourteen, stays in Colorado, but Kristina, ten, Ejay, eight, Kimberly, four, and Angela, five, are packed into the car with their parents, and all head south to Guillermo’s family Rancho in Barancas, Mexico. Thankfully, they discover everyone is fine when they reach Barancas on January 28, 1999. The parents decide to stay

awhile and treat their children to some extra days of family time. On February 4th, Guillermo takes his family of six and his mother to Sain Alt'o, a small town not far from the Rancho, to enjoy a day of shopping. The main downtown street is not only lined with stores, but also has vendor tables set up with souvenirs, food, clothing items and traditional gifts. The street-market tables are organized for walkers and customers to move among them, shopping and visiting together throughout the day. Veronica and her mother-in-law shop with the kids, buying clothes, shoes and gifts. She and Guillermo go their separate ways; the town is small enough that no one is very far away from each other. Family members enjoy the freedom of safely shopping, eating, visiting and playing. It is during this joy-filled family time that the inconceivable happens.

For some reason, even though Angela has her own new clothes, she wants to wear pieces of her brother and sisters' clothes instead. Concerned that Angela will mess up her siblings' new things, Veronica says no – that Angela can just wear her own new clothes. But Angela insists and before long is wearing shirt, pants and socks that aren't hers. The little girl heads off with ten-year-old Kristina to find and then try on some shoes from another vendor's table. Veronica stays at a separate table with other family members while Guillermo is off finding food. Veronica recalls that she looks up and notices that a truck is driving toward the market area. "I remember that truck coming down a street and (it) turned where all the tables are." She knows the truck driver realizes he is not supposed to be on that street; he begins to slow and swerve to avoid things. Veronica believes that the driver sees her daughter who is now sitting on the ground, near the table, trying on shoes. He tries to miss her by turning, but the back of the truck "took her." Veronica, tears streaming, shares the horrific scene: "And I actually thought of the man that hit her before I even thought of her. It's like I saw it all happening . . . but I didn't. I was outside myself. I remember people running, things flying, shoes everywhere. And then I see this little girl lying in the road and I look at this man and think, oh my God, what he has to live with for the rest of his life. I look at the little girl and I just want to walk away and I turn to walk away when I remembered the pants and the shirt and the way I yelled at her to not mess up those clothes. And I turned back so fast because then I knew it was her."

We pause for a moment as Veronica wipes at the tears that refuse to stop. She continues her heartbreaking story sharing how she raced to pick up her daughter. ". . . her head was just back and she had all this blood gushing out of her ear and I'm trying to hold it in." The distraught mother's hands show how she cradled her daughter's head, trying to stop the blood. "I couldn't stop the blood!" These last words are like a cry and Veronica lowers her head, reaching for another tissue to wipe eyes brimming with tears. Veronica believes

Angela is still alive; her head is moving back and forth and her eyes are rolling. Trying to catch her own breath to continue, she repeats the anguished words she said on that day, "God, let me feel her pain. I don't want her to feel all this pain." Still aware that Guillermo is not beside her at the scene, Veronica leaves everything behind but her daughter. She takes off running with Angela in her arms to locate a doctor, hoping that her other children and her mother-in-law will follow. The doctor she finds looks at Angela and tells Veronica there is nothing he can do. And all of a sudden Guillermo is there. He picks up his daughter, rushes to a waiting truck and speeds away with her, leaving Veronica, his mother and the three children wondering what to do next. They hurry through the streets of the small town, trying to find where Guillermo and Angela might be. Finally, they come upon another doctor's office but instead of being welcomed in, Veronica, her mother-in-law, Kristina, Kimberly and Ejay are locked within a room, away from Angela.

Veronica, her eyes still wet, but now flashing in anger explains her experience of being kept from her daughter. "I had a lot of hate at that minute. Why didn't they want me to be with my daughter? I'm her mom! I hated that I wasn't with her." *In Mexico, Veronica notes as an aside, women have no rights. She is told that as a woman she is not strong enough to be there, with her daughter.* Though she pounds on the door to get out and find Angela, no one helps. Veronica tries different ways to get out of the room – needing a bathroom, a cigarette, reminding the nurses she is a US citizen, demanding to see her daughter – and eventually the door is opened. Veronica moves out into a hallway and past another open doorway where she sees a doctor who invites her to come into his office. This doctor tells her again that her husband is with Angela and then reveals that "they are coming for her." Veronica angrily asks what that means and finally realizes that Angela is dead. Because she was locked away, unable to be with her child during this important time, Veronica says, "I went psycho!" She starts to throw and break things in the office and is then finally taken into the room where Angela lies. She finds Guillermo there and is surprised to also see two of his sisters who have somehow gotten there from Barancas and been allowed in the room. She focuses on Angela, goes to her, and finally is able to hold her.

Veronica learns that Angela actually died while in the truck with her father as he raced toward the doctor's. Though she felt robbed of the privilege of being with Angela at her passing, she is thankful that at least Guillermo was there at her end. She calls her husband "one of the richest men ever;" he was given the gift of being with Angela when she took her last breath. The parents mark this day, February 4, 1999, as the death date of their little girl.

It is still February 4th and though the hours are passing by, time is standing still in heart-aching ways for the parents. Where they are, now, in Mexico, the expectations, preparation and burial practices are unfamiliar. Veronica experiences more and more confusion and frustration at what she is expected to know, understand and do in those short, rushed hours after Angela's death. Angela's body is taken in one direction from Sain Alt'o to be autopsied and embalmed, and the parents are told to go in another direction, to a different town to meet local police and complete paper work about the accident. But before she and Guillermo can make that trip, his sisters insist that Veronica shop for Angela's burial clothes. There is anguish in her voice as she relates this unexpected shopping time with her sisters-in-law. She is taken through the same streets where she held her mortally-wounded daughter only hours earlier: "I just wanted to kill myself and they want me to pass by the street, and they want me to pick out clothes, and they want me to drive and do statements, and drive and see my daughter . . . and I didn't have anything in me. And they each . . . had an arm dragging me down the street."

Eventually, with burial clothes purchased and collected in a bag, Veronica is finally free to travel with Guillermo to provide the necessary information to the police authorities. Veronica voices how that particular experience is both irritating and painful as the officials continue to look toward her husband, the man, for the important details of the event even though she, a woman, was the person actually present at the scene who needs to recall it all again. In time the statements are accepted from the parents, and they leave, backtracking to where their daughter's body is being embalmed. The address they have been given turns out to be a cemetery. Veronica gives her husband the bag of burial clothes because she can't bear to go into the mortuary. She waits for him in the truck. And time stands still.

Veronica takes another turn in the story to relate how the next event impacts her and Guillermo in ways beyond the immediate tragedy. Guillermo, alone, observes the completion of Angela's embalming. He then dresses her, forgetting nothing. He comes out of the mortuary carrying their daughter and walks down the sidewalk toward Veronica. She names this time as one of her most enduring memories: "He looked like an angel." She is so proud of her husband during this time. Strong and capable, he tenderly cared for their daughter's body, handling all the necessary details. "He thought of everything." Then Veronica takes the conversation to another time and place . . . to another pain-filled memory. After Angela's death, the couple continues to struggle with the persistent grief, anger, guilt and frustration surrounding the loss of their

daughter. They both had been living with pieces of the experience in Mexico they hadn't yet told each other. Their struggle grows worse. Eventually Veronica asks Guillermo, "What's wrong with you? Since she passed away you don't talk to me." Then she adds, "It became this thing that we blamed each other. We didn't know what we were going through. He didn't know what I had gone through. I didn't know what he had been through . . . and the truth comes out." Guillermo is finally able to share the horrible picture he witnesses when he entered where his little girl is being embalmed: a man, trusted with their Angela, has laid her, naked, on a cement floor; with one hand he holds a tube to drain Angela's blood from her, while his other hand is on her "privates." As she relates this atrocity, Veronica's voice rises in pain and anger, and the tears flow.

Just as Guillermo exits the building with Angela in his arms, a hearse arrives. A woman gets out of the vehicle and moves to the back to pull out an infant-sized casket. It has been brought to hold Angela, but it is much too small and the parents refuse it. Instead, Angela's body is lain across the laps of those in the truck while they follow the hearse to a funeral home where Guillermo chooses a different casket that is more fitting. This particular coffin is designed so that when the left, upper part of the separated lid is lifted, glass still covers the face and chest of the resting body. Others can see but not touch the departed. Veronica describes it: "She was covered like a queen." With Angela's body now resting in a more suitable place and dressed in her beautiful white clothes for burial, the parents set off for Barancas. Veronica remembers that she begins to cry as she thinks of Angela, alone, bouncing around in the casket, so they stop the truck and the parents go back to lift their daughter's body out and hold her tenderly the rest of the journey. They arrive at the Rancho and discover Guillermo's family has been preparing a place for Angela to be laid out. A white sheet and surrounding candles await her little body. Though they weren't expecting to display a coffin, family members find a way to rearrange the area so Angela, in her casket, has a place to rest. *As Veronica describes the scene when she and other family members look at their little queen, more anger surfaces. She remembers in awful detail the lack of care given by the medical professionals charged with caring for Angela's body: she has never fully been cleaned, either after the accident or from the embalming process; her hair is in disarray; and her body is still smeared with fluids and her own blood.*

Before long people begin to arrive to sit with the family in their grief. They are mostly unfamiliar to Veronica; she recalls that she is in a "state of numbness . . . there, but not there." Before the night is over, she decides to shoot a video of the visitation at the Rancho to commemorate that time. Veronica also realizes Angela's body is deteriorating and wants to have pictures of her for their Colorado family before that happens. The

nightwatch progresses; family, friends and caring others pass the hours together. February 4th turns into the 5th as daylight brightens the horizon. Veronica is told, "its time." When she asks for what, a sister-in-law reveals that Guillermo's nephews have been working at the cemetery all night to be ready for this morning. It is then when Veronica discovers what most everyone else seems to know – Angela is to be buried, in Mexico, now. And the next part of this tragic story starts with a mother's declaration: "You are not burying my daughter here!"

Veronica reveals that those who are in charge of having Angela embalmed admit that they are not good at the process. According to the Mexican Health authorities, bodies are expected to be buried within twenty-four hours and burying a body after a forty-eight-hour period requires a permit from the Mexican Health Department. Her family is operating under these understood expectations, but to Veronica it means saying good bye too quickly, and then committing her daughter to a place too far away. She begs Guillermo not to let his family bury Angela in the grave, just dug, next to his own father's gravesite. Preparations for burial stop and the parents head back to Sain Alt'o to find a phone and call Veronica's parents who still haven't been told either about the accident or their granddaughter's death. Veronica not only needs to give her family the horrid news, she is also hoping for guidance.

Veronica takes a moment to note that when she dropped her purse and all of her packages in order to pick up Angela and run to a doctor, most everything disappeared – new gifts, clothes and shoes as well as all of her money are stolen. Nothing remains but an empty purse with their identification documents still intact. During the call to her parents, Veronica relates the accident and, though she doesn't remember how she did it, tells them their granddaughter is dead. Distraught, feeling helpless and thinking only of her little girl, she tells her parents they should "sell the house, sell the cars, sell everything, keep it, I don't care. I'm not going home. I'm not going to leave her here." After her father hears the story of the family's last several hours, he strongly agrees with Veronica's wishes. Angela should be brought back to Colorado to be buried, where her mother and father can always be close to her. Knowing that her Mexican family is prepared to bury Angela, this very day, she tells her father, "I don't know how to bring her home."

It's February 5th and the first twenty-four hours are ticking away. Veronica and Guillermo understand that they cannot transport their daughter's body back to the United States unless it meets certain health requirements. In order to buy more time to create a possible path for taking Angela's body home, Veronica goes again to

the mortuary and asks a woman in charge to embalm her daughter a second time. The woman agrees. Then the parents spend hours talking with others, checking regulations, asking questions – all the while searching for ways to transport Angela back to the states. Options are few and obstacles are many. Cremating her was never an option for Veronica, and the specific regulations surrounding driving out of the country with Angela's body are considered but marked off, one by one, as impossible. Time slips away and Veronica returns to the mortuary asking for a third embalming. Their little girl's body again receives the procedure and the parents continue to search for an answer to their dilemma. Veronica affirms, "Every door was closing." And then the situation begins to turn a corner . . . toward the answer.

Veronica's father in Colorado gives his daughter the name and number of someone to call who he believes can help them. Veronica, who has been trying unsuccessfully to get the funeral home to honor their business promise of providing air transport for the deceased to the states, returns to the funeral home. This time she makes a call to her father's contact – someone who works for the American Embassy. She reaches a man who is aware of her name and some details of the situation. After asking her some questions and assessing the difficulties the couple faces, he talks with the funeral home representative. Eventually, he directly tells them that if he must, he will come to Mexico and bring Angela out himself. The woman at the funeral home rethinks her position and tells the family she will honor their promise to transport the body. Veronica begins to believe that the closing door might stay open just long enough for them to send her little girl home.

As details unfold for the transport, more problems surface. The legalese and growing red tape wind tightly around the situation and the parents now wonder not only how they will get Angela, but also the rest of the family, out of Mexico together. Having little money, since most of it was stolen at the scene of Angela's accident, and facing new paperwork complications surrounding transport and citizenship issues, the couple senses the door begin to shut again. Their contact from the American Embassy makes another call to see how things are going. An anxious Veronica details the latest unreasonable expectations and again he asks to speak to the funeral home representative. This time he uses the power his job carries and the family's position as US citizens to untangle the bureaucratic, punitive paperwork. His words work and the family finally watches the door open fully. Angela's casket is put on a flight to Denver on February 6, 1999, two days after her death; it lands just hours later. After making certain Angela is on her way to Colorado, a relieved Veronica calls her father to let him know that his granddaughter is on her way to him. Then, she and Guillermo say their goodbyes to their Barancas family, load the children in the car and begin an almost non-stop drive home.

Angela's body is met at DIA by a mortuary located in Denver as well as by the Embassy representative who promised to help them bring their little girl home. She is held in Denver as her body is re-examined and re-autopsied. After another embalming procedure and all medical considerations are met, a funeral home from the parent's hometown collects their daughter's body, bringing her the final way home. Veronica, Guillermo, Kristina, Ejay and Kimberly arrive on February 7th, only one day after Angela lands. Thankfully the Colorado family is together to take possession of Angie's body when she is finally released by health officials and transported from Denver to Fort Collins. All the arrangements for a family viewing, the special Blessing and her rosary service, have been made by her family to commemorate the life of a beloved little girl. The Little Queen of Barancas, in her long, white dress, white shoes, jewelry and crown, is finally laid to rest on February 11, 1999.

Veronica reveals that she has held close many things of Angela's over the years. "I saved every piece of clothing she ever wore, toys and clothes she got for Christmas (right before her death), every paper she brought home from school and I still can't let go of the clothes from her accident. I just feel like if I throw them away . . . all her blood is on them; that's the last of her life. It will just go in the trash, like nothing. I just can't bring myself to do it." Veronica shares that she is now ready to give some of her daughter's things – those last Christmas presents and toys that she was never able to play with – to someone who will treasure them.

Veronica and I move toward the closure of our interview as I ask her about the passionate feelings she still holds concerning the accident and the circumstances of Angela's death. She thinks a moment and describes that she feels a kind of "grudge" against the truck driver who hit Angela. Though he was held by the police directly after the accident, before the parents could deal with the case the driver bought his freedom and fled the country. According to Veronica and members of her family, some form of justice needs to happen: this man must face Angela's whole family; he needs to admit to what he has done; to say he is sorry, that he didn't mean to take their cherished daughter, granddaughter, sister and niece from them. "Basically my daughter's accident turned to murder when he ran away," Veronica declares.

Veronica gives me a small smile when she says of Angela: "I have to talk to her a lot . . . to tell her about what's new and what I wish she could be here doing . . . and just everything. I told her I hope you know that we loved you." She continues, "God told us from the beginning . . . this is the one that's not going to be here

long.” Still, Veronica believes that Angela is always here, around her; she is love. She is present in the laughter, the special smiles and the bouncing energy of family – especially through (Guillermo) Junior, the younger brother Angela never met. In closing, Veronica shares important and grace-filled wisdom she has gained from her grief-filled loss: *“Every day is a gift. Love one another like it’s your last day.”*