

from *True Noble*, a novel by Nancy Garruba / Angela. To the Jersey beach and back. 1957.

Dad was a machinist. He worked in a factory that made cables for bridges. He got two weeks of vacation a year, always the last two weeks in August, and that's when we packed the green Oldsmobile, and later the white Ford, with suitcases, towels and beach chairs, and headed straight to the tip of the Jersey shore, a stone's throw from Cape May. Dad's Uncle Jack owned a hotel there that he bought during the war. He wrote to Dad the week he bought it, Dad was somewhere in France. He said there were lots of Italian families where he was living in Philadelphia who couldn't afford a vacation at the shore, with however many kids they had and what the big hotels were charging—and he saw an opportunity there. His hotel would be different. When Dad got back he couldn't wait to see it, so he drove down the next morning with Nonni Innocent. (The Sicilian word for grandmother is *nonni*. Nonni Innocent was my grandmother.) Dad said Uncle Jack, Nonni's brother, was like a father to him. That after his father died, Uncle Jack came to visit almost every weekend, and brought white shirts for him and Uncle John, and dresses for Aunt Pia. He said that whenever Uncle Jack left, to go back to Philadelphia, he'd force an envelope of twenty-dollar bills into Nonni's hands, saying *Take it! Take it!*

Uncle Jack had hotel postcards printed up; Dad saved a half-dozen. Dad was always filing away postcards and photographs, when he wasn't busy taking pictures himself, or telling stories. And he was always telling stories. In fact it's hard for me to separate my memories of how various events unfolded, and how things looked to me, from my memories of the stories he told about those same events, and from the pictures he took of those same things. Much of what I now feel drawn to write about, I think, concerns these ambiguities.



*Hotel Atlantic Rooms For Rent With Kitchen Privileges By The Day Or By The Week* is what the sign says, on the postcards, up between the second and third stories. All the cars date from the Forties. On one postcard the men play *bocce* on the side of the hotel facing the beach. On another people stand on the sidewalk, and on the front porch, and stare up at the sky as if expecting something to drop. Maybe they're watching a blimp slowly pass, one advertising *Ralph's Famous Seafood*. Or *Kohr's Ice Cream*. In the far distance, on the beach, you can see a lifeguard on his tall chair, and striped umbrellas propped in the sand, and spreads of tall grass, although I have no memory of walking through grass. Anyway, it's all gone now. No grass, no hotel, nothing but beach and a few nondescript condominiums built some years after a vicious hurricane stripped the hotel and everything around it down to piles of rubble. Uncle Jack was no longer around to see; he would have been devastated. I thought other people would have had postcards just like these but they would have thrown theirs out years ago, along with cancelled foreign postage stamps, and rusty paper clips, and the type of detritus that collects in desk drawers. Dad, as I said, saved his. And now as I consider how when things get lost the memories attached to them also disappear I begin to see him differently.

In one of the old snapshots:

Alice and I are five or six. We're on a blanket at the beach; we're wearing swimsuits and Chinese sunhats. Identical smiles, identical suits, identical hats. Dad's in his striped beach robe; head thrown back, he takes a drag on his cigar. Under his robe are the infamous trunks, with the blue and purple mountains and

setting sun—infamous because he refused to exchange them for a new pair for years, long after the sun had disappeared and the mountains faded to a few pale brush marks. Mom says, “Vince, you know once in a while you need something new—.” Dad interrupts: “Look, Pat, it’s all part of being a Democrat—holes in your sweaters, holes in the soles of your shoes. Don’t let anyone ever think I make more money than I do.”

After the funeral we found his favorite sweater in the closet, it was more holes than wool.

He hated to shop. Hated spending money on himself. He’d stand at the racks, finger the price tags and say, “They have a nerve to charge this much! For just a suit?”

Still, dollar bills flew from his pockets as if on wings. Ended up inside gloves and mittens, under pillows and plates. And every year the bills tucked into the birthday cards grew bigger and bigger. “You girls buy yourselves something new,” he says, “you must want something.”

When we ask him for quarters, for the Coke machine, he sticks a hand into a pocket and fishes out dollar bills. “Dad—we can’t use these! The machine only takes quarters!”

Christmas Day is the worst. Dad’s remote, almost sullen. Mom opens the presents with Alice and me. He walks around the living room bagging the torn papers and bows and leaves his own gifts untouched. Then he sits in his chair and reads the paper; he smokes a cigar; he calls a friend on the phone. We wait and wait for him to open his presents. We go to the annual Christmas open house at Aunt Pia’s. When we come home we tiptoe around him and the tree, our eyes back and forth between him and the still unopened, foil-wrapped boxes filled with shirts, ties and sweaters.

We say, “Dad, you haven’t opened your presents yet!” He says, “I said to spend your money on yourself—not on me—how many clothes can a man wear anyway?”

Eventually he opens his gifts. He says “Thanks!” but his smile’s forced. There was always something going on that we couldn’t comprehend. There was always a shade, a presence. In a corner. Behind a door. In an empty chair. Behind the bright blinking lights and silver tinsel. Invisible. Inscrutable. We didn’t have words for it.

I carry my little suitcase to the car, in all my fleshy childness, wearing shorts and a halter top, my feet locked in orthopedic oxfords, my left leg strapped in a brace. I had an operation for polio when I was three; I used the brace for two years and wore heavy oxfords until I was fourteen, when I flat out refused to wear them anymore, and Mom finally helped me figure out how to adapt what I considered “normal” shoes to my feet. The polio affliction was my shadow. It was unscrupulous. It should have toughened me but it didn’t. Instead it undercut my confidence and instilled within me multiple ghosts of inadequacy and awkward singularity. In the picture we see the edge of Mom’s skirt, and someone’s shoe in the corner, and I’m sure they were saying, “Smile, Angela, smile!” though what we see on my face is a scowl, a disavowal of what they were asking of me, a declaration of my independence. Always threatening to rebel, I never succeeded.

Dad places his camera on the hood. Uncle Jack says, “Vince, listen here—Move your mother and your family down here! Live with me! At the beach! Don’t worry about work, I’ll find something for you to do. I know a lot of people here.”

They speak in dialect and I understand all of it.

Dad takes a drag from his cigar. He looks up at the sky and considers. At last he says, “*Senti, Ziu*—Listen, Uncle—Trenton’s my home—it’s where I know everyone, everything—here-who-do-I know-where-would-I-go-what-would-I-do?” Uncle Jack says, “Trenton! *Ma cchiè?* You live in the past Vince! You live in the past!”

Mom wouldn’t stand for it, anyway. She has her own family, a large one, and both our families, the Geminis and the Ciceros, live on Mercy Street or its vicinity. Plus, she’s a secretary in one of Trenton’s top law firms; she makes a good salary, enough money so that after she pays all the bills she has enough left over to buy nice clothes. Where would she shop in South Jersey? To her way of thinking South Jersey’s a desert. In all the pictures she’s *très chic*. She leans against a boardwalk railing, in a dark dress, a spray of sequins on the bodice. She bends over to catch the drips of an ice cream cone, with long dark wavy hair and lipsticked lips, in pedal pushers and fancy leather sandals.

She tolerates Dad's roller-coaster antics. She never knows when he'll decide to throw a fit or a party. Get on the phone, invite a bunch of friends to the house. Say things like "Hey Pat—I just bought a half-dozen steaks—how about putting them under the broiler with some fries?" Always another joke, another story in his pocket. He works the crowd, pats people on the back, everyone gushing: "Oh that Vince! Boy can he make people laugh!"

She never knows when he'll fly into a rage. Empty a basket of laundry on the floor just after she's finished folding it all. Or stomp out the door and disappear for an hour. Then he walks back in, rolls up the carpet, puts on a record, and twirls us round in a waltz, one by one: Mom, Alice, me.

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The sun through old yellow shades casts an apricot glow. Eyes half-closed, I watch Dad rummage through the dresser drawers. First, he grabs a pair of socks, then his belt and wallet. I tumble from the bed I share with Alice and find my dress and sandals. Alice tumbles out behind me, still asleep, and climbs into bed with Mom. We leave Mom and Alice sleeping; we move through the hall, wordless, past the closed doors of the other still-dreaming guests; down the stairs and through the front doors, wire screen soft on my palms. Sky—beach—boardwalk—ocean; the intermittent whir of waves; everything is new and fresh, every element awash in a light like just-cut lemons. Dad buys sugar doughnuts at the corner café and tells me to reach for the bag when the clerk hands it over the counter. The bag is white and wrinkle-free; I carry it dutifully down to the beach. We find a spot near the boardwalk, sheltered from the wind, and sit side by side. Gulls loom and swoop, cackling at the glint of all that cinnamon sugar.

I say, "Dad, tell me one of the stories your mother always told you. Like how her mother Margherita always kept the house dark."

The same stories over and over; I drink them like water.

His jaws tear apart the second half of his second doughnut. He swallows, and starts:

My grandmother's name was Margherita. She always kept the house dark. She wanted the doors locked tight, the shutters too, she said the sun gave her a headache. For her nothing was ever right. Either the oil was bad or the water was warm. Or the meat was old. In other words, she was a real complainer. She didn't want my mother to get married and she chased all the young men away. My mother's father, my grandfather, was an overseer on a large estate. He'd get on his horse and ride for hours just to get to work. During the harvest he'd be gone for weeks. Anyway, when he came home he always had something good to eat—my mother would watch him, riding home, through the window—half a lamb across the saddle, or a jug of wine, or a big bottle of oil. Uncle Jack always went with him so my mother was left alone with their mother, and their mother had lots of fevers. So then my mother would go door to door looking for leeches, little animals that suck out your blood. You put a hot cup on the sick person's back and that made the skin swell. Then you cut the skin where it swelled, and you put a leech on top. People kept them stored away in jars for when someone got sick. Not only over there—here too. Once Aunt Pia got sick and I wasn't born yet, Mom carried her all the way down to the foundry to find Pop. She took my sister Isabella with her, back then Isabella must have been seven or eight. Pop said, "Go find leeches. Go knock on all the doors of all the people we know." So she did until she had enough. One here, another one there, you needed half a dozen to do the job right. As soon as I was older, whenever there was an accident, Mom sent me to the foundry to find Pop. Once Uncle John fell on the sidewalk in front of the house and broke two teeth. Another time your Aunt Pia sliced her finger with a knife, down to the bone, and Mom couldn't stop the bleeding. My mother was a strong woman, Angela, but sometimes she just panicked, and that's when she sent me running. I don't know why nothing ever happened to me. Anyway, I was proud of that job. I'd run all the way down Mercy Street, and then up Lincoln Avenue, then all the way down Hardy and around the corner. There was a security guard at the foundry gate—Trenton Malleable Iron—biggest foundry in Trenton—and he didn't want to let me in. Big man—big stomach, big round chest, smoking a big fat cigar. Anyway, he finally let me in, but not by myself, he said he'd have to come in with me. Boy I tell you, walking into that place I felt like I was walking straight into hell. It was dark and hot, I mean really hot, you started sweating right away. I could feel the sweat running down my

back and my shirt starting to stick to me. The men inside wore undershirts on top, that was all. All of a sudden you'd see light flashing from the furnaces, big bolts of it. Big blasts of noise from the presses and the cauldrons, big big buckets fifteen feet up in the air, molten iron pouring out of them, like rivers of lava pouring down into the molds. The first time I saw Pop there I'll never forget it. He was walking across the floor with a big bucket of iron in each hand. Boy his arms were solid. He had big arms, big muscles, thick like a horse's shank, from the shoulder all the way down to the wrist. He was walking with his knees a little bent, walking fast, trying to keep his upper body straight so he'd have more strength, trying to keep the buckets level, trying not to spill anything. The second he saw me he put those buckets down fast. He was surprised at first, but he figured right away something was wrong. He might have been a little afraid but he'd never show it. I'll never forget his face the way it looked back then—black and shiny from all that soot and sweat . . .

"Tell me again how he died," I say.

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Uncle Jack's good-looking, almost rakish, even at seventy. Even as a child, I see that. Aunt Cynthia's large, ungainly, grim. Her gray hair is dry and fly-away, and she keeps it off her face, which is always damp, with a bobby pin. They stand on either side of the front doors as we walk in. Inside, to the right, is the reception desk and the door to their private apartment. To the left are the stairs. We track sand on those stairs day and night. The stairs have an institutional smell, of humidity and old wallpaper, a smell that turns into something else again at three in the afternoon when mixed with the odors of shells and salty hair and bathing suits; and again at night with the scent of the cream Mom spreads on our hot skin. The wallpaper of our room is patterned with blossoms, maybe white, maybe pink, maybe so long faded, even then, that color is nothing but a memory; and the beds have iron frames and thin mattresses; and the mirrors are tarnished, slightly. The linoleum is cracked, again only slightly, and dusted with sand. Our bare feet make small thuds on the steps which are hard and glossy. Uncle Jack paints them every April. Battleship gray, Navy-issue surplus. He says, "It's cheaper!"

The front hall leads to the dining room and kitchens. Uncle Jack has bushels of crabs and kegs of beer delivered every day to the small kitchen in the back, where all the men cook and eat between games of *bocce*. The scent of garlic and herbs from the large kitchen towards the front begins to infuse the hall at around three in the afternoon, when all the women begin to cook. Except for Mom, that is, who at three is just getting back from the beach. Mom starts her cooking more towards five, a more sensible hour, after a shower and a cup of coffee. We shake out the towels with her; we brush the sand from our feet. Alice and I take our showers first and go down to the dining room, immense and glistening, with large windows and sea-green tables and chairs, and the late afternoon sun pouring in. We collect salt and pepper shakers and napkin holders from the central station and set the tables. We take care to align things perfectly.

At the end of dinner Uncle Jack sets up a microphone at the front of the room and sits on a chair and plays his guitar and sings. He sings ballads, mostly melancholy. He has a beautiful voice, even at seventy. Aunt Pia leans over and whispers to Alice and me: "When Aunt Lola was living they sang together every night. She was really good, even better than him. She wore big floaty skirts and crystal necklaces. She always looked real nice. But then they found the cancer, and—" she looks down at the table and slowly shakes her head "—she went down fast after that. Poor Uncle Jack. That was hard on him."

In winter, sometimes on Saturday, Dad drives Nonni Innocent down to visit Uncle Jack and I go along. We find the rooms heated just enough to keep the pipes from freezing. We huddle at the kitchen table in Uncle Jack and Aunt Cynthia's small apartment. Uncle Jack strums and sings, and stops every now and then to sip from a small glass. He wears a large hat with red and white checks and a wide brim. Aunt Cynthia makes a pot of coffee and disappears. I hear voices from the living room, from her Philco TV. I see the cold blue light of its tube filter through the dark and wrap around her feet at the end of the recliner. Her terry slippers are blue, her stockings pulled up to just below the knee. There's a chill between her and

Nonni Innocent, even as a child I feel it. Once, many years later, Dad says: “In the beginning, before Aunt Cynthia and Uncle Jack got married, Aunt Cynthia lived upstairs, she was the chambermaid. ‘Cause see, after Aunt Lola died—well, to tell you the truth, we called her Aunt Lola out of respect, she wasn’t really our aunt, Uncle Jack and Lola never got married—you see after Aunt Lola died, little by little, Uncle Jack and Aunt Cynthia became familiar. He was lonely I guess. I used to feel sorry for her, back then, for Aunt Cynthia. She was Irish, she didn’t understand a lot of what we said so I used to translate. And I’d bring her things. Stop at the bakery before going down, for a nice cake or a loaf of fresh bread. But she didn’t appreciate it. When Uncle Jack was rushed to the hospital she called me first thing and I rushed right down, going ninety miles an hour. But when I got to the hospital she wouldn’t let me into the room. ‘Immediate family only’ is what she said. Then she turned and closed the door. He was like a father to me and I never got to say good-bye to him.”

When we leave to drive back to Trenton Uncle Jack puts an arm around Nonni and says, “Don’t look back, look ahead, *‘l passat’ è morto*. The past is dead.” Nonni looks at him and says, “*Non è mai morto. Vive dentr’ tudde, fa ch’ siam . . .* the past never dies, it lives inside us, it makes us who we are.”

On the ride home Nonni sits up front with Dad. She eats crackers from a paper bag and drinks water from a green soda bottle. She stares out the window at the pine trees, and the cold sky and sand. She grows thinner and thinner.

Back at home Dad pulls Mom into the kitchen. I sit on the sofa by the door so that I can hear.

Dad says, “It’s hard to say how much her heart can take.” I consider that statement. *How much a heart can take*. “The doctor says there’s just no way to know how long it’ll hold out.”

I worry. What do I do if she gets sick and I’m alone with her? I think: Angela, don’t be stupid. You’ll pick up the phone. You’ll call Dad or Aunt Pia.

Nonni serves Alice and me vegetable soup with oyster crackers when we stay with her. I study her kitchen. On the wallpaper green ivy tendrils climb a white lattice.

There's an old-fashioned electric washing machine with wringers in the corner, where Nonni caught her hair one day, distracted, caught up in a memory Dad said. Or maybe a daydream, for her not unusual. Aunt Pia was there to flip the switch and save her. There's the canary in its cage. Nonni calls him *Giallo*, Italian for *yellow*, which to us sounds like Jelly. When Jelly dies she runs out and buys another just like him, or her, and gives it the same name.

Nonni watches us eat but eats nothing herself. At times she regards us with tremendous shyness, as if we'd just met. Other times she sweeps us up into her arms and laughs with a laugh that's large and strange, almost frightening, that seems to come from some distant geography. Once she wept and didn't try to hide it. She folds and unfolds her arms, fusses with her blouse, flutters like a butterfly. Her hands are transparent, like cellophane. I see her blue veins. She taps the tabletop with her fingers. The tabletop is white enamel, the art deco border red, the touch cold. The chairs are maple. When Nonni dies Dad will carry this table, will carry these chairs, one at a time, to our house. The table has a drawer with a chrome handle. It's where Alice and I keep our pencils and our pads of paper. Where Dad once kept his. Where he taught his father to write in English, every night after dinner. First, the name of the street: *Mercy*. The town: *Trenton*. The state: *New Jersey*. The names of important presidents: *George Washington*. *Thomas Jefferson*. *Abraham Lincoln*. *Franklin Delano Roosevelt*.

The Sicilian word for grandfather is *nonnu*; Nonnu Fabio—Fabio Gemini—was my grandfather.

It's the table where Nonnu Fabio made a doll house for Aunt Pia, with doors and windows she could open and close. And matching dolls. He bundled wooden clothespins together with rubber bands, Dad said, so that the head and arms and legs moved.

It's the same table where Dad and Aunt Pia tell their stories. Alice and I ask for the story of Nonnu Fabio and his falcons, over and over, the way Nonni Innocent used to tell it years ago.

“Okay,” Dad says, “The way my mother told it:

*‘Your father took the falcons out to the fields, and he held them up on his fist, and they flew up in the air and they always came back to him.’ So one time I asked her, ‘Where did the birds live when they weren’t with Pop in the fields?’ And she said, ‘In a small barn, where it was dark. They stayed tied to a bench there.’ And I said, ‘Ma, to keep a wild animal like that all cooped up is wrong and crazy.’*

*“And boy did she rip into me. ‘You know what Vince? You should ask a question once in a while, and listen, maybe then you’d learn something. Your father took those falcons out every day—every day—so they could fly—and guess what? They always came back to him—so just think about that. He held the falcons up on his fist one at a time, and they flew up in the air and they always came back to him. Now if that’s not magic I don’t know what is. Those falcons sat on his fist and they ate right out of his hand. Right out of his hand.*

*“Sometimes your father took the boys from the village with him, when he went out to the fields with the falcons. One time he took off the glove and he gave it to one of the older boys to try but that boy was scared, even with the glove. Those claws were sharp.’*

*“And once I said, ‘So the falcons always came back? They never ever escaped? Not even once?’*

*“Well one time,’ she said, ‘one didn’t come back and then your father almost went crazy. At first he said it was just like a pin. Up in the sky like the head of a pin. Then he said he couldn’t see it at all, he couldn’t see anything. And so he ran to the stable for Notti, his stallion, the black one, and he went racing on Notti to find it. He looked everywhere for three whole days, maybe four. He rode all over Sicily. And it was hot. Let me tell you—it was suffocating. Enough to bring on a stroke. No shade and the hills on fire, and all around him only rocks and wild olive trees. We had the scirocco back there. And that wind burns your face, before you know it you’re covered in dust from head to toe. Burned and covered in dust from head to toe your father ate his last piece of bread, he drank his last drop of water. And he never turned back, he kept on going. Dying of thirst but he kept right on going.’”*

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