



Memories of a Gay Catholic Boyhood

COMING OF AGE IN
THE SIXTIES

.....
JOHN D'EMILIO



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Cover art: Photos of the author. *Front, top to bottom*: At an essay contest
award ceremony, 1962; playing with his brother, circa 1959; at his desk,
senior year. *Back*: His brother's first birthday, 1958 (*top*); with trophies,
1964 (*bottom*).

This book is dedicated to the memory of my parents,
Sophie Scamporlino D'Emilio (1925–2010)
and
Vincent Anthony D'Emilio (1924–2020)

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Preface

For three decades, I taught undergraduate college history courses that covered the 1960s. When I first began teaching, many of my students were of an age where they had older brothers and sisters who had participated in the events of the decade and from whom they had heard many stories. By the time my teaching career ended, the sixties had become the experience of my students' grandparents. But over those decades, one thing remained unchanged. Across identity lines of class, race, and gender, students displayed a deep fascination with the events and movements of that era. The fact that young adults—many of them college students like themselves—were at the heart of the turbulence only made the decade more compelling to them.

Many of the histories of the 1960s highlight headline-making names, whether Presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard Nixon or prominent leaders of social justice movements, like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, or Betty Friedan. But my students were most curious about the lives of young adults like themselves, youth who came from ordinary, not-privileged backgrounds and might best be described as “faces in the crowd”—those many individuals who sat down in the streets and blocked traffic, rallied in front of government buildings, and paralyzed campuses. How did so many young people move from the quiet of their family backgrounds to the social and political upheavals of this seemingly revolutionary era? What kinds of experiences provoked their shift in outlook? How did they become agents of change? And how did their lives change because of this? What kinds of life paths opened up for them?

As the sixties move farther into the past and as our nation lives through an era in which so many Americans seem to have outlooks at odds with the hopeful progressive vision of social justice that the sixties projected, the need to bring this period back to life through the experience of ordinary Americans

seems more important than ever. In the midst of a Black Lives Matter movement against police violence, a #MeToo movement against sexual violence and abuse, a movement to save the planet from climate change, and an effort to challenge gender binaries with a queer vision of identities, it is worth recalling how a previous generation of young people moved from the routines of daily life into a new world of activism, dissent, and nonconformity.

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I was one of those many faces in the crowd in the second half of the 1960s, when protest and dissent were at their height. But anyone who had observed my life growing up in the conformist decade of the 1950s would never have expected to find me in such a role just a few years later. At the height of the baby boom years, my large, multigenerational family of Italian origin was making every effort to be good Americans. We watched the benevolent family comedies that television networks were offering, celebrated Memorial Day and the Fourth of July with backyard picnics of hot dogs and hamburgers, and sang the praises of Dwight Eisenhower, our war-hero president who projected a calm, reassuring demeanor and promised to protect America from communism.

How does a boy from an Italian immigrant family in which everyone went to confession regularly and unfailingly attended Sunday Mass become a lapsed Catholic? How does a family who worshipped the politics of Senator Joseph McCarthy and whose members were loyal to Richard Nixon to the end of his political career produce an antiwar activist and pacifist? How does a multigenerational family in which the word *divorce* is never spoken and where no adults leave home until marriage raise a son who comes to explore the hidden gay sexual underworld of New York City? How does a politically engaged intellectual whose work, later in life, will help shape a historic Supreme Court decision, emerge from a family in which almost no one ever read a book?

In addressing these questions, I hope that this book sheds light not only on the life of an individual but on the larger baby boom generation whose experiences are still shaping the United States today. Its three parts will take you from the working-class neighborhood in the Bronx that I almost never left during my childhood, to the Jesuit high school for academically gifted Catholic boys that introduced me to the wonders of intellectual life and the culture of Manhattan, and finally to the Ivy League campus of Columbia and the political and social upheavals of the late 1960s.

Part I, “An Italian Boy from the Bronx,” re-creates the flavor of my large, extended Italian immigrant family and the Depression-era housing project in which I grew up. I lived within the boundaries of “Big Grandma’s house,” where

aunts, uncles, and cousins gathered every chance they could, where the adults spoke Italian, and Big Grandma was adored by all. Family, I learned, was everything, and it deserved an unbending loyalty. At the parish elementary school, nuns and lay teachers taught us catechism every day and imposed a firm discipline upon us. I learned to be a good Catholic boy, or else pay the price, on earth now, and later in hell for all eternity. Relief came from the occasional teacher who treated us with kindness and, most of all, from the school and neighborhood friendships that formed among the boys. We ran wild together through the neighborhood in the hours after school, until this band of boys came to seem more important than my Italian clan.

Part II, “A Jesuit Education,” covers the adolescent years of high school, which took me out of the boundaries of family, parish, and neighborhood. I won admission to Regis, a Jesuit high school located on Manhattan’s elegant Upper East Side. Regis brought together academically gifted Catholic boys from the greater metropolitan area. Its Jesuit and lay male faculty introduced us to the world of classical learning and held out high expectations for our future mission in life as committed Catholics. I was chosen to be mentored in the speech and debate society, and soon I was traveling throughout the city and across the country to tournaments, where I won state and national championships. I had friends to die for, and together we explored Manhattan—its museums, its parks, its grand old movie palaces. A boy who had almost never left the Bronx was suddenly enveloped by a world of intellectual engagement that my family could scarcely appreciate.

Meanwhile, these years also saw this good Catholic boy drawn into an underground world of male homosexual desire. On the subways of New York and the streets of the theater district, I found men who had sex with men. In subway restrooms, along the edge of highways in the Bronx, in the bushes by railroad tracks, and in tenement buildings in Manhattan, I had sex with men whose names I never learned and whom I never saw again.

Part III, “Everything Changes,” revolves around the campus of Columbia University on Manhattan’s Morningside Heights in the second half of the 1960s. Black Power activists, antiwar protesters, and student radicals committed to overthrowing “the system” were holding rallies, marching through campus buildings, disrupting classes, and frequently shutting down the university. Almost immediately, the campus had an impact on me. During freshman orientation, I learned from the campus Protestant minister that “God is dead.” In my Western Civilization course, I found myself unable to challenge the logic of the great philosophers who proved that God did not exist. I encountered radical priests and nuns who believed that war was always evil and needed to be opposed as a matter of conscience. My rejection of Catholicism and embrace of pacifism

provoked intense conflict with my conservative Catholic parents. Meanwhile, as I struggled with the draft, declared myself a conscientious objector, and counseled other young men on how to avoid military service, I was slowly discovering a hidden gay social world on the streets of Greenwich Village, in the standing-room section of the Metropolitan Opera, and among some of the pathways in Manhattan's parks. I met a man who became my lover and introduced me to New York's secretive gay life. I came out to a small circle of friends.

The political radicalism and emerging sexual revolution of the late sixties led me to reject the professional career options that an Ivy League education held out. Instead, I landed an entry-level job in a Brooklyn library, continued my activist work against the war, and maintained my ties to New York's gay geography and the safety it seemed to provide for exploring my forbidden desires and developing a gay social world. When my work in the library exposed me to a new radical literature on American history, I realized that my intellectual abilities and my activist impulses had found a place where they could come together. Rather than return home, as a good unmarried Italian boy was expected to do, I embarked upon a life path that nothing in my family background and upbringing could have prepared me for. The sixties had changed profoundly the direction that my life was meant to take.

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Recounting one's life story a half century or more after the events occurred can offer challenges. Fortunately, my training as a historian impressed upon me early the value of preserving evidence from the past. My personal archive of correspondence with friends, especially from my college years, allowed me to reconstruct both events and my responses to them. As an adult, I preserved connections with some elementary school, high school, and college friends, and we have exchanged many reminiscences over the years. I also reread the *Columbia Spectator* from my years on campus in order to capture the range of activities and protests during my time as an undergraduate.

The culture of the Scamporlino and D'Emilio clans has also been a great resource. From the time I was a child and into my decades of adulthood, family members never failed to tell over and over the stories that I grew up hearing about as well as those that I was a part of. And my mom, Sophie, who appears in many of the pages of this book, was meticulous in preserving materials from the family—and my—history. She carefully put together photo albums, treasured the home movies, and collected and saved local news clippings about my victories in speech and debate tournaments as well as in other student competitions. I hope I have done her justice in retelling some of those tales from the past.

PART I

An Italian Boy
from the Bronx

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An Italian Family

In 1977, in his first year in the White House, President Jimmy Carter made a celebrated trip to the Bronx to prove that a peanut farmer from Georgia cared about our cities. Images of crumbling buildings and rubble-strewn lots flashed across television screens. A corner of America looked remarkably like a devastated war zone. Soon after that, I began to notice a new line dividing native New Yorkers from everyone else. If I told someone I was from the Bronx, a New Yorker said, “Oh! What neighborhood?” Everyone else said, “Oh” and looked at me sadly.

To me, the Bronx where I was born after World War II was special. It had the biggest zoo in the world, with its own pair of Chinese pandas. It had the Yankee Stadium of Joe DiMaggio and Casey Stengel. On the Grand Concourse, the Loew’s Paradise stood with star-spangled vaulting so spectacular I could forget the movie I was watching and just stare at the ceiling. We had the best Italian ices this side of Naples. On warm summer evenings, you could stroll forever along Pelham Parkway or ride a roller coaster on Bruckner Boulevard. Bronxites knew we were the best. Had you ever heard anyone say “the Brooklyn” or “the Manhattan”? But the Bronx: it just rolled off the tongue.

My part of the Bronx was the best of the best. I grew up in Parkchester in the 1950s. Parkchester claimed the distinction of being the world’s largest housing project. More than forty thousand people filled its twelve thousand units, making our two hundred acres among the most densely populated in the

world. The buildings were brick, seven or twelve stories tall, with one-, two-, and three-bedroom apartments. The halls were well lit, the elevators always ran, the apartments were painted every three years, and everything—from the grounds outside to the floors inside—was immaculately clean.

Parkchester opened in 1940 so that, when I was a child, it still possessed a spanking new quality. A product of the Great Depression, it was built, owned, and operated by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company to provide decent housing to working people—as long as they were white. For those privileged to live there, it was the best of corporate paternalism, even if no Parkchesterite ever called it that. The housing was as good as New York offered for the money. With New York's rent control program, you could live there for decades and never see your rent increase. Good citizens that they were, my parents voluntarily signed a new lease every three years and accepted a modest rise in rent. To them, living in Parkchester was a gift, and they were thankful for it.

They had reason to be. Each had spent their first two decades in the South Bronx, my dad by way of a few years on the Lower East Side. The tenements they lived in were built to turn a quick buck at the expense of immigrant families. Mom's family had left the old neighborhood just before the war ended, but Dad's sisters and mother ("Small Grandma," to distinguish her from "Big Grandma," my maternal grandmother) still lived on 147th Street.

Every couple of months, we visited on a Saturday and always took a cab. It made the trip a great adventure because nothing else ever caused Mom and Dad to splurge on anything as extravagant as a taxi. The block Small Grandma lived on was lined with an unbroken row of tenements several stories high. Only the fire escapes interrupted the old brick fronts. They hung so precariously, ready to fall at any moment on anyone foolish enough to linger under them. As soon as Mom had me out of the taxi, I slipped my hand out of hers and ran as fast as I could into the building to avoid so grisly a fate.

But inside wasn't much better. The hallways were dark and narrow. The climb to the third floor was steep and scary. There was no elevator. The two-bedroom apartment was smaller than our one-bedroom. The floors tilted. The walls were lumpy and rough. The bathroom had a tub but no shower fixture. A chain attached to an overhead tank made the toilet flush. It rumbled so much I was sure it would collapse on top of me.

And then there was Small Grandma. I knew I was supposed to love her, but to a little boy she was very scary. She looked older than Methuselah. She dressed completely in black. Not quite five feet tall, she was thinner than any living human being I had seen. Her arms were nothing but bone, the skin stretched so tight that her veins almost popped out. Small Grandma didn't speak English,

but words crackled out of her as her bony fingers reached for my cheek and pinched it sharply in greeting.

These visits always happened on a Saturday when everyone was likely to be home. Small Grandpa died when I was an infant, and Small Grandma moved out of her own apartment, a few buildings down the street, into one with Anna, her eldest daughter, and Felix, Anna's husband. She occupied a tiny bedroom just off the kitchen, having displaced my cousins Donald and Johnny, who now slept in the living room on a sofa that opened into a bed at night.

Johnny was the saving grace of these visits. He was a year older than me, which, at age three or four, seemed a big deal. Our best times came when we hid in the bathroom. Above the tub a window opened into the kitchen where the adults sat and talked. By standing on the edge of the tub and stretching our small frames, we could almost see over the window ledge and secretly listen. At some point, someone was sure to say something that struck us as funny, and we quickly slid down into the tub and held our mouths shut to keep from laughing aloud and being discovered.

Mom's father—Big Grandpa—still owned a store a few blocks away on Morris Avenue. Sometimes we strolled there from Small Grandma's apartment before hailing a cab to take us home. We knew he'd be there. He worked in the store 365 days of the year. His only concessions to leisure were the half days he took off on Sundays, Christmas, New Year's, and other holidays.

Big Grandpa sold olive oil and tomatoes, anchovies and cold cuts, macaroni (what "pasta" was routinely called back then), and other staples of an Italian family's kitchen. Everything canned or boxed was imported from the old country, which is to say, Sicily. Much of the time Grandpa had a simple display in the window: boxes of rigatoni or cans of peeled tomatoes stacked pyramid style. But if he was between displays, he let me climb onto the built-in window seats. It was so different from the view out of our sixth-floor Parkchester apartment. I could hear the noise of the buses and delivery trucks and watch the small dramas played out among pedestrians. Sometimes my presence in the window would elicit an "Oh, what a cute little boy" look from an adult passing by.

Grandpa opened the store every day in part because his signature item was the mozzarella he made each morning. It kept customers returning, even after the war when the ranks of Italians in the South Bronx were dwindling. More than thirty years of shaping the curd into mozzarella and twisting the end until it made a nice head had mangled the shape of his right hand. Grandpa could always extract fright from me by calling me over, holding out his left hand, the palm facing me and the fingers spread, and then whipping out his right hand from behind his back. The tendons and muscle joining the thumb

to the rest of his hand had worn away, eroded almost to the wrist. I'd scream in terror while he, laughing, reached out to draw me close in a big hug.

The grocery store allowed Big Grandpa to weather the Depression, and by the war years, he had saved enough to buy a house in the northeast Bronx. Its twelve rooms, plus basement and attic, must have seemed like a mansion to my mom and her sisters. It was large enough for three generations of the family to live there. Big Grandma quickly planted a fig tree in the backyard, a reminder of Sicily. Every fall, when the chill in the air turned steady, she lovingly wrapped the tree in layers of cheesecloth to keep it alive through the winter. The tree never produced more than a handful of figs each season, but to Grandma they were as precious as gold.

The house was less than a mile from Parkchester. Just out of high school when the family moved to Silver Street, Mom managed to get a job as a bookkeeper in Parkchester's main office. This meant she could leapfrog over the hundreds of families on the waiting list for an apartment. She and Dad had been engaged for three years. They timed their marriage for when an apartment became vacant. With the housing shortage after the war, this was a real coup. Mom also wrangled a janitor's job for her brother-in-law Phil, and soon Aunt Lucy, Uncle Phil, and my cousin Paul were also living in Parkchester.

I grew up thinking I lived in the closest thing to paradise this side of Eden. Parkchester was made for kids. Its two thoroughfares intersected at the dead center of the housing project, creating four large quadrants. There were playgrounds and ball fields and handball courts, lawns and grassy fields and winding paths, and benches where older folks sat and young mothers rocked their baby carriages. Protected from the dangers of traffic, young children played and ran without ever having to cross a street. With my short four-year-old legs, it seemed like I could run forever without ever reaching the borders of my kingdom.

Since Mom defined the essence of overprotective, it's a sign of how different New York was in those years that, even before I started kindergarten, she let me go to a nearby playground without her. One of my earliest vivid memories of childhood is of racing down the hill behind our building, a big smile on my face, my short legs straining and my arms pumping to get me there as quickly as possible. The playground was a wealth of delights, and I remember having the time of my little life, feeling strong and full with the freedom Mom was giving me. There were swings, slides, and monkey bars, a basketball court, and a tetherball. By age five or six, my favorite game was tetherball. I took to this game quickly and was pretty good at it—so good in fact that the older kids who dominated the playground let me line up to play with them. I gave them a run for their money as I strained and stretched and jumped, pounding the ball

with all my strength. The bigger kids cheered me on, and sometimes I actually triumphed.

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When the weather was rainy or cold, the playground was not an option. On those days I stayed home. Mom often had laundry to wash or carpets to vacuum. She dusted and polished furniture, scrubbed countertops, and kept the windows sparkling clean. In the lingo of the day, her floors were clean enough to eat off them. When not doing housework, she was on the phone. She talked every day with Big Grandma and with her sisters Lucy, Anna, and Jenny. During those hours I kept myself busy in the bedroom. I had a wooden puzzle of the forty-eight states, and long before I understood what Minnesota or Wisconsin was, I knew that they fit together along the top edge. I had a set of wooden blocks and built forts and skyscrapers. I had Smokey the Bear and a stuffed panda as playmates. Panda was as tall as I was. I would drag him onto my parents' bed, lie on top of him, and rub my nose in his face.

But Panda and the forty-eight states held my attention for just so long. Eventually I made my way to the living room or kitchen to find Mom. If I caught her between tasks, I would climb onto the sofa and sit next to her.

"Read to me," I said, with a puppy dog eagerness that I hoped was irresistible.

Mom never read on her own. She sometimes opened the Bible and stared at the page for a long time. Or she looked through a cookbook, seemingly considering recipes, but never making them since our weekly meal schedule was as dependable as the sun rising and setting. But when I spoke my plea, she responded. She had decided early on that school was my future, and so our small apartment was filled with children's books that she stocked for me.

Fetching one—Aesop's Fables, Hans Christian Anderson, a children's version of the Bible—she pulled me close so I could see the illustrations. She took me to a world where donkeys spoke back to their masters, little boys who were bad had their arms turned into flightless wings, and violent floods almost wiped out life on the planet.

But reading wasn't Mom's thing. She inevitably tired of reading before I tired of listening. I always fared better if I spoke the magic phrase.

"Tell me a story," I begged.

"What do you want to hear a story about?"

"Tell me about Grandpa and the store."

"Well, you know, Grandpa didn't set out to open a store."

"What did he want to do?" I asked.

“Grandpa wanted to be a priest. His family raised goats in Sicily, and they had a few olive trees too. But Grandpa didn’t want to work in the fields. So, he set out one day with his clothes rolled in a sheet. The seminary was several towns away, but he never got there. And it’s a good thing because if he had, he never would have met Grandma, and you and I would never have been born.”

“Really?” My eyes widened.

“Really.”

“How come he never made it?”

“He met a friend who was going to America. His friend told him, ‘You’re crazy to be a priest. Come to America. There’s gold in the streets. My cousin is in New York; he will get us jobs.’ So, Grandpa got on the boat and came to America instead.”

“Then did he open the store?”

“Oh, no, he had lots of other jobs first. The one he liked best was as a delivery man for Sheffield Farms. They taught him to drive a truck, and he went all around the city. Oh, how he used to tell us stories about those days!”

“But what about the store?” I reminded her.

“Well, Grandpa was a good worker, and his supervisor was German and liked him, and he gave Grandpa the best routes. But he got promoted, and Grandpa got a new supervisor, an Irishman. He expected Grandpa to grease his palm. That’s when Grandpa decided to open the store. He said to himself, ‘I will never work for anyone else again.’”

This wasn’t enough of a story, and Mom was on the edge of falling into one of her rants, so I pressed on. “How did he meet Grandma?”

“Grandma worked in a factory with Grandpa’s sisters. Grandpa had brought Aunt Connie and Aunt Anna over, since there was no real work for young girls in Sicily. When Grandma came as a teenager, she got a job in the same dress factory as his sisters. They became good friends because they were all from Sortino.”

“Did they know each other in Sortino?”

“Oh, no. They weren’t from the same society. Grandma’s family had nothing. They were so poor that her mother took her out of school when she was seven. She took care of her younger brothers and sisters and did all the housework, while her mother cleaned the houses of others. Grandma had a very hard life. She never learned to read or write. She had nothing before she came to America.”

“How did they meet?” I wanted to know.

“Well, Grandma and Aunt Connie were walking back to Morris Avenue after work. He saw them and thought, ‘That’s the woman for me.’ Grandpa was already over thirty. He needed to marry or else he’d be an old bachelor. Grandma was

from the same town. She was a paisan. And she was beautiful. You should have seen the pictures of her in her wedding dress. She was thin, with long hair that she wound into a bun and—”

“Big Grandma was thin?” My eyes almost popped out in disbelief. Grandma was so heavy that when she laughed, the fat on her upper arms rolled steadily, like waves heading toward the shore. That was why she was “Big Grandma” instead of “Small Grandma.”

“Oh, yes, she was thin, like Aunt Anna is now. But Grandpa told her she had to fatten up. She needed to be strong, like a horse, to work in the store and have children. And so he fed her eggs and macaroni and ricotta. Later it made her sad to look at those pictures from when she was younger, and she tore them all up.”

Mom could talk like this about her family forever. She had a story about every twist and turn in the saga of Vincenzo and Jessica Scamporlino and the five daughters they raised in the old neighborhood. Mom’s eyes lit up and a smile spread across her face as she described Grandma peeling tomatoes in the back of the store, where the family took its meals. Just like Mom did with me, Grandma bustled around as she told stories about the old country, about the donkeys that wandered through Sortino, about her own parents and the brothers and sisters she missed so much.

I never tired of Mom’s stories, no matter how often she told them. There was the time her older sister Lucy came to the dinner table wearing lipstick and Grandpa shouted “Put a!” as he slammed his fist down and made the dishes rattle. I heard about the day Grandma took her daughter Vincenza to enroll in first grade. Unable to speak English, she was helpless when the principal said, “Vincenza? That’s not a girl’s name. We’ll call her Jenny.” I heard how Jenny, the daughter who never married, loved to dance and was popular with the boys. With her girlfriends she formed a club, “The Gay Teens.” They sometimes skipped school and gallivanted around the city. Not to be outdone, Mom formed “The Debuteens.” One time, they headed to Coney Island and met up with a group of boys from the neighborhood. They rode the Cyclone, feasted on cotton candy, and took pictures of each other smiling happily, the ocean in the background. When Anna, the eldest, later saw the pictures, she snatched them from Mom and ripped them to pieces. Anna knew there would be hell to pay if Grandpa found evidence of his thirteen-year-old daughter flirting with boys at an amusement park.

As someone who never put pen to paper except to write a shopping list or scrawl greetings on a Christmas card, these tales were Mom’s way of doing history, of keeping alive the times and places that meant the most to her. And her storytelling had a purpose. She had lessons to teach, and she was not shy

about making them explicit. She'd look up from the vegetables she was chopping, shake the knife in my direction, and announce: "Obey your parents and never speak back to them!" "Show respect for your elders." "Blood is thicker than water. Family is everything." She always insisted—and I mean *always*—that hers was the happiest family in the world, that she loved her Mama and Papa to pieces, and that they were the best parents a girl ever had. I should consider myself lucky to be growing up in the Scamporlino clan. Nothing was more important than family.

But there were also lessons she didn't intend. They lingered in the air, long after the telling, like the smell of Sunday's roast chicken when it cooked too long or Wednesday night's gravy if it scorched the pot. Sadness and tragedy, anger and resentment wafted through these narratives. There were the tears shed by Anna, Mom's oldest sister, when Grandpa took her out of school after ninth grade so that she could learn dressmaking and work in the garment industry during the early years of the Depression. There was the tragedy of Lucy, a year younger than Anna. Grandpa also pulled her out of school, but Lucy, who loved her movie magazines, used dressmaking school to learn how to make clothes in the latest Hollywood fashion. She wore her creations as she strolled along Morris Avenue, and she sold dresses to girls in the neighborhood. But then, struck with crippling arthritis that deformed her hands and made walking painful while still in her early twenties, she stopped going anywhere except to church on Sundays. There was Jenny, the sister with whom Mom was closest. By everyone's account Jenny was the pretty daughter, with an outgoing personality and lots of boyfriends. She too did well in school, winning oratory contests and excelling in dramatics. But when Grandma had a last child late in life, Grandpa forced Jenny to leave school before graduating. He needed Grandma to work in the store, and Jenny had to care for her infant sister. Mom told how Jenny cried and cried, begging to stay in school.

Mom, of course, never pointed the finger at her papa for any of the things that happened to her sisters. Instead, I learned through Mom's storytelling that the Scamporlino's were a "hard luck" family. Whenever good fortune came our way, someone cast an evil eye in our direction. I learned that I must keep my successes to myself because bragging would provoke someone's envy, and they would rain curses on my head. The wrongs done to us were many. Even so, in Mom's eyes we were still the happiest family there ever was, and I must always be thankful that I was born into it.

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Big Grandma's House

Big Grandma's house was the place where that happiest of all families gathered with great frequency. A few blocks from Parkchester, her house on Silver Street was my second home. Every Sunday and holiday, every weekday during the summer when school was not in session, in fact any day Mom could manage it, was a day spent there.

"Family" never meant just me, Mom, Dad, and later my brother, Jimmy. It was the whole Scamporlino clan. Anna, the eldest daughter, and Tommy, her husband, lived on the second floor of the house with their children, Vincent, Sylvia, and Laura. Lucy, the next eldest, started married life there but then, with her husband, Phil, moved to Parkchester. Their son, Paul, was born a month after me. Jenny, never to marry, lived in the house too, as did Fran, the "baby" of the family. Five daughters, three husbands, six grandchildren: we were always together, it seemed.

Sometimes the crowd swelled to include the family of Grandpa's sister Conchetta, or Aunt Connie as we called her. She and her husband, their four daughters and husbands, and the grandchildren lived together in a three-story house, two neighborhoods away in Throgs Neck. For birthdays or wedding anniversaries, everyone came over. My uncles pushed the large dining table flush against the wall, and Grandma crammed it with plates of cold cuts, cheese, olives, eggplant, and roasted peppers. Dad put records on the phonograph. He

played music from the thirties and forties when the big bands performed in Manhattan's ballrooms. Cousins Yonnie and Danny, who, as Mom put it, were "good on their feet," spun their wives around the living room. But mostly the women danced with each other, two sets of sisters who had done this in their teens more times than anyone could count.

Laughter is what I remember most from these gatherings. When the daughters were with Mama, troubles slipped from sight and everyone was happy. Anything might provoke fits of giggling. A favorite card game was "donkey." It lacked complicated rules and required little strategy. When the dealer said "pass," everyone passed a card to the left. The first person to get four of a kind raised a finger to their nose, and that set off a scramble among everyone to do the same. The last person to touch their nose got a letter—"D . . . O . . . N . . . K . . ."—until the word *donkey* was spelled out.

To the adults it was pure fun, and the best part was watching Mama. Inevitably, at some point, she started to laugh. Maybe she had four of a kind and was pleased by her success. Maybe she was the last to notice and, having gotten a letter, was embarrassed. But once the laughter started, there was no stopping it. First one daughter and then another saw Mama laughing, and it spread around the table until my aunts were wiping the tears from their eyes.

Often the laughter involved television, which to the adults was still new and thrilling. Sometimes wrestling matches were on. Mom and Dad said they were "fixed," everything done to put on a show. But Grandpa watched religiously. He winced, or raised his hands to protect himself, when one guy was the target of a particularly fierce attack. If someone landed with a thud, Grandpa's groan filled the room. And then his daughters would start to laugh, exiting quickly in order not to show disrespect, and hugging their sides in the next room as they enjoyed Papa's faith in what he saw on the screen.

Grandma, too, liked TV. She didn't need much English to grasp the antics of Milton Berle or Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca. But her favorite was women's roller derby. Like wrestling, a lot was show. Brawls were part of the game. An elbow jabbed into an opponent provoked another player to make a body slam that drove a third over the railing, and then all hell broke loose. The women were on top of each other, punching and slapping and pulling hair. Without fail, Grandma would start laughing, quietly at first but soon matching in its fullness the intensity of the fight. When she laughed hard, her whole body shook. Soon her flesh was jiggling up and down. If Grandma was watching roller derby, everyone knew this would happen, and we all watched in anticipation. Grandma's laughter was contagious, and soon the whole room was laughing with her, the television forgotten.