

## Chapter 1

### The Red Suitcase

*“All you need is a place to hang your hat.” Grandma Vi*

My grandmother Vicenza (Vi) lived with us in a large turn-of-the-century house on Cleveland’s lower west side. She lived in our house but we lived in her neighborhood, an Italian enclave of extended families, hardworking immigrants and lots of children. My mixed Italian/Irish heritage made me feel at home with families whose names either began or ended with a vowel. O’Malley or Brizzi, it didn’t matter; from a very young age I and my siblings, like many of the immigrants who had passed through our neighborhood, were an adaptable lot. We learned to fit in anywhere.

In our neighborhood were two grocery stores complete with butcher shops, two bakeries, my great-Aunt Justina’s dry cleaning and tailoring shop, and, best of all, two candy stores with soda fountains. Nearly every home had a grape arbor in the backyard, and my family spent most summer evenings visiting with neighbors and sharing coffee and conversation under a canopy of grape leaves. The adults drank their evening espresso or perhaps a glass of vino rosso, and we kids drank freshly squeezed lemonade. Nothing in that neighborhood came from a can or a bottle.

The adults usually spoke English, but they quickly turned to Italian if good gossip was involved. Most emphatic phrases started with the word “ma,” which is Italian for but. I loved the way each phrase was accompanied by the appropriate gesture, like throwing up one’s hands in disbelief, or the praying-hands pose, or the open, right-angled hand wave.

“Ma, are you crazy?”

“Ma, what was he thinking?”

“Ma, whatsamattah for you?”

I always ducked when I heard this last one because it was followed by a quick swat to the head.

After finishing her afternoon shift at the local Union Carbide factory, Grandma Vi would come home, get cleaned up, touch up her red nail polish and walk over to the next street to visit with her sisters, my great aunts. She usually took me with her. We made quite a pair, she and I, strolling arm in arm, slowly making our passeggiata. She was a dark-haired beauty with olive skin that would remain wrinkle free all her life. I was her little ghost of a granddaughter with pale skin, red hair and large green eyes. I looked like the poster child for Tourism Ireland. My mother would sometimes lean over to Grandma Vi and whisper, “I know I gave birth to her but sometimes I wonder if there wasn’t a mix-up at the hospital.”

Louisa Brizzi O'Malley; her teased black hair with blond streaks was held in place by a Jackie O headband. She always sported a pair of bright white Keds tennis shoes and never left the house without her make-up on. She was Connie Francis, Annette Funicello and Elizabeth Taylor all rolled into one energetic package. I used to wonder about a potential mix-up too, but it was plain to see I had my mother's patrician features and my father's ruddy Irish complexion. There was no denying it, or me.

At the age of nine I felt very grown up to be included in Grandma Vi's nightly summer ritual, despite the fact that she often stopped to inspect my face.

"Didn't you take a bath?" she asked on one of these evenings.

I nodded. Yes, I'd taken a bath, but those steamy Ohio summer nights made it impossible to keep cool or clean. The blue sailor top and matching pedal pushers that had looked clean just 20 minutes earlier now hung limply on my small frame.

Grandma Vi took a hanky out of her pocketbook and dabbed at a dirt smudge on my cheek. Then she spritzed me with a bottle of her favorite cologne, Emeraude.

"Gram did you hear?" I asked as she fished around for a comb. "They put a man on the moon today."

"Imagine!" she replied. "That's a long way to travel just to get some pecorino cheese when all you have to do is go to Micelli's." She laughed at her own joke, then grew serious. "Someday you will be hopping off and on airplanes just like we used to do with the streetcars. You'll see. We're launching you this week. You will have something in common with those astronauts."

That night's visit to Aunt Justina's had a special purpose. We were borrowing a small suitcase because I was about to leave for camp. It was a dream come true. I couldn't wait to be on my own, to leave the confines of our big, old, noisy house filled with kids, adults, dogs and cats. No dusting, no diapers, no folding clothes or picking up someone else's toys. No responsibilities.

I would taste the freedom of a foreign place, at least foreign to me. I would trade in concrete sidewalks and parked cars for the quiet of the countryside one hour's drive from home. There would be trees instead of telephone wires. There would be arts and crafts, hiking and swimming, stars and crickets. I would meet new people. For the first time I would be on my own, without family or friends—except for Donna.

Donna Peterson was one of our few non-Italian neighbors and a protestant. That summer she also happened to be my new best friend because, for some reason now long forgotten, I was on the outs with my lifelong best friend, Sophia Rizzo. Donna was a year younger than me and a member of the local Presbyterian Church that was sponsoring us inner-city "underprivileged" kids for a week at summer camp. It cost \$20 for the week, which might not seem like a lot but in those days was a week's worth of

groceries. My parents and my grandmother had pooled their money and I was on my way. All I needed was the suitcase.

That night I felt a little cramp of anxiety in my stomach at the thought of it. I get the same little cramp today when I travel to unfamiliar destinations for the first time. The writer W. Somerset Maugham, quite the traveler himself, once said, "There are too many tourists and not enough travelers." I wanted to be a traveler. And this is exactly what I announced to my grandmother and my great-aunts the night we went to pick up the little red made-in-Italy valigia, suitcase.

I told them I wanted to go to Italy. No! Paris. Wait! First camp then Paris then Ireland to visit the other side of my family.

"Madonne. You already have a list," my Aunt Rosie laughed. She was fanning herself with a newspaper, her abundant jet-black hair tied up in a kerchief and her lips, as usual, impeccably painted in bright red lipstick. "Vi, what are we going to do with this child?"

Grandma Vi responded with a knowing look directed my way. "All you need is a place to hang your hat."

"Vi!" Aunt Josephine exclaimed. "You're going to make this child a gypsy talking like that. She'll never be home." Even on hot summer nights my Aunt Jo wore her long wavy brown hair loose so everyone could admire what she believed was her crowning glory.

"Careful, Vi," Aunt Justina warned as she rhythmically snapped the ends of green beans on the lap of her red-flowered housedress. Her ample bosom heaved with every breath. "It could be a blessing, but maybe not. What she does is up to God."

At that, they all crossed themselves.

I felt a little like Sleeping Beauty with her fairy godmothers arguing over the proper gifts to bestow upon her. As my great-aunts debated the various merits of which blessing I should have, my grandmother remained placid. Even then I knew she was wise; she knew what was best for me.

The conversation turned to my immediate destination: summer camp. Everyone seemed satisfied that at least this wasn't too far from home, but at the same time summer camp was a foreign concept to them. Until then, the farthest one of us children had travelled was to the local playground, and then with the strict admonition to be home when the streetlights came on.

"What's the name of this summer camp?" asked Aunt Mary, the youngest of the five sisters. She was dressed in white Capri pants and a modestly cut red halter-top, her hair pinned up on top of her head. Standing there, sipping her pink lemonade, she looked like a pin-up girl from a 1940s magazine.

I studied the group in front of me. The color red seemed to define my childhood, from my grandmother's glamorous nails, Justina's dress, Rosie's lips, Mary's halter-top and now the little suitcase. All of them were nothing if not passionate.

"It's called the Highlands and it's in Middlefield. It's Amish country," I answered, pleased with my knowledge of Ohio geography.

My aunts all looked at me like I was speaking an Italian dialect they didn't understand. Their world was limited to the west side of Cleveland from 117th Street to Public Square. Making a trip across town to the east side, to that "other" Italian neighborhood, was far enough for them. Beyond that, they would have packed bags.

"You go with who?" Justina wanted to know.

My grandmother headed off the question before I could answer. "The church," she said.

They all nodded their approval. I knew she wanted to leave it at that but I couldn't resist mischievously adding, "The Bethany Presbyterian Church."

Four pairs of eyebrows shot up in unison. They all turned and looked at my grandmother, who just shrugged.

"Eh," was all she said.

They all crossed themselves again. If there was a font of holy water nearby, they would have thrown me in it. All except my grandmother: she winked at me.