

Part II ~ Partial Segment of Chapter I “Auch du Lieber Augustine” ~ Nonno’s Monkey Arrives

Optima Dias

Prima Fugit

The best days are the first to flee

~ From The Latin ~

It all started on a warm Indian summer day in 1942. We were the children of Northern Italian immigrants twenty-eight years after they came from the Old Country. In homes Nonno had built, Nonna and Nonno lived up the hill. Mimi and Uncle De lived above them in a little attic apartment. Zio Vic and Zia Irma and their five kids lived over the hill. Momma, Dad, David and I lived down the hill. I was five, soon to be entering Branford Indian Neck Primary, a one room school a mile away. David, my brother was four. America was at war; Pearl Harbor had happened seven months before. Our world was full of English spoken with dozens of foreign accents. It was a time of tight families, rigid tradition, flag waving, strong beliefs and measured prejudice.

It was the day the monkey came. Our famiglia, and the little town of Branford, Connecticut would never be the same.

Chapter I.

Ach du Lieber Augustine

July 1942

Let me go back and find my childhood
under the years of life collected, then discarded into layered heaps
shrouded in joys and bungled growth
Let me find it and snap it like a chicken wishbone
and win the wish
Then suck and chew the ends for the marrow
Let me reach back when imagination ran free of time
Shiny copper penny days, toed heads-up from the dust
Fireflies in the hand at sunset
When straight, strong, rich brown stick
became steed with winged fires
soaring upwards to everywhere

The NBC News Hour with Walter Winchell:

“Good evening Mr. and Mrs. North and South America and all the ships at sea ... LET’S GO TO PRESS! Women without stockings may now enter St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome. Speaking of the ladies, ladies, the US Congress has approved the creation of the WAVES - Women Accepted for Voluntary

Emergency Service. The snappy gals will help fortify our boys at sea ... Whirlaway, ridden by Eddie Arcaro takes it all - the Derby, Preakness and Belmont - becoming horse number five to win the American Triple Crown ... What about the Cards! They beat the Yanks four games to one in the World Series ... For the first time Mr. and Mrs. America, our fly boys have joined the RAF and bombed Nazi bases in Holland ... And now ... a word from our sponsor ...

Pepsi Cola hits the spot
Twelve full ounces
That’s a lot
Twice as much for a nickel too!
Pepsi Cola is the drink for you!

Saturday. *La Famiglia* big boy play day. My little pest of a brother, David, and I meander through the thick blue cigar smoke, hoots, gags and back slapping, wind around Dad, Uncle De, Nonno, Zio Vic and miscellaneous pals down by Nonno’s wine cellar. We usually get a good natured brush-off with old corny sayings like “go peddle your papers,” “go toot your horn,” “amscray,” “go bother your Mamma,” or the final termination declaration, “Bada-boom! (hand clap, mouth click, finger snaps) ... *BASTA!*” Italians of this family, especially our targets for today, the men, constantly make head, foot, eye, hand or vocal sounds, since they all seem to suffer from a mental disorder that produces *provare orrore per silenzio*, a horror of silence, and the need to smack each other. If you’re a kid, you’re also getting told “Silence is Golden.” This family had to pick that one up from the Yankees, because no Italian believes it, let me tell you. Even if silence is The Great American Way, our family boys get the dunce cap and the corner. How confusing is this? To me, it seems

that all Italians David and I know are all noisy, kissy, laughing, crying people who cannot spend even one “quite” minute. This is how Nonna pronounces the word “quiet - et,et,et!” All except for Nonna, who is always begging for silence, because she’s an artist and thinks that all gestures and loud voices are low class. Today, the men are in a good mood which is produced by several jelly glasses of Nonno’s vino rosso, so, a certain amount of wheedling, whining, begging, or fake crying is tolerated. Wheedling, whining, begging and fake crying targets are arranged from: impossible-Nonna; hopeful-Dad, Zio Vic and Nonno, and never Uncle De, because he’s mean and does mean things to you, like twisting your braids so tight you cry. Then, he laughs. He’d laugh if God was dying on the ground right in front of him. Other times when you least expect it, you’re grabbed up, showered with hugs, rapid-fire drenching smooches, pinches, undivided attention and stares that would make a hole into steel. Sometimes, the men will pitch a football, or let you play bocce ball, take you for a walk or go in the woods to see the secret fort you’re building. These infrequent miracles mean you get pasted onto their fun like clothes to a paper doll. These acts keep desire alive, so today, like every famiglia big boy Saturday, David and I keep wandering through the cigar smoke, while flashing fingers behind our backs, which show the individual vino drinking scores. Mamma, Nonna, Zias Mimi and Irma are usually watching from windows making funny faces. In case any kid thinks they’ll get a better deal in another family, forget it. Branford’s entire population of Italians, Swedes, Poles, Norwegians, Russians, assorted others, and “Dozayankiss,” sometimes called, “Dozadamnyankiss,” all think the same way. The latter are our family words for the non-immigrant Connecticut Yankee people, and why this family just can’t get the “Yankee” word correctly pronounced is a real annoyance to me. They also have the nerve to make fun of accents and how immigrants, other than Italians, pronounce things. Please be

reminded of “quite.” Generally, getting back to the point, kids are left to their own imaginations, certainly not the center of any family universe, which again goes back to the art of wheedling, whining, begging and fake crying. Today, the big boys are really going at rock, paper, scissors and are slapping the holy living hell out of each other. Soon the drop-in, now *ubriaco*, slightly drunk pals depart and our men full of *appetito*, head to their kitchens, singing Italian love songs, intent on executing what is called “the goose.” Nonna believes this *culo* pinching act is an inborn trait present in all Italian men, including priests and others she calls “dirty old-a ...” The adults in this family always stop before the ends of certain words, smearing them with their hands over their mouths, usually accompanying this act by staccato eye blinks and coughing. It’s just a way to say cheap, low class stuff where you fill in the blanks. Any dummy knows she means dirty old-a-*bastardo*. But, the last time I filled that in, Mamma washed my mouth out with Lifebuoy Soap.

“The men are born with the thumb and forefinger ready for *mangiare o’ pizzicare*,” Nonna said to me loftily, sniffing greatly at the end. “In English, because you might as well know the scientific definition, this means eating or pinching the behind. Culo is a low class word,” here she hammered that word, slapped her heine part and added, “your back end.”

Once, Dad got Nonna with the *pizzicare*, by accident. Our dark, dog-legged stairs caused the “oops.” He’d just gotten home from work as she was climbing up to our bedrooms, to make a check on what we were doing. In a clear case of mistaken culo identity, he made the fateful pinchy-pinchy at the ascending rear end which he assumed was Mamma’s. Anybody can see the difference. Mamma’s is a bubble, while Nonna’s is skinny and flat. The victim yelled “GEORGE,” so loud, the windows rattled. Dad turned all red, beseeching, “*Scusa* Angela! Oh gee! Oh sorry,” and almost killed

himself tripping down the steps backwards.

“For God sake George, get some glasses!” she recommended tersely, rubbing her behind. “Goose the piano! Eh!” And continuing, she added hotly, referring to his German ancestry, “You’ve got absolutely no talent for the goose! You’re like that near-sight gander down the street. He bites the holy living hell out of anything moving!” When the men got the right rear, the women would always jump, squeal their husbands’ names, and try to swat them. Sometimes the pair would move in for the kissy-kissy, which was disgusting, and made kids run and hide. This goosing continued through closed door adult nap-time, straight into Saturday evening. By then, the men were “three-sheets-to-the-wind-*ubriaco*.” Supper smells were filling the air, and, outside for the last bit of play before bed, David and I were catching fireflies. I worried about Dad and this three-sheet business, especially since he did much of the cooking, but Mamma would always throw “grown-up” eyes and hum, “Your father is fine. Just fine.” Life with this family was a tangle, and as a result, I spent much time in a *non capisco*, non understanding state which could be or could not be fixed.

“What is this ‘three-sheets,’ anyway?” I asked Nonna, one day, hoping for an answer I could understand. “Is it three sheets of paper? Three sheets on Zia’s line? Why don’t you just call it what it is: ‘drunk,’” I continued.

She dusted off her face, re-arranging it with a penetrating gaze directed straight at me.

“Not drunk, Ezabel,” she explained, wagging her finger at me, accompanied by the pause that did not refresh, when hereyes bored holes and the world stopped breathing. This routine occurred when I suggested using, in her opinion, a sullied English word or besmirched hand gesture. “Never drunk. Only happy. It’s low class, “This word-a ‘drunk. You don’t use this

espresso. Never drunk. Capisco?"

She waited for my "Si. Capisco," while her two caterpillar eyebrows froze horizontal on her face. What if it was a "non capisco?"

Not even the town dummy would admit that, and so Saturday moved along, with or without my understanding or permission.

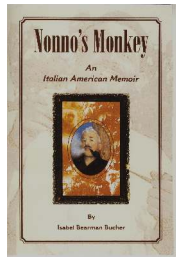
Saturday Play Day for the Girls

Sometimes, to get away from the big boy play day, Mamma and Mimi might go shopping or to Polly's Tea Room, and no little kids were allowed anywhere near that place, unless they were really rich Dozayankisses girls, with white gloves and perfectly curled blond hair. Sometimes Nonna took my older cousins Marie or Lorraine to the Branford Theater. *God Is My Co-Pilot* was showing, and I wasn't allowed to see any war violence. Then came *Casablanca*" with Bogey and Bergman, and all that kissy stuff mixed with war nixed that show for kids. A couple of weeks back, Mimi took David and me to see *Bambi*, and she cried through the whole thing right from the beginning when the title got written on the screen all surrounded by flowers. It was a cartoon for gosh sakes. People kept turning and shushing her. But, when they shot Bambi's mother, then she really cranked off, which triggered David, who has a big problem with plugged-up and runny adenoids already. The whole theater, except me, fell like soggy dominos. Maybe the women would all walk to town, taking us to keep us out of the men's "hair." Now, here was a real non capisco. Why didn't they just say they were tiptoeing because the big boys had finally gotten to the piled-up home repairs, between rock, paper, scissors, *culo* pinching, lunch and three sheets. Maybe somebody had a free-for-all fight, which seemed to occur most often on Saturday. Nonna also thought loud tiffs were low class, but

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our houses were close, and you could always hear the yelling which happened no matter what she thought. So the women, excluding her because she never took sides, showed support for one another, yanked all the kids by the collars and left in a blue huff. They'd march off to church under similar conditions if the fight lasted through Sunday. So, while this going someplace was a gift, how you went mattered. Mad women are not fun, let me tell you. They pay no attention to you, hit you if you dare to move, while they weep or yell in public about their issues. So, the kith went from *culo* goosing to combat.

Who could understand?



Kindly note: Nonno's Monkey, An Italian American Memoir contains some 150 pictures that date back to 1856. It took the author two years to cull through, organize and choose only the best of hundreds for her memoir. Only Prologue Uno, Due and Tre contain pictures in this E-book download-a-chapter-at-a-time. If you like the taste of this sample, and want to make your way through the full meal, you are cordially invited to go to "PURCHASE NONNO" on this website: isabelbucher.com; oneitaliana.com, or you can continue your individual chapter downloads.