

***The Beginning Is The End***  
***March, 1948***

*Did both of us die surviving those hot bayou days?  
Walking in the shadow of sorrow  
With starved hearts no longer worn on our sleeves  
We folded and tucked them away in some distant tangle  
of the great vines that were our past.*

The last time the family was ever together was a day of thin sun in March of 1948. Loaded into our '37 Packard, my brother David and I, then nine and ten, had the back seat with a whole box of Mars Bars between us. Momma was holding a cigarette between her ruby nails, teeth flashing, eyes doing the slow dance of leaving, then switching in an instant to the fast tango of adventure. Zia was waving her apron from the hill on her way to join Aunt Mimi and Nonna. Mimi had gotten up to give us a good breakfast. Nonno and my two Zios had said their goodbyes the night before because none could miss work. David and I waved madly out the back window as we rolled slowly down our

long driveway, completely oblivious of what we were leaving, and would never have again. The three women stood in a clump, faces stretching to the ground. Not touching, hunched with personal, and yet, collective sorrow they seemed painted slate gray from head to foot. Turning left, with the smell of the emerging spring and the distant sea in our nostrils, we were on our way down Indian Neck Avenue going to Felix's Sunoco Gas Station. As if snipped with precise scissors, our life in Branford, Connecticut was severed and we were on our way to Houston, Texas, almost 2,000 miles away.

Dad yearned to see the world and seemed fed up by the fact that he'd never been farther than fifteen miles from New Haven, except when he ran away to join the Army in 1918. Big boom town Houston was advertising in eastern papers for all kinds of workers, especially draftsmen, like Dad, who could design piping for the vast mushrooming oil fields. The ad, one among many throughout the country, fueled the post war hysteria of millions of Americans who yearned for and saw rosy futures by striking out on their own, moving and breaking away from once solid family ties. That fall, he climbed aboard the train at the Branford station and headed south to check out the lay of the land. Two weeks later, waiting at the kitchen window for hours, I saw his

tall figure through the blanket of heavily falling snow as it exited the passenger side of the Packard. My heart leapt with joy. I thought he was the most blessed, handsome and wonderful thing I'd ever seen. As I burst out the kitchen door desperate for his arms, he dropped his suitcase, swept me up, calling me his darling girl.

He brought David and me cowboy boots, hats and fringed vests with longhorn steers either cut or stitched on them. Full of anticipation and importance, we wore them to our fourth and fifth grade classes at the Laurel Street Elementary School to announce our departure for the big promised land sometime in the spring. Over Sunday supper, with something akin to "gold fever," Dad painted tall tales of balmy heat, oil wells in people's front yards, pumping hundred dollar bills into their hands, like the little mill grinding salt at the bottom of the sea. Sunsets and sunrises seemed jammed with endless opportunity for an ambitious, hardworking person. Some Branford people, who'd ended up at our Friday singing get-togethers, had moved down there and offered a back apartment to rent until we got settled.

The "For Sale" sign went up on our house which was down the hill from Nonna and Nonno. Mamma started culling through piles of life accumulated

over the years, over which David and I sniffed and whined. Dad quit his job at A.C. Gilbert, the toy manufacturer of erector sets, and got one in Houston as a salesman at a mom and pop tool and dye manufacturing operation. Big money could be made in that oil rich place, and Dad was bent on doing just that with his life. “Make it big,” “strike it rich,” “be somebody,” were the constant seasonings added to our conversations. His words confused me because Dad was already a huge somebody in my life.

With the sign and all the activity, David and I, who clearly didn’t want to move, became frightened, so we developed a silent pact to sabotage any offers on the house. We’d get prospective buyers alone and tell them the coal furnace in the basement puffed smoke, the roof leaked, and the plumbing sprouted water geysers. Our totally false and secret subversion was effective, for the house stayed on the market for five years. Nonna and Nonno eventually sold it to a returning Korean War vet.

Houston was abysmal. We lived in two sweltering rooms on Heights Boulevard. Mamma, David and I slept in the one double bed, and Dad was beside us on an old army cot. To cool ourselves in that oppressive jungle-like heat, we secretly opened the fridge door and sat crowded in front of the small

opening. David and I worried that if our landlords discovered us wasting such energy, we'd be probably be in real trouble, like getting kicked out on the street. Barely managing to crowd together in front of it, we took our meals at the tiny, dilapidated, chipped enamel table. We stored washrags and towels in the fridge and draped them over feet and foreheads just to try to get to sleep. The family crying game over opera and every other little emotional delicacy that I had once ridiculed became standard daily procedure for our parents. Dad did it sitting in the car or the bathroom. Sometimes we'd peer out the window and see him sitting in the white metal lawn furniture out back, hunched with regret, reappearing later red-eyed and somber. Mamma was more open and tucked it into every nook and corner of her life, wailing for Nonna, her home, or sitting mute for days. Unable to gather us to her with the selfless mission it took to create the heart of the home, she entered a mournful, grief-stricken place, taking our father with her. Like Humpty Dumpties who'd fallen off the wall, nothing could put them together again.

Calling long distance was almost never done, and if Connecticut did call, I broke down unable to speak to Nonna; Nonno and Mimi wept. Uncle De would have to grab the phone, but nobody knew what to say or what to ask, so we

blubbered “this is costing money,” and hung up. Returning to Branford was out of the question. Dad stated he was not going back with his “tail between his legs,” no matter how bad it got, and it got bad. In a matter of months he’d lost his job and was pounding the pavement as a salesman, the first of a series of fly-by-night jobs. We were heartsick amputees, lost in the wash of an alien place and without the comforting network of the family, the pain lashed us like the Branford’s ocean storms, a pouring sheet of white rain, sucking and wailing down the chimney to the most remote thought-to-be safe place. Nothing was safe anymore. David and I tossed like corks on this sea of dark, frothy emotion, without any clues on how to make anything better. Like Nonna and Nonno’s immigration story, life was repeating itself, only this time it wasn’t the ship railing of the Duca d’Aosta, from Italy, it was a flat boom town, that stunk from endless petroleum production and stockyard slaughter.

The Houston elementary school where David and I enrolled had no idea about our background and soon the taunts began from children, and to our horror, teachers followed suit. To them, we were just “dark,” short people, who spoke funny-uppity, like “Yankees,” and that made us unacceptable. It never occurred to us that our parents were experiencing the same kind of humiliation.

Mamma went to work, something hardly any women did then. David and I knew we were on our own, endured and clung together, because we were all we had left. Many days we arrived home bloody nosed from some altercation, patched each other up and carried on. Concrete, asphalt and a strange targeting, unfamiliar prejudice replaced everything we'd ever known. Gone were the woods, the apple tree, our homes, the meadows and our town. Our *famiglia* and our way of life were replaced with the sluggish bayous, cottonmouth moccasin snakes, soggy heat, and melancholy, struggling parents lost to us, for what we thought was forever. Everything and everyone was stitched in loneliness. Mamma and Dad lived locked together in a forlorn place that was so far away, we could neither find our way to them, nor save them from their desolation. And so David and I wandered together through the barbed wire days, totally alone and severed.

One day, I thought I heard Mimi's voice and went bursting into our landlord's residence, only to find a total stranger smiling down at me. Mortified by my loss of control, and wilted from the steely stare of our landlord, I backed up into our two rooms and entered the closet. David came to join me, closed the door, and we sat numb in the dark until Mamma found

us there after work. Inconsolable, weighted by our own confused and incalculable sorrow, we had turned into those gray slate people, who'd waved goodbye to us in Branford. On that day, in that closet, childhood ended. We began taking care of our parents, trying harder to make them happy, trying to make up for what we'd left. We kept the house clean, we started supper, we never shared our own personal struggles. And, the crying went on. Mamma cried for Nonna, for Branford; Dad cried in the open now because Mamma cried, and because he needed a place to discharge his massive anguish, he beat us on Saturdays. There was no one to whom David and I could bestow our unshed tears. They stayed inside.

Like wheat chaff in the wind, within five years, *la Famiglia* scattered. Because time heals and because neither the good, nor the bad lasts forever, through effort and hard work, our lives smoothed out but for me, something was always missing. Dad got good jobs drafting and Mamma moved up the ladder, a successful office manager and accountant. Mimi and Uncle De went to Yuma, Arizona, and a year later, with a two-by-four under the hood of their Chevy to keep the engine cool in the 114-degree heat, they headed for Sarasota, Florida. Nonna and Nonno followed them the year after. We

eventually moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico where Dad went to work for the Atomic Energy Commission, leaving all those unhappy Houston times behind, forever. Only Zia and Zio stayed put in Connecticut.

The years rolled over; David and I grew to adulthood. We married, had children. As the old ones passed from us, I accepted their loss with the interior tools of what I was then – a young wife and mother caught up with the importance of my own jam-packed days, smugly sure that because I had purpose, my life had true meaning. And I judged all of them as a young person does who has not lived enough of life, positive I'd never make their same mistakes. Childhood interior anguish was buried so deep, I couldn't even touch its edges, but what did surface was a huge anger that grabbed life and everybody in it, because it was so desperate for control.

It took me a lifetime to fully understand the paradox of all that personal and collective grief, and the souls of the people who built my bottom story. *La Famiglia* understood Mamma and Dad's need for a new life, mourned the dissolution of family, despaired what they knew was at an end, and would never be again. The eight years we spent in Houston I count as the longest stretch of grief I've ever endured, or will ever endure again as a human being on this

earth, and its testament continued hidden for the next half century.

In the long, long journey, wandering the interrogation chambers that lead from child to adult, David and I know there will never be another time to match the one we lived with our people on that quiet street called Indian Neck Avenue, and Nonno's monkey, Chico, who was won for a song.

But then, this beginning must go forward to its end.