

DEPRESSION BABY

Yes, that is how those of us born in 1934 were labeled...Depression Babies.

I was born in New York City on a freezing Sunday morning during an historic snowfall. No family members were able to visit Knickerbocker Hospital to give comfort to my teenage Mother, or to see me, her first born, and the first grandchild of this generation.

Shortly after my birth I was delivered to Staten Island, N.Y. to live with my maternal grandmother, Maria (Nonna). I lived there until it was time for me to go to school. Five years!

My Nonna, widowed in 1934, was a warm woman, affectionate, caring, and I thought, the best mother a child could ever have. In an old album of black and white photos, we see this plump, immaculate smiling toddler in pictures with aunts, uncles, cousins, neighbors and Nonna. No others, no parents.

As a toddler I spent time with my Nonna in a small rented house on a farm off Richmond Road. The house was so tiny that I slept in the loft. Each night Nonna would watch me climb the wooden ladder, calling "Dorme bene (sleep well) Sogni dolce (sweet dreams)."

Sewing was one thing we did on that old porch. Nonna was a master seamstress. That is how she earned a living, five cents a bra, piece work. The bonus was take-home work for the poor immigrant trying for a better life.

The woman was passionate about sewing. She made all my clothes straight through college. Coats, dresses, suits, skirts, underwear. She could also knit – sweaters, scarves, socks, mittens. We did have to buy shoes!

Her creative cooking – what she did with vegetables, I mimic. So the days went on –fun, affection, caring and teaching. The days of sunshine, the outdoors, all memories I cherish.

Late afternoons Nonna and I would sit on the porch, she in her rocking chair, me at her feet. Each day was something new and different. All happy times!

My grandfather, Bonfiglio Mazzocchi, was the only person with a car in all of lower east side, where he lived with his family. He was the one who drove people everywhere they had the need to go. This ranged from hospitals, dentists, jobs and even grocery shopping. Driving the neighbors to meet incoming ships as the immigrants arrived and families were reunited. He was revered by all in the neighborhood of 22 James Street. The Italian immigrants, poor for the most part, shared beds, baths and beyond.

Bonfiglio went beyond. He drove across the just built 1931 George Washington Bridge to New Jersey and found a plot of land that he could afford on the street of his dreams, Wayne Avenue. He had a house built to his specifications. Here his family could walk to work and they would all work. Everyone!

The location was well planned as my grandfather “Nonno” owned and operated a Penny Arcade in Palisade Amusement Park, perched high on the cliffs overlooking the Hudson River and the Island of Manhattan. Location, location, location.

It was the first and only house on the street. The rest was made up of woods, tall trees all around and a field.

So 278 Wayne Avenue housed Bonfiglio, his wife Caterina, daughters Stella, Marie and Rita, son George and George's soon to be with child-bride Angela. The 278 address was described by law as a three-family house. It had two floors, each comprised of two bedrooms, eat-in kitchen, living room, dining room, sun porch, and one bathroom. In addition there was a cellar and an attic. Aunt Stella, just married, had returned from Bedonia, Italy with her handsome young Italian husband, Claude Luigi Captelli. They lived on the first floor of this strong, well-built brick house.

The second floor was very comfortable with my paternal grandparents in one bedroom and the two girls, my aunts Marie and Rita sharing the second bedroom.

My family lived in the attic...a real attic...one with a pitched roof and tiny alcoves, suitable sleeping quarters for five tiny heads, and very short adults. There was a tiny room to the left at the top of the stairs with two windows that started at the floor and were about three feet high. My maternal grandmother slept there in a single bed and a crib for girl children, numbers 3 and 4. That room had a closet. My parents had a room off to the right. Baby girl number 5 slept in that room in a tiny bassinette. Across from that room was an open alcove called the living room. It had a couch up against the wall, a small table, a window, and nothing else to my recall. We played there sometime. A door led to another low ceiling area including a tiled, all white, full bath to the right, and an alcove where two first-born little girls slept sharing two thin cots, with a wonderful single window between. In another alcove was the kitchen table, a refrigerator and two chairs. Another alcove held the stove and sink. A skylight was a joy of mine, as I dried the dishes I could see the stars in the sky. They seemed so close.

In the five years that I lived at 278 along with grandparents, aunts, uncles, parents and four younger siblings, laden with all the responsibilities of a first born, creative forces and the nature of the environment filled the house – giving birth to a series of “escape personas.”

The lower level of the house, the cellar, included a full bar, and wine cellar, in which my grandfather made and stored his own wine, a store room, a bathroom, and a doctor’s office. Doesn’t every house include a doctor’s office? No waiting room...just a room with an exam table, a scale, a stethoscope, a desk, lots of books and a doctor’s tool kit. Fascinating. Always locked. The key hidden above the safe that Nonno kept just inside the back entry to the basement.

“Betty Grable” knew that. She knew everything about that cellar. She’d sit on that bar stool...dangling legs crossed, pretending the water in the champagne glass was, well, champagne; pretending to drag on an invisible cigarette. Some days, if the house was quiet, she’d slip into some of Aunt Rita’s clothing, the store room was Kleins and Macys all in one place...high heels. OOPS! Saved those great legs but chipped a tooth...a front tooth. Yes, it was my second, permanent tooth. It was a badge I would carry until college, where I met Roger Poole, DDS. “Wassup with that tooth?” Thanks Dr. Poole. Sorry I did not meet you before I started high school.

“Sheena, Queen of the Jungle,” was one of my favorites. The woods abutting the property allowed Sheena to swing freely from one tree to another, shrieking with abandonment of all cares, all responsibilities. One day the rope, worn well over the summer, suddenly

snapped. Sheena fell several feet to the ground below. I carry the scar to this day and smile in my heart each time I see it. Oh, Sheena! Thanks for the save.

“Wonder Woman” grew out of my fear, the insecurity I often felt about where I really belonged and to whom. This comic book woman was my personal hero. I wore my Wonder Woman bracelet, the one that gave me “wonderful” powers...and did become for a short time powerful, self-assured and fearless.

I have the scar, often questioned by techs who wax eyebrows, to prove how fearless and perhaps bit reckless a younger version...so far from being a woman, might behave. Yes, each day when I apply eye makeup, I smile.

Ah, Wonder Woman! Thanks for the save.

A decade ago, I had to resurrect her, facing new challenges, becoming fearful, an aging widow, retired too soon, emotionally wrecked by destructive greedy families, trying to get back into the lifeboat. I took part of a gold chain which I had gifted to my then husband and had it made into an ankle bracelet.

Whenever I had to enter a room filled with people...me, myself and I, entered with confidence and “attitude.” When asked to speak to an audience of hundreds, I do so with ease. If you check my left ankle...Yes, it is a modern day “bling” version of my Wonder Woman bracelet, yielding the same magical powers it gave me seven decades ago.

OMG! Wonder Woman. Thanks for the save.

In my life, in that moment there was only my maternal grandmother, Nonna Maria, my private...just for me only, mother, my hero...followed by Nonna Caterina, and paternal grandfather Nonno Bonfiglio, who came to this country alone at age 16, married, raised children, ran a business...a penny arcade, skee ball, bed and breakfast in South Beach Staten Island, New York.

I never pass up a penny. They make me smile and remember summer nights and the jukebox playing... "you'll never know just how much I miss you." Sung by some Jersey guy...Sinatra something – 1943.