

GOING HOME

Since Staten Island is in the State of New York, and my grandmother was not my legal guardian, as I approached school age, my Nonna prepared me for my return to New Jersey. We'd made this journey once before, a very short, memorable one.

On the days previous to our leaving, she spoke of my mother and father and the need for me to go to New Jersey. I listened but just didn't get it.

"Recorda tua mama e tua famiglia distanza?" (Do you remember your mother and your distant family?) *"Si, Nonna."* (Yes, Grandmother.) *"Se una ragazza grande ora"* (You are a big girl now.) My head bowed lower.

"Adesso se deve andare a scuola." (Now at this time you must go to school.) *"Si."*

I bit my lip to stop the quiver.

"You know, she spoke in her best English, you must be very American all the time and speak English always. *"Sempre!"* ... (Always) She lifted my chin and looked into my eyes.

"Answer me." *"Capisco?"* (Understand?) *"Si."* *"Inglese, Cara, Inglese."* (English, dear, English.) She reinforced, in a whisper, *"sempre."*

On Sunday before we were to make this journey to another state, Nonna cried during mass. She lit more than one candle; she barely spoke on the walk home. I looked up at her, hoping to see her return the look and smile. She did not. The whole day was heavy with sad cousins, Uncle Cesare and *"Zia"* Mary. We said our goodbyes after our Sunday ritual ... *cicchetto* and *pasta d'malfattas* (badly made shapes of pasta cut from leftover dough). The

dinner was led by prayer and followed mostly by silence. Everything was different. Nothing was the same. There was a sorry in Staten Island.

That night, as we kneeled to pray, Santa Marie became Hail Mary... Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us ...

In the next morning, Grandmother packed very few clothes of mine into a shopping bag. She spoke softly about the journey we were about to take and how long the day may be for me.

Earlier that morning she prepared a simple breakfast of bread and cheese for us and using a few eggs made a frittata (omelet) adding grated with parmigiano cheese, tomatoes and basil from the garden. She made two small sandwiches for our trip, wrapped them in wax paper and slipped into her handbag.

Prior to leaving the house, never to vary...go to the bathroom. Back to the kitchen for the, you know *"lavarsi le mani!"*

Hand in hand, we walked two blocks to Richmond Road. We waited for the Richmond Avenue bus for the twenty-minute ride to Saint George and the Staten Island Ferry.

For the cost of a nickel, the ferry took us to New York City. It was a lovely, scenic half hour adventure for me. I darted from side to side stopped only by the guardrail which caught me just above my head. Nonna, a bit uneasy, asked me to stop or we'd go inside to sit.

"Fermarsi!"

"But Nonna, look! A Statue of the Lady. The Virgin Mary! Why is she not in church with all the other lady statues?"

My grandmother lifted me up to get a better view. Speaking softly, with her lips close to my ear, she corrected *“Mas, no, Cara, ciama, Statue of Liberty.”*

“Oh, The Statue of Liberty! But, Nonna, why is she there and not in church with all the other lady statues?” My grandmother, carried me, with her purse and precious cargo held in the shopping bag, into the interior section of the ferry. We sat on one of the long hard wood benches for passengers.

So, a short history of my grandmother, leaving her family, parents, many siblings, all her relatives and friends began. She sailed for many days, along her four-year old daughter, Gemma. The “Lady” was there, seen from the ship as they sailed into the harbor.

Yes, coming to America, arriving at Ellis Island, to meet the husband she believed had abandoned her four years before. I liked the story. I did not understand how the pain she saw coming for me, might ease by sharing her own losses. She was very quiet.

We disembarked and walked to a subway station, down the stairs into the gray tunnels, and waited on the platform for the train to Chambers Street.

We took the subway to Chambers Street. Our bodies rocked back and forth and we laughed

Then we changed trains for 125th Street. The wait there was so noisy and the platform a bit crowded. Although a short ride, we were lucky to find seats. We sat very close together in silence.

Once we reached our stop, we hurried from the crowded station down the elevated platform, me holding on to the rail as directed. Once on the street she wiped my hand with one of her handkerchiefs. Holding my hand tightly and pulled close to her hip, we'd walk through this section of Harlem, the few blocks to 125th Street Ferry into Edgewater, New Jersey.

On the ferry, the lesson of how to use a public toilet was reviewed. She'd hold me above the seat and warn me not to touch anything. I obeyed with no response. We washed our hands and returned to the bench. Nonna took the sandwiches from her pocketbook, placing mine on a paper napkin in my hands. We ate in silence. She used a spare napkin to wipe my mouth and hands. Silence was hurtful, confusing.

Then we rode the trolley to Cliffside Park. She was very quiet, almost pensive, half whispering words of courage to me.

"Sta brava, Cara." (Stay brave, Dear.) She continued after the trolley stopped at Wayne Avenue ... now in English. "See how beautiful is this street. The school is on the other side of those trees. It is not too far to go. You will learn quickly *"perche,"* you are *"intelligente"* and a good girl. Always."

I remained clueless about the unhappy situation before me.

The lone house stood tall and stately. The house my parents built was beautiful and appeared huge in my eyes.

There was no house on Staten Island, where I lived, that compared to this brick structure standing among giant trees.

There were more trees than I could count, taller than I could crane my neck to see. Did they have names? The trees in Nonna's yard had names. Cherry. Fig. Pear.

There were no fruit trees.

"Vivrete in questa bella casa con tua famiglia nuova." (You will live in this beautiful house with your new family.) *"Mas, Nonna,"* I sucked in my breath, *perch?"* (But Grandmother, why?) *"Sta quieto e sta forte, Biona."* (Be quiet and stay strong, Blondie.) She used a pet name we used in our playtimes together. Suddenly comforted, I almost smiled and quickly squeezed and kissed the hand holding mine. I wanted to skip and sing, *"Bionda, Bionda, Bionda!"* We'd often sing, *"Balla bene, Biondina, Balla bene supra ..."*

Nonna gripped my hand as we walked up brick steps to a front door. *"Sta brava, cara."* (Be good, dear.)

I was to learn, much later, her switching back and forth between languages was a sign of her discomfort.

Why were there two front doors? Nonna rang the bell. It sounded like something you'd hear in a church. This was followed by a harsh sort of long, burp. The lock was released by a buzzer pushed by someone on the second floor.

We entered the door of 278 Wayne Avenue.

A dimly lit foyer led to a set of stairs on our right. We walked up the thickly carpeted staircase. Large flowers, like roses, were in that carpet for us to walk on wearing our shoes – something I was taught never to do.

I gripped a big wooden banister with my tiny hand. Along with Nonna's seemingly tighter grip on my right hand, we reached the top of the stairs.

Here, life as I once knew it would change forever.

We entered a glass door with many square panes. In that room of my paternal grandparents, I was suddenly lost in a room of strangers.

In a flurry of both Italian and American English I was tossed from one embrace to another, cheek kissing, crying, hugging, squeezing, lifting me off my feet, forehead kissing, hand clasping, tossing me in the air, fingers through my hair, compliments and kisses.

Only the new coat, made by my Nonna, for this special day, saved me from being injured. I was certain of that as I hand brushed it at the door.

We left that room and started climbing up another set of stairs. No carpet, wood steps.

A woman was sitting on the top step, holding a curly haired, bawling "*Bionda*" in her arms, another "*Bionda*", a screamer, pulling at her dress.

The woman looked so very beautiful, so very pale, ... a "*Bionda*" herself ... my mother.

