

ANN-MARIE VAZZANO

Peripheral Visions: an excerpt from an autobiography

Old photographs of my parents rest on my desk. My father, in his college graduation picture, age twenty-one, resembles Dick Van Dyke—Rob Petrie really. 1963. He stares at me with my brother's eyes. My mother, seventeen years old in her high school graduation picture, smirks rather than smiles, having never been fond of her teeth. She's wearing pearls and an angora sweater that my father bought her from the Style Center on Broadway between Fourth and Fifth Streets. 1959. She stares at me with my sister's eyes.

They laugh when I show them the photographs.

"Your mother always hated that picture of me," my father recalls. "She said I looked like a nerd."

"You do look like a nerd in that picture," she says.

"I think you look like Dick Van Dyke," I reply.

"You're kidding."

"No, you really do."

"Hey, Louise, on our honeymoon, we went into one of those beachside shops to buy a pair of Bermuda shorts for my father, and the guy working the counter told me I looked like Dick Van Dyke—remember?" my father said to my mother, whose name is Charlotte.

"Yeah, but he didn't say I looked like Mary Tyler Moore, did he?"

My father examines the picture of my mother and turns to me.

"You see, when your mother had this picture taken, tweezers hadn't been invented yet. Look at her eyebrows."

"You thought I was beautiful then."

"You're the second most beautiful woman in the world."

"Who's first?"

"I always leave myself room to maneuver."

Every so often, I rearrange the frames on my desk. I like my parents to face me at an approximate twenty-degree angle, half way between the keyboard and the printer, directly beneath the desk lamp. There, proud, my father watches me work. He beams

as his youngest child earns her education. I'm the last one. When I finish, he'll feel like he can die.

"I'll get a charter boat when I retire," my father jokes. "I'll sail it out on Lake Erie and take people back and forth between Port Clinton and the Islands. Everyone can call me 'Skipper.'"

"You're deathly afraid of water," my mother tells him.

My father doesn't want a charter boat on Lake Erie.

My parents grew up in Lorain, Ohio, on the state's coast, just west of Cleveland. The steel mill employed virtually everyone in Lorain, but those who didn't work there worked for Ford Motor Company, "FO-MO-CO," they called it.

My mother and father went to Lorain High School. Their experience there was like a scene from *Grease* or *Happy Days*, but with a bit more ethnic variation. They went to school with kids similar to Juan Epstein, the Jewish Puerto Rican, and bad boy Vinnie Barbarino from *Welcome Back, Kotter*. My father was in a social club called the Dukes, and my mother was a Junior Gem. They weren't gangs, really—not in the sense that gangs exist now. They were more like fraternities and sororities for high school kids.

When my father's mother died a few years ago, we had to sell the house my father grew up in. We found his old Dukes jacket in the front hall's corner closet. It fit my brother perfectly.

"You can have it when I die, Frank," my father told him. "But I'm not ready to part with it yet."

My mother was missing half a front tooth when she met my father; she had chipped it somehow. But my father thought she was beautiful. It wasn't long before her mother received a call from the Lorain High principal.

"We think Charlotte is hanging around with the wrong crowd."

"What do you mean?"

"She skipped class today."

My father and Eddie Manten, his red-haired prankster best friend, had taken my mother and another Junior Gem out to George Daniel Field to smoke cigarettes after lunch.

When my father left for Bowling Green State University in September of 1959, my mother gave him her high school graduation picture, framed, so he wouldn't forget her. He claims that all he took with him was an alarm clock, a toothbrush, some sheets, and that picture. My mother claims that he turned the picture around when he had girls in his room. He denies it. They were engaged. My father drove home in his '56 Chevy twice a month to see her.

Every summer, they would take walks on the beach at Lakeview Park in Lorain and watch the sun set behind the lighthouse, while massive iron ore boats drifted past. Years later, my whole family would go to Lakeview Park on Easter Sunday to have our pictures taken in front of the giant Easter basket that sits in the grass near the lake.

My father was the first Vazzano born in the United States. He lived, spoiled, with his parents, grandparents, and two aunts. His Aunt Do-Do (Josephine, became Jo-

Jo, became Do-Do) introduced him to the library, and by the third grade, he'd read and reread Homer's *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, too. He retained everything.

His grandfather, a blue-collar steel mill worker, owned three houses at once. Nice houses. You work. You save. You make it in this world. That was his philosophy.

"If you don't have the cash to pay for it now, then you can't have it now."

My father pays for everything with cash. The only things he's ever had to pay interest on are cars and houses. And if anything, no matter the severity, goes wrong with either one, there's plenty of "rainy day" money to cover the expenses. He's the only person I know in his income bracket who can buy a brand new Jaguar and put a \$26,000 down payment on it, partly from saving, and partly from keeping his 1997 Lincoln Continental in mint condition for five years, making it worth at least \$14,000 upon trade-in. I've never seen him use a credit card.

"I was fifty years old before my contract read forty-thousand, and when I say that, I mean the second number was a *zero*," he always says. "I don't have this car *because* of how much money I make. I have it *in spite* of how much money I make."

We've never been rich. Nothing's been easy.

My father used to watch his grandfather make wine in the basement of the old house on 19th Street. Intent, he listened to his grandfather's stories, absorbing everything, almost as if he realized the aging man's mortality.

"Everything grandpa ever said stuck with Frank," my father's Aunt Kay, ninety years old and deafer than Beethoven, said recently. "He idolized him."

I should ask Aunt Kay about the old country.

The night before I left for college, my father stopped me in the kitchen after dinner. He took out his wallet and held it in front of me.

"I have something for you in here," he said.

He opened the billfold and handed me a crisp twenty-dollar bill. I noticed some words scribbled in his handwriting, just right of Andrew Jackson's chin. I looked closely: Friday, August 27, 1999.

"This is an emergency twenty," he said. "Put it somewhere in your wallet—somewhere hidden where you won't be tempted to spend it. If you're ever in a bind—need to call a cab or anything—you'll always have it."

I looked at him—examined the creases in his face—especially by his eyes. Lines from laughter must be worth it. They must be. But he looked old.

"Thank you, Dad."

God, he looked so old.

He reached back into his wallet, sliding his index finger between the wallet's worn leather and his driver's license. He unfolded a creased, faded bill. It was an old twenty-dollar bill with the date written on it, just right of Andrew Jackson's chin: September 2, 1959.

"My grandfather gave this to me when I left for college," he told me. "In case of an emergency."

"And you still have it?"

Of course he did.

And I was so glad he still had it. I was so glad he'd never used it—so glad, that I went to my room and cried.

I still have mine, creased and fading, pressed between my wallet's worn leather and my driver's license. I think my sister spent hers on pizza. I wonder about my brother's.

Our Lady of Peace Catholic Church sits at the bottom of a hill in the residential neighborhood where I grew up. My mother used to take me to the church's playground to swing on the monkey bars, but my earliest memory—I'm not even sure if I truly remember it, or if I've heard the story so many times that I think I do—was my sister's first communion. I watched all the holy marchers, dressed like tiny brides and grooms, walk down the aisle and extend their hands to receive what I thought were cookies. Then, they all moved on to take a sip of.... Kool-Aid? I jumped off the pew and ran up the aisle to join my sister.

"I want cookies and Kool-Aid, too!" I screamed. And the looks of horror on my parents' faces—body of Christ, vanilla wafers, what's the difference?

In first grade, I went to Sunday School for the first time, and by May of that year, I'd made my first confession. We were urged to think of all the terrible things we'd done so we could practice our confessions the two Sundays preceding the big day. There wasn't much I could think of, so I decided to be apologetic about fighting with my sister. Very sincere.

"Say ten 'Hail Marys' and an 'Our Father' every day for a week," the priest said, "and you will be forgiven for your sins." So I did. The year after that, I had my first communion.

My Godmother—my father's Aunt Do-Do— always woke up at four a.m. to mumble prayers and wash clothes. She'd kneel next to her bed, methodically fingering the worn beads of her rosary, her mouth moving in perfect holy rhythm. She owed everything to God, she thought. She made her husband get up, too, sometimes, so she could change the sheets.

"I lit a candle for you," she'd say all the time, to anyone who'd experienced any sort of adversity. She was always lighting candles at Saint Peter's—always hoping—and sometimes, maybe, it worked.

There was a baseball game on television when Aunt Do-Do died. The Cleveland Indians were in the playoffs. She got up for a snack during the seventh inning stretch and collapsed onto the kitchen floor. Linoleum. She was eighty-three. I wasn't quite seventeen. It was my junior year of high school, and I was supposed to be confirmed that spring.

I never got confirmed.

How many candles would it take now?

My father is too agnostic to care that I didn't get confirmed. But we used to go to church every Sunday, and on Christmas morning, too.

He never gets over death.

"My Aunt is worm food, cold, stiff, frozen in the ground," he always says. He's always so depressed. Nostalgic.

"Oh, stop it, Honey," my mother says. "You're so morbid."

“It’s true. It’s so cold outside, and they’re in the ground—my father, my grandparents, my aunt—my mother.”

But he knows she can’t feel it. She can’t feel anything. There’s no Utopian afterlife. There’s nothing at all. And no one likes to pick out coffins.

At my father’s mother’s funeral, her six grandchildren were pallbearers. I stood in the middle, white knuckled, gripping the handle on my grandmother’s box, trying to convince myself that it was just a big wooden trunk filled with old toys or clothes or newspapers—anything. My sister was on the other side, white knuckled, too, and shivering. My brother stood in front of her. I watched his nose turn red from the cold, or the tears, or both. Our Grandmother weighed virtually nothing—there was nothing left, but god, she was heavy. And February was freezing, and my father—he looked gray and lost. An orphan.

Who can stand the smell of roses now?

In February.

When I think about Christmas in my old house, it seems warmer than Christmas now—cozier. My sister and I once woke our parents up at two in the morning to open presents. I got a Barbie Ferrari that year, candy-apple red. My brother, half-comatose, put it together for me under the dim glow of colored Christmas bulbs. My sister got a new pair of roller skates. My father, wrapped in his flannel bathrobe, sat in the green armchair, smiling and snapping photographs. He probably hadn’t been asleep very long when my sister and I woke him up. He’d probably just finished nibbling on the pecan cups and fudge Kristen and I left on the kitchen table before we’d climbed into bed.

Our father tucked us in on Christmas Eve, always. One by one, he’d pull the covers up to our chins, starting with the sheet. He’d make an “O” with his lips and blow to simulate howling winds outside.

“It’s so cold,” he’d say. “Aren’t you glad you have this nice comfy sheet to shield you from the wind?”

He’d blow again and pull up the next blanket.

“Ahh, isn’t that nice? Aren’t you warm and cozy now?”

By that time, the sugarplum fairies were pirouetting through our brains.

After opening presents on Christmas morning, we’d pile into the car—the first one I remember was a blue, 1978 Monte Carlo—and drive to my grandmother’s house. The hour-and-a-half trip usually seemed short, because I was nestled into my yawning brother’s bony arm, asleep. The radio was tuned to the local oldies station, where Christmas classics dominated the airwaves.

Jingle Bell Rock.

Blue Christmas.

Santa Baby.

When we arrived at my grandmother’s house, aunts, uncles, godparents, and cousins greeted us with hugs, kisses, and the infamous Italian cheek pinches. It was

always obvious, though, that I was a generation removed, not only because of my blue eyes and blond hair, but because I hated the cheek pinching with all my Americanized heart. My round face, unfortunately, boasted the chubbiest cheeks of all.

Sometimes, in a pusillanimous attempt to avoid the inevitable, I'd hide behind the armchair in the living room, where a few minutes later they'd find me and double their doses of affection.

"There's my adorable little godchild," Aunt Do-Do would say, lovingly lifting me up by the cheeks. She'd pinch, kiss, and hand me an envelope with my name on it, a crisp hundred dollar bill concealed inside.

"Go put this in your mother's purse, cutie-pie," she'd say, and I'd scurry off, my cheeks still rosy from friction.

A few hours later, we'd situate ourselves around the dining room table, munch on Sicilian olives, and await the first course. My apron-clad grandmother, sweating from the heat of the kitchen, would emerge carrying heaped bowls of spaghetti and giant pans of meatballs. Italian sausage and neckbones followed. At one end of the table, Aunt Kay and Uncle John argued about which tasted sweeter—Sprite or Seven-Up. Across from them, Aunt Do-Do reminisced about Gangi, speaking intermittently in her native tongue, Gangitan, an Italian dialect. My father sat and listened, intrigued.

At the other end of the table my grandmother needlessly apologized for her meatballs.

"I'm sorry these meatballs are so dry, kids," she'd say, ignoring the fact that most of us were already enjoying our third or fourth one.

"They're delicious," everyone told her.

She cringed and shook her head. "Too dry."

The next course consisted of various gargantuan pans of roast beef, chicken, and spareribs, each one passing multiple times around the table.

"Save a breast for Eugene," my grandmother said. "Eugene likes breasts."

The rest of us nearly choked on our food laughing, but my grandmother never got the joke.

"Sorry this roast is so tough, kids," she said.

"It seems okay to me, Ma" my father said. "I think you must've gotten the hoof."

"Can somebody pass the peas, please?"

"Save room for cannoli!"

I remember summer, too.

Sometimes, my father would wake me up on sunny mornings singing:

"Lazy bones, sleeping in the sun, how do you expect to get your day's work done? Sleeping in the sun, sleeping in the sun."

Recently, he sang that song to pull me out of a mid-morning slumber. He hadn't done that for years. I'd been in pain the night before, due to a herniated disc in my back, a common ailment in my father's family, and I think he felt guilty that I'd inherited it. His mother used to sing that song to him, and as he sang, he seemed hopeful—almost as if it could ease the pain—or take us back.

Last October, my father returned to Lorain for the first time in over two years. We were invited to his brother's surprise sixtieth birthday party—obligated, sort of, to return to the place where my parents used to live. My father drove, mostly silent, speaking only to complain about the increased Turnpike toll. He'd had eighty-five cents clenched in his hand for ten miles, only to arrive at exit eight's booth owing a dollar ten. Automatic windows. Aunt Do-Do would've loved the Jaguar. Ostentatious. She loved nice things. My father drove it through Calvary Cemetery—a quick detour to visit.... home? Rod Stewart's voice poured through the car's speakers—"Forever Young." I sat in the backseat, staring out the window, feeling awkward and ill, wondering if anyone else was listening to the music.

Eventually, my father turned the volume down, low, so Rod Stewart's words were inaudible. But the song was still playing, whether we could hear it or not. And each digital second flashing on the dashboard teased us with sardonic relevance.

My father pulled up to the curb, and we got out. We stood and stared at the cold gray slabs, thinking that somehow, they represented life—and death—and somehow, standing there, looking at them, meant something. Brown leaves and crabgrass. We didn't speak. But the chiseled gray dates reminded me of the last time I'd thoughtlessly motioned the sign of the cross.

We left the cemetery and turned left onto North Ridge Road.

"I wanna drive down 19th Street," my father said.

And we couldn't stop him. We drove past the old house. They'd painted the trim and replaced the windows. The house had needed new windows. He couldn't pull into the driveway. What would they think? But he wanted another look.

We turned around in Hattie Nowicky's driveway, but Hattie didn't live there anymore.

"Hattie's been dead for fifteen years already, Louise. Do you believe it?"

Still, it was Hattie Nowicky's driveway. My mother didn't respond, and we drove past the old house again. They should've painted the garage.

"I'm afraid your father and I ruined you kids," my mother said to me one afternoon while we were riding in the car.

"What are you talking about?"

"You and your sister and brother—I'm afraid you'll never get married because you're too picky."

"What's wrong with being picky?"

"Well, you've grown up seeing how your father is. Not many people have a work ethic like his—not many people are like him."

But I'm not a snob.

My father worked two jobs for years, and he always taught summer school.

"Huh?"

"I just wish I could have grandchildren someday."

She was right. I won't eat lasagna with meat in it because that's not the way my father's family made it.

My grandmother kept spare change in a plastic butter container in the kitchen drawer by the phone. In the summer, when the ice cream truck drove down 19th Street, she'd reach in the drawer, hand me the container, and tell me to get whatever I wanted. She stood, smiling, watching me from the front porch.

"Be careful, honey," she'd say as I descended the driveway.

A pack of Pall Malls every day for fifty years. Filterless. But her voice was sweet.

I decided I'd remember her, but not just as an accumulation of fragmented and sloppily spliced images.

As we pulled out of her driveway one Sunday evening in August, she stood on the walkway in front of the porch, wearing a blue sun dress patterned with red and yellow flowers. She was holding the end of her small dog's leash. Baby—a Benji-reminiscent, affectionate mutt that had wandered into my grandmother's yard on a rainy afternoon. Something about my grandmother, standing there, smiling, waving, made her look as if she were twelve years old, and I knew I had to remember her—that precise image, blue sun dress, summer sun, sweet smile, the way her head tilted to the side as she waved.

The piece of candy she had given to me before we left was melting in my sweaty palm.

Sunday.

I tortured myself in May, three months after she died. My mother, sister, and I were in Lorain visiting family. I made my mother drive to the house on 19th Street. I wanted to see it again—just once more before they sold it to someone who knew nothing about it—which steps creak, which windows are drafty, which corner of the basement held the wine press where, as a boy, my father watched and listened to and memorized his grandfather.

My mother and sister sat in the living room while I wandered through the house. They didn't want to torture themselves. Or maybe for them, it wasn't torture. If it were, they would've wandered with me.

Upstairs, some of the furniture had already been removed—auctioned off. The framed photographs that rested on dressers were all gone, too, but I saw them anyway. I opened the attic door and examined the stairs. I didn't climb them. I knew my mother's wedding dress was up there, yellowing, and my father's first communion portrait, and the chest that held the letters from my great-great grandmother in Sicily to her family in America who had left the old country with the hopes of creating a prosperous future.

The bed was gone from the little bedroom, but the plastic laundry basket filled with old toys and stuffed animals was still in the corner where it had always been. The white bunny, missing an ear, looked up at me. My brother played with it when he was young. So did I. I picked it up and examined it. Matted white fur. It was old. I wanted to take all the toys out, sit on the floor, and play. But I was eighteen years old, and my mother and sister were downstairs waiting. I put the bunny back and picked up a homemade, double-sided teddy bear, pink on one side, yellow on the other. And it had two faces—happy on the pink side and sad on the other. I stared at it, flipping it back and forth. Pink and yellow tangled fur. Smiling and frowning fabric mouths. I held it. I couldn't put it down, so I didn't. It smelled like her house.

I left the room and went downstairs. My mother and sister sat on the couch, ready to leave. I ignored them and entered the kitchen. The table was gone. How

many hours did she sit there? Alone with Pall Malls. A widow for thirty-three years. The refrigerator was empty, and I knew we had to leave.

I wanted to go in the basement to get one last look at the coal bin, the fruit cellar, the old stove and dining room table, the ice skates hanging by their laces from a nail in the wall. But I didn't.

We walked out the back door, and my mother locked it.

A month later, my father buried a penny behind the garage.

I wonder if he still has the keys.

In the summer, I never wanted to leave my grandmother's house. On sunny afternoons, I'd take Baby outside and run in circles with her around the garden. When I ran, Baby ran, and when I stopped, she stopped, always perfectly content with my decision, a quality in her that forever amused me. I think she was part Golden Retriever, to which I attribute her loyalty, but her small stature, squarish face, and shaggy fur boasted Terrier.

When we'd worn ourselves out, I'd attach the end of her leash to the clothes line, pluck a juicy Polish tomato from one of my grandmother's hearty vines, and eat it while lounging in the cool grass.

One day, a boy's voice startled me.

"Get out of my yard!" he yelled from the next lawn.

I stared at him, tomato juice dripping down my chin.

"Get out of my yard!" he repeated when I didn't respond.

I looked at Baby, who glared at him. What was the meaning of this unprovoked territorial battle? We weren't even in his yard, yet, as unthreatened as it was, he fervently defended it. Darwin's theory proved. Shouldn't it have been the dogs having this battle, bearing their terrier teeth in territorial defense? His dog, Cheeser, was napping under a crabapple tree.

I, being a staunch avoider of conflict even at that young age, unhooked Baby's leash from the clothesline and led her to my grandmother's driveway. The boy stood, still glaring. He was funny, even though he didn't mean to be. I decided to test his patience, so I marched forward, my feet returning to his claimed grass. That did it.

"Get out of my yard!" he demanded again.

I giggled and stepped back. Still he stood there, the human fortress. Just once more, I thought, so I moved forward again. This time he did, too, clenching his chubby fists at his sides. I stepped back, and growing weary of his animalistic antics, turned and walked toward the front of the house. It was a shame, really, that the potential playmate turned out to be such a colossal bore.

The afternoon sun dimmed and turned the sky a pinkish-orange reminiscent of the Polish tomato I'd devoured earlier. Baby and I fell asleep on the front porch glider.

Later that evening, the whole family, seeking the cool, lake breeze for relief from the house's heat, retreated to the front porch. My father and grandmother reminisced about all the people who used to live on 19th Street, back in the days they referred to as "good and old." There was Drunky, for example, who used to pull his car into the alley next to Nole Hodkey's house every Saturday night and pass out there until the next morning. Around nine a.m., his wife would arrive and pound on the car's windows.

“We’re late for mass again!” she’d yell. “Come on outta there, you lazy bum!”

Eventually, old Drunky would roll out of the car, the old lady pulling on his arm as he staggered behind her down Washington Avenue. There was still beer on his breath.

And then there was old Florence Rosso who’d lost her mind. Sad. But she used to make a delicious raspberry cheesecake. A real shame about old Florence Rosso. One time, she ran away from the nursing home and sought refuge at my grandmother’s house. My grandmother gave her coffee and some cigarettes, but called Tony to come pick her up and take her back to the home. Poor old Florence. She’d lost her mind. She really had.

Eventually the lake’s cool breeze lured us inside to our beds, and we slept.

Today I was in Lorain again. My grandmother died—the other one. I got to see her the day before she died, but I don’t think she saw me. She was teetering between two worlds, asleep in this one, but trying to open her eyes. I wanted to tell her that her hair looked nice, but it didn’t.

“Your lungs sound pretty good today, Stella,” the doctor told her. She didn’t respond.

“I don’t know how to make her wake up,” my cousin’s three-year-old son said, head slightly cocked, shoulders shrugging. It seemed clichéd, and I wished he hadn’t said it.

“Jeez, kid,” I wanted to say. “I’ve heard *that* one before.”

“I guess she just needs the rest,” the doctor said. He left.

The morning after we got the call, my father sat in the armchair reading the paper. He folded the front page down so his eyes peered over the top and focused on me, on the couch.

“There’s no longer a generational barrier between your mother and me and the grave,” he said.

I thumbed through a magazine. *Good Housekeeping*, I think. “I don’t wanna think about it, Dad.”

He flipped to section B. “I know,” he said. “But there’s no substitution for youth, you know?”

We buried her in pale blue to complement her silver hair. She wore blue to her youngest daughter’s wedding. I was the flower girl.

I imagined her dancing, smiling, spinning, and twirling between Andy, my mother’s father, a young man who was killed in World War II, flag-draped casket, and Joe, my mother’s half-sister’s father, an old man who died of heart failure when I was five. Her husbands. And I guess I tossed the last rose before they lowered the casket.

“I’ll probably never come back to Lorain now,” I said to my sister as we wandered toward the blurred line of cars.

But maybe I would. Maybe the cousins who don’t know me, but who, when someone dies, give me obligatory hugs, will invite me to their weddings. And maybe I’ll go. After all, we knew the same old woman once. We knew an old woman who loved polka music, had an overweight Chihuahua named Pumpkin, and laughed all the

time, even with oxygen tubes in her nose. But maybe I wouldn't go, and instead I'd send cash-filled congratulatory cards with hopes that they never get divorced.

Best wishes.

Always.

I drove back to Pennsylvania in black, a run in my nylons. Rain. Later that night, the president decided to drop bombs and launch missiles. But I was asleep, finally.

So much for patriotism.

My worried mother begged me to stay away from the anti-war demonstrations, but I didn't. In the midst of a blizzard, I crammed myself into the backseat of a Volkswagen Jetta with three avid members of the campus Green Party and headed to Pittsburgh for a war protest. Fat flakes of snow accumulated and covered the roads; trees wilted under winter's weight.

"I have a lot of experience driving in snow," the VW's driver, Kara, said. "So don't worry."

And I didn't. After all, if I did die, at least it would be for a good cause.

Nearly a thousand marchers lined Forbes Avenue carrying signs that bobbed like buoys on whitecaps.

Snow.

I thought of John Lennon. "You either get tired fighting for peace, or you die," he once said.

We chanted:

NO BLOOD FOR OIL

NO BLOOD FOR OIL

The following Monday, I walked into the office of the Political Science department where I worked three days a week, to find on my desk a copy of *The New People*, a Pittsburgh-based newspaper dedicated to promoting peace and justice. I picked the paper up and examined the front page, which featured the previous weekend's protest. I glanced at the photograph in the center of the page and realized I was looking back at myself from the prominently displayed picture. There I was. Front page. I had unknowingly become some sort of poster girl for the Pittsburgh anti-war movement. Good karma. When I showed my parents the paper, my mother was delighted, even though she wished I hadn't gone. My father let out an amused chuckle and then ranted about renouncing his citizenship if Bush were reelected. I agreed.

I sometimes lie awake at night worrying about the Presidential election. I'm afraid Bush will be reelected, World War III will commence, and the apocalypse will soon follow. Pessimism, I've decided, fuels insomnia. If only it fueled trendy four-wheel drive sport utility vehicles. Then we wouldn't be in such a mess, a thousand GIs would still be alive, and I'd probably be able to sleep at night. Sometimes I wish I were ninety-seven years old so I wouldn't have to live to see the end.



I stood next to my father in the driveway, early September, late night, watching Mars. I wanted to pluck it from the sky. In a few weeks I'd leave for London.

"It looks so close," I said.

If only I could pluck it, set it in sterling silver and wear it around my neck as a keepsake. I wondered if my shoulders would notice the weight.

He shifted his weight to his left foot.

"In 66,000 years it'll be this close again," he said. Pensive. Calm. "We'll have to come outside and look at it then, too."

Warm bread and spaghetti sauce waited in the house. He was hungry. I followed him inside. We sat in the kitchen, and I watched him dip bread in sauce.

"How many moons does Mars have?" he asked, even though he already knew. He always does that—quizzes me.

"Two?"

"Yes, and what are their names?"

"I don't know."

"Should I tell you?"

"Yeah, I'd like to know."

"Deimos and Phobos."

I must've looked puzzled. I didn't know what they meant. He chewed and swallowed.

"Terror and Fear."

On the morning of my departure I woke up, sat up, and thought—mostly about how I wouldn't wake up there again. My father was in the next room emptying trash. I was somewhere. I looked out my window at autumn. I guess the moment you leave, you become patriotic, even if you've always mocked patriotism. If they'd known it would come to this, they might've stayed in Sicily.

I've never seen Albuquerque, but I thought I might like to see London. I'll buy a cactus in London, and maybe a map, I thought. I'll send myself postcards so I know where I've been, and then I'll try to guess where I'm going. Venice. I'd love to see Venice.

"She just needs to get it out of her system," they kept saying. I thought I didn't mind it in my system. I thought I'd take it and Mars and have a hell of a time not knowing much of anything. Wide open windows are hard to come by. I said goodbye to my mother and my father and my everything without much of an explanation. But I knew why I was going, even if no one else did.

I flew.

Venice stands with unparalleled grace, rising from the sea as if it were natural, washed up with the tide like seashells.

Old women hang from their windows like laundry. They, too, have always been there. Venezia. Boats are cars. Canals are roads. The old women watch them from their windows for generations.

"Amo Venezia!" they shout as they open their shutters on mornings when the sun's citrus glow glistens like glass on the water. A broad-shouldered, mustached man in a gondola below looks up at the window and follows the old woman's gaze to absorb her view. He has seen few cities, but he knows none compare to his own. His eyes return to the woman in the window.

"È un bel giorno!" he shouts to her as his gondola drifts and disappears beyond the canal's curve. A footbridge stands above him. Generations have walked there, regal bell tower chimes summoning them to mass. I stand motionless on the bridge. It is the closest I have been to my roots.

I imagine Gangi, Sicily eighty-four years ago, my great-great grandmother Blando hanging from her window on a sunny, summer morning, watching her young grandson draw pictures with a pebble on the doorstep. Tomorrow he would be gone—sailing across the Atlantic on a ship called *America*.

"Antonio!" she called from the window. "È tempo per il pranzo!" Dinner was ready. She would never call for him again.

The engrossed eight-year-old looked up and squinted, the mediteranean sun burning shadows in the dirt.

"Sto venendo!" he yelled.

Antonio's sister Gaetana and cousin Giuseppa were already seated at the table eyeing the Sicilian olives that preceded their meal of homemade gnocchi and sauce. Giuseppa, an orphan, lost her mother in the flu epidemic of 1914. Her father, a farmer, was murdered by "la mano nera"—the black hand. She was lovingly adopted by her father's brother, but always felt like an outsider, forever indebted. She, too, would board *America* tomorrow alongside Antonio and Gaetana. Her Uncle had already been in America for six years establishing himself in Lorain. He left before the children knew him. To them, he'd always been gone. The ship on which he sailed—*Verona*, no longer existed. A German submarine torpedoed and sank it in 1918. He was settled. They were to follow, and tomorrow was the day. Only the children enjoyed their gnocchi. And only Giuseppa would return, sixty years later, a visitor. Gaetana would all but deny her heritage, willingly changing her name to Katherine and going by

“Kay.” Antonio would become “Anthony,” father of my father, and Giuseppa, without choice, would become Josephine, and later “Do-Do” because of nephews who could not pronounce “Jo-Jo.”

In the end, she became my godmother. Selfless.

In Venice I lit a candle in her memory.


