

ABANDONING THE ATTIC – NEW DIGS

Living in the attic at 278 Wayne Avenue proved unhealthy for a growing family. This Mazzocchi family of mine just kept growing.

After the fifth baby arrived, my paternal grandparents decided to purchase a house for us on the same street. Kiss the attic goodbye!

Now this was a house. A real house. It had doors with locks and full-sized windows and a yard. Now we could really work on walking erect and getting some good posture. It was great.

On the first level, we had a real kitchen with everything: table, chairs, a pantry. There was a big window and a back door with a lock. There was a screen door, too, and a back porch. The living room and dining room were beautiful, with big windows and shiny wood floors. Too beautiful. There was a sun porch, too, with eight windows. It was too brilliant to describe. It had a heavy, solid, front door with a big brass lock. There were four bedrooms and a bathroom on the second floor.

We had three garages. We had a clothesline that stretched from the back porch, across the entire backyard, attached to a heavy branch of the lone tree. A cherry tree.

We had a back lawn, a side lawn, a front lawn. We had a stoop! It was too much happiness to be believed.

There were four bedrooms upstairs. My father decided he could rent those two rooms for fifteen dollars a week. He did.

Three garages and only one car, only one driver. The car could be parked on the grass under the clothesline. Garages would be rented out for five dollars a month.

Guess what happened next? We lost the dining room that disappeared overnight, being transformed into a master bedroom. How awful was that plan?

Now we had five girls under ten year of age, two parents, two tenants and one bathroom. That bathroom was on the second floor. The indoor play area was now reduced to the sunporch. That beautiful, window framed room with no heat. Cool! Put on your coat cool.

Two things came together to bring about yet another change. I do not know how it came about, unsure of the sequence, but the young couple left and mama was pregnant.

The dining room reappeared and Nonna Maria was summoned back from New Jersey. All was right with the world.

My parents now had the bedroom next to the bath. Nonna Maria had a tiny room next to that, shared with the baby of the moment. Four siblings shared the two back bedrooms. The first-borns were to have their very own bedroom. We jumped up and down, screaming with joy in that empty bedroom, with two big windows.

Mother suggested that I could buy a new bedroom set with the hundred dollars in my savings account. Over the years gifts of money were deposited into the account, with great

flair. Mother suggested, she and I could shop together for a new bedroom set. Whoa! Just the two of us. I was one happy eleven-year-old.

I picked out a lovely, light walnut bedroom set. It had a double bed, and included a bureau, a dresser and a free hanging framed mirror. The entire set cost ninety dollars.

I gave my mother the entire hundred dollars so she could buy “something else.” This bedroom set was to stay in our family for the next fifty-four years.

On January ninth of 1946, the first male child of our generation, my brother, Joseph (Joey) was born. It was the highlight of my father’s life. The entire family, the entire neighborhood shared in the celebration. “It’s a boy!” Shouted from the rooftops. My father stayed drunk for days. He was missing from home until mother’s return from her week’s stay at the hospital.

Baby, new baby, boy baby slept in a bassinet in my parent’s bedroom. The routine for all newborns.

With the presence of Nonna Maria, the household became less chaotic. She washed us, combed hair, prepared breakfast and dressed us in our uniforms in a timely fashion. We walked or ran the block and a half to school each day.

Clothing was always appropriate to meet the climate, the weather. A short cut through the path in the woods reduced our time down to a few minutes. It was my responsibility to lead or pick up the rear, or pick up the child depending on the need. If we heard the first bell, we’d run like hell!

The memory of being caught late one morning in first grade was a huge motivating force to get me to school on time. While living in the attic, during the absence of Nonna, it all was a hectic drill each morning to get to school on time. Trying to get into the bathroom, trying to wake mother, trying *not* to wake father, trying to find something to eat, trying to find shoes, trying to keep a baby from crying. Trying, trying, trying.

Crying. Before I reached the corner, I heard the last bell which meant the school yard was in shut down. It was an additional half block to run to the front entrance. In tears, I struggled to open the huge, heavy Catholic School door. I froze at the bottom of the wide marble stairway just inside the doors.

I looked up into the angry black eyes of Sister Rose Kathleen. I dashed up the stairs, head down, feet flying. Full stop. Once on the landing she wrapped her bony hands around my bare neck and lifted me off the ground. She shook me, and warned me never to be late again. She spun me around and pushed me towards the first-grade classroom. In the remaining year, through eighth grade, I was never late again. Never.

Since Sister Rose Kathleen was the second-grade teacher; I worried all summer. Please God, I pray each bedtime, don't have me spend an entire year in the same room with sister, The Witch from Hell, Kathleen. God answered my prayers. It was about time. He seldom helped me out of tight spots. He did bless this child, however, with a wild imagination. Thank you.

Nonna did all the cooking, all the household chores, all the baby caring and in the absence of my mother, was always present. She was calm, clean, affectionate, caring and

reliable. She sure knew everything about babies and how to care for them. She was the stability I craved at that time.

I was helpful. Chores were done without protest. No whining. Each evening I'd set the table, help with the food preparations. (Spinach had to be rinsed four times.) A handy step stool helped me to reach the polenta pot that needed stirring, a dish or two that needed washing.

That simple step stool enabled me to reach the ironing board. This position, held every day after school, became permanent. In those days everything was ironed. Drudgery graced only by the three stations that played on a tiny, beat up, plug in the wall radio. Hop Harrigan, Terry and the Pirates, Jack Armstrong – The All-American Boy, Stella Dallas and more...all motivating distractions.

Handkerchiefs were ironed, underwear, pillow cases, sheets and dresses. Little damn dresses. Little damn dresses with puff sleeves. Little damn dresses with pleats. Little damn dresses with lace collars and cuffs. No end in sight. There seemed to be an endless conveyor belt delivering one after another.

In my adult life, since I left school for college in 1951, I have never owned an iron. Never!

By spring, the following year, my brother was displaced, expelled from the parents' sanctuary, and relocated to Nonna's room. He was replaced in position as the final sibling, by a bouncing baby girl. She is still simply nicknamed "Seven."

As, for this newborn, there was baby care. Changing diapers. They were cloth. They were not disposable or discarded. Sometimes there were as many as three babies in diapers. Washing bottles, boiling nipples, making formula, mixing pablum, two high chairs set to feed tiny mouths, changing bibs, dressing, undressing, sponge bathing, towel drying, guiding nightly prayers.

Those lawns needed to be mowed, hedges trimmed, snow to be shoveled and always prayers looking to be answered.

Oh, there was a giant black monster living in the cellar. It had a huge, dark cave of a mouth that required shovels of black coal to keep it happy and energized. The coal feed was housed in a bin. Every so often a coal truck would arrive, fix a chute into the basement window, and dump a truckful of coal for Nonna and I to shovel feed The Monster that lived in the cellar at 234 Wayne Avenue.

Did I tell you what I loved best about this house? It had an attic where no one had to live.