

Some Family History  
As transcribed by Nate Zeppetello  
(digitized April 2006)

In the summer of 1991 I left Oxnard and took a trip. First I visited Marc and Donna in San Francisco and then proceeded Syracuse where I visited friends and relatives, especially Philip and his inamorata. The last leg of my trip took me to Philadelphia/ where I sojourned for a week or so with Roberta and her cute daughter Melanie, AKA "The Impatient One."

Discovering that we shared a love for fermented grape juice, Roberta and I got the better of more than one bottle- you bet! One evening, while I basked in a mild Zinfandel glow, I was importuned by said Roberta, to expatiate on her maternal, non-Sicilian roots, which she would capture in a tape for the benefit of her siblings and other interested parties, if any.

I must have been in a particularly garrulous mood because when Roberta transcribed the tapes the resulting document was 49 pages long. Furthermore, I must have been more than a little bit "under the influence" because much of what Roberta had typed from the tapes didn't make much sense. Accordingly, being a man of my word, I am going to start from scratch and abjure imbibing wine or any other mind altering drug during my labors. Honest!

I shall begin, as they say, at the beginning -- with Alfredo Zeppetella, my father and Roberta's grandfather, who also fathered my four siblings. (You will have observed that he spelled his last name with an "A" whereas we always spelled it with an "O".)

Anyway, Alfredo, who will henceforth in this narrative be referred to as "Ta-Ta," was born in a grubby little mountain town a few kilometers north of Naples, population about 5,000 souls. TaTa used to say that the town was founded by Nuns and Priests who had been incapable of living up to their vows \_\_ of chastity! Pietramelara — that's the name of the town — has a very impressive-looking church — "La Chiesa Di Santo Rocco" — named after the town's patron saint, a favorite target of TaTa's blasphemous outbursts. There is a pew in the church donated by TaTa after World War II.

TaTa's father was "Geremia". a very uncommon name in Italy. His mother was "Luisa", (nee Vitiello). That's the full extent of my knowledge concerning our genealogy. I do know that there were blood kin called "DeFusco" and,"Negro" but haven't a clue as to where they fit in. I know nothing about TaTa's possible cousins or aunts or uncles or grandparents with the exception of one uncle, a brother of Geremia, named "Pietro" who settled in Rochester, New York.

TaTa's mother, Luisa, gave birth to fifteen children, most of whom died at birth or shortly after. There was only one female in the 'litter'. Only three survived to adulthood: TaTa, the first-born, who first saw the light of day on the eighth of June, 1881; "Anthony", born about 1890; and "Luigi", born in 1894. one who died at the age of eight was named "Angelo Danielo" and was reputed to be a real bright boy. Uncle Danny was named in his honor and memory.

What did TaTa's siblings die of? In a word, malnutrition. There were so many kids, and they came so fast, that they were prematurely weaned. TaTa apparently got the best start in life and lived to be 74, expiring August 28, 1955. Antonio died in 1950 and Luigi died in 19<sup>5</sup>.

Geremia never made it to America, dying at a rather young age. TaTa came to America first, in 1900, and soon earned the passage for his two brothers and his mother, Luisa. Incidentally, we called our Grandmother "Maniela", which is Italian for "Grandma". She died in 1924 and is buried in St. Agnes Cemetery where she was later joined by her three sons.

An amusing anecdote: For years we called TaTa's brother Antonio "Zi' Monico", instead of "Zi' Antonio" because we actually believed that his name was "Monico" (Monico means "Monk" and Zi' means Uncle). Actually, it was merely a nickname which sobrlguet he acguired in this way: In Italy, when he was half-grown, he contracted a life threatening illness which soon brought him to death's door. In desperation, his mother appealed to God to spare her son and promised to see to it that little Antonio spent the rest of his life in the "Master's service". To prove her sincerity she dressed him in a Monk's habit, which costume he wore for several years, probably until puberty. The nickname endured much longer.

Speaking of names, the custom among many, if not most. Italians was to name the children after the grandparents: the first boy and girl after the paternal grandparents and the second boy and girl after the maternal grandparents.

Accordingly, the three Zeppetello brothers each had a son named Jeremiah and a daughter-named Louise.

No other Zeppetello's came to Syracuse and the only other person of that name that I ever came across was listed in the Chicago phone directory. That was in 1945. My father's uncle, Pietro, settled in Rochester and was apparently of more fecund stock because that city's phone directory lists many more Zeppetello's. I heard a rumor once that one of the Rochester Zeppetello's was tried for first degree murder but I never checked it out. There was no contact between the Syracuse and Rochester Zeppetello's.

In Pietramelara, the Zeppetello's were shoemakers. TaTa and his brothers were loyal to the tradition and all went to work for the Nettleton Shoe Company in Syracuse. That company was a career job for both TaTa and Luigi but Antonio left to open a shoe store and did very well. He also did very well selling wine during prohibition. However, making shoes in Italy was not a lucrative trade apparently because the family lived in terrible poverty. Probably the surfeit of children contributed in no small way to the difficulty of keeping Zeppetello bodies and souls together! In any case, TaTa told us that not until he came to America did he eat the red part of watermelon; in Italy he had only eaten the white part, scrounged from the garbage of the well-to-do.

TaTa was a great raconteur and Sunday dinner was always a great experience, partly because Mother was a great cook and also because TaTa recounted his experience in a manner which held us spellbound. This, despite a "slight" language barrier: except for a few swear words, he spoke no English and we were not very proficient in the Neopolitan dialect. Occasionally he would issue an edict proscribing the use of English in his presence but the dictum was always ignored at once.

I guess the Zeppetello's were musicians, too. TaTa and both of his brothers played and some of their offspring did also. TaTa was also a bit of an intellectual. Though poorly educated, he had quite a little library of Italian books which he bought and had shipped to America. Most of them were volumes of the history of Italy. My mother used to heckle him, claiming that although he read, he was short on comprehension. But she was jealous, actually, because there was a "class" difference between them: he was an artisan while she and her family were peasants (cafoni!). Never mind that he and his family starved while my Mother's people always had enough to eat! An artisan was better than a peasant! The artisan's stomach might demur.

TaTa went to church but he had the typical- Italian man's antipathy for the clergy. When angry he didn't come out with profanity; blasphemy was his forte: "porco de Gesu Cristo"! "Quella putana della Madonna"! "Managa a Crist' en croce"! and on and on. With a mother who never went to church while we were growing up and a father who "cussed out" Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints, is it surprising that none of us had much use for religion?

On the other hand, in remote villages of Italy a century ago, the church was more than a religious center, it was a cultural center, also. Especially for my father because as a musician, he played exclusively at religious festivals. I always thought he was a believer, but a couple of years before he died, TaTa told me that he was not a believer, had never been one from the time he reached the age of reason.

Christmas was a big thing for him, though. First of all, he constructed an enormous creche (for years in the living room, later in the cellar after my mother got "sick" of cleaning up the mess.) At midnight on Christmas Eve, Louise or Mary or a female cousin had the job of placing the Christ child in the manger. Shortly after, Nate would "go to work". I would 'kidnap' the little bastard, remove him from his bed of straw, and hide him. Sooner or later TaTa would notice the abduction and come to me. He never accused my siblings of having "snatched" the Christ child, only me! And, of course, I would deny vehemently that I had committed the deed. But finally, I confessed, and restored the brat to his mother.

In mitigation of my misdeed, repeated each year, I offer this:

that TaTa had told us more than once, with relish and obvious glee, of how the unbelievers in Pietramelara had celebrated Christmas Eve midnight Mass: by interrupting the service with loud screams of "It's a Boy! It's a Boy! It's a Boy!"

School in Southern Italy didn't amount to much a century ago. TaTa had some experience as a student, but not much. I do

remember his recitation of a prank that the students often played on the "maestro" of the one-room schoolhouse. Here's what they did: they would come to school early and shove excrement into the lock. Then they would wipe away any tell-tale stains and, all innocently, wait for the teacher to arrive.

The reader must understand that door locks of that day were not the streamlined devices of today; they were huge and so were the keys. When the teacher pressed the key into the bowels of the lock (some joke, huh) the displaced excrement was forced out, onto the fingers of the hapless pedagogue! The discomfiture of that worthy was approximate to the glee of the students!

TaTa was a big guy, six feet three. And strong. His work did not take a lot of muscle but he was powerfully built. Once, a year or so before he died, he arm wrestled Vic Krouse and put him down easily — no mean feat considering Vic's size and strength. He developed quite a girth as he grew older but, at age 20, he was a fine figure of a man.

About this time, TaTa and a friend went to a restaurant and ordered steak. As one can imagine, TaTa had never developed much expertise in the art of wielding knife and fork, probably because his family did not own such tools. Anyway, TaTa strove to cut a slice of the steak and, worse luck, the steak slid off the plate and landed on the sleeve of a male diner who was seated at a nearby table. This poor fellow rose, picked up

TaTa's steak, and made for TaTa's table with an expression on his face which could only be described by the word "murderous". Then he saw TaTa. His demeanor altered, to say the least. He placed the steak on TaTa's plate and, ever so softly, said, "Pardon me, Sir."

TaTa had two hobbies: The Syracuse Italian Colonial Band and "chewing the fat" with his -Paesanos", relatives and friends from his home town. He played a great big horn, I guess you'd call it a "sousaphone", but he was more than just a member of the band; he was the driving force which kept the band together.

At night, after supper, TaTa would invariably go to the grocery store owned by his cousin, Alfredo Vitiello, on Pearl Street. There he would be joined by his pals and they would converse for hours about "God knows what". At times we would seek to convince him to stay home for an evening but to no avail. We often referred to him as "Il Bordante" — "The Boarder", but he

didn't mind.

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TaTa and a "Paesano" opened a restaurant near the end of World War I. It failed in short order because, according to my mother, the partners spent more time ogling the female customers than attending to business. The restaurant got TaTa arrested — for selling alcoholic beverages to returning veterans, in violation of the 18th Amendment to the Constitution which forbade the selling of alcoholic beverages. That was the end of the restaurant! He was not prosecuted, however.

When TaTa and my mother were married in 1914, TaTa was a widower. He had been married for several years to a lady whose surname was "D'Ambrosio", whom he met while playing at a fiesta in the Town of Herkimer. They had a child, "Mafalda", who lived about a year. Her mother did not survive the daughter by very much and both are buried in St. Agnes cemetery, close to TaTa's mother.

A word or two about "Maine 1 a", TaTa's mother. She doted on her three sons and, in a way, resented the fact that all three married and replaced her as ^1. "She constantly exhorted her boys to resist efforts at domination by the wives and to remember that no wife could love them as much as she!

Another funny story: I don't know whether TaTa's brothers had light colored eyes but he and his mother did. And, of course, she hoped that TaTa's kids would also. (My mother, whose eyes were brown, disparaged her husband's and her mother-in-law's eyes by referring to them as "cat eyes").

Anyway, when Jerry was born with brown eyes, Mamela swallowed her disappointment and looked forward to the next child. But Louise had brown eyes, too: This is too much! When Mary and I were born, Mamela could not wait until we opened our eyes naturally: she manipulated our eyelids to see what lay underneath. Zounds! Two more sets of brown eyes! Mamela was inconsolable.

When she died early in 1924, Danny had been conceived and my mother assured Mamela that this time, for sure, the baby would

have light colored eyes. Her death, before Danny's birth, spared her another disappointment.

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If Mamela had lived a few years longer (she died in 1924), she would have been sorely disappointed in her sons because they -failed utterly to obey her injunction to be boss in the house and to keep the wives in subjection. Part of the problem lay in their affable natures. The larger cause of their failure to assume the role of "Lords of the Castle"/ however, was that each of Mamela's sons married a formidable virago!

The three Zeppetello wives had one trait in common: a desire to have as little as possible to do with the other two. All three saw to it that their children were oriented toward the Mother's side of the family, so we didn't get to know our Zeppetello cousins very well. We never spent the holidays together and the three brothers went along with the wives' dictates. Because they liked one another, they saw a lot of each other, but this social intercourse took the form of - individual, not family , visitations.

Still, TaTa enjoyed a lot of freedom. Music was a large part of his life, so much of his free time was devoted to the "Syracuse Colonial Band" of which he was the driving force. He was also free to hob-nob with his "Paesanos". But as far as running the house was concerned, he was not even a full fledged partner, much less the boss. When decisions had to be made he was rarely even consulted. Lucky for us kids, too, because he was by nature improvident.

About 1925 or so, women began to free themselves from the tyranny of waist-long hair. Having recently won the right to \_-..-vote, women were "feeling their oats." Keeping their long

tresses neat took a lot of time, this before "the age of labor-saving devices. Besides, long hair impaired mobility and was very uncomfortable in the summer heat. So "bobbed" hair became the order to the day! Ha — that's what we called our Mother — became a convert and confided to TaTa that she was considering bobbing her waist-long naturally wavy hair.

Well, TaTa wouldn't hear of it. Quoth he: "Only the "putani" (whores) are cutting their hair! Besides, ay mother never cut her hair.!" He threatened murder, or at least mayhem, if Ma were reckless enough to disobey him.

Actually, TaTa had misunderstood the nature of Ma's statement. She had not asked his permission. She had already decided what she was going to do and merely wanted to prepare him, to lessen the shock he was bound to feel upon seeing her shorn look! The . very next day — "bye-bye" long hair and "hello" to a sheepish-looking, but completely non-violent, husband!

Another "tempest in a teapot" occurred when Ma decided she had to buy a new-fangled contraption called a "washing machine." The great polemicist and author, Camilla Paglia, who grew up in Syracuse and whose father was born in Avelino, Italy, the town where Mary Ann's Carrino grandparents were born, is right-on! when she says that men, through their inventions, have been the instruments of women's liberation from back-breaking toil.

Scrubbing soiled clothing by hand has been women's lot since time immemorial with, at best, the aid of a scrub-board and, later, a muscle-driven wringer. (My siblings and I often took turns on the wringer while Ma fed in the wet clothes.)

Since there were seven of us in the family, and since Ma had scant tolerance for dirt, a washing machine seemed like a good idea. But again, TaTa marshaled his tedious arguments: "They cost too much; a machine could not do as good a job as scrubbing by hand? the machine might break down." And, of course, the clincher: if washing clothes by hand had been good enough for his mother, it should be good enough for her daughter-in-law! History records that shortly after, a new washing machine was delivered to 513 North Townsend Street.

After his defeat on the washing machine, TaTa ceased to raise objections to whatever Ma wanted to do. In 1943 Ma bought the house on Lodi Street without a word to TaTa. He found out on the morning that they moved when Ma told him: "Pack your books and your horn. I've bought a house and we're moving today."

The truth is that, for all his bluster, TaTa was a pussy-cat --long on imprecations and threats but incapable of violence. This man, who was well over six feet tall and who, as a youth in America, had been scouted by prize-fight promoters looking for a "White Hope" capable of dethroning the then-reigning heavyweight champion of the world. Jack Johnson, was a gentle man. He never laid a hand in anger on either his wife or his

children. Sometimes, in exasperation, Ma would implore him to give one or the other of us kids (I was the prime candidate) a taste of the rod, but he always declined.

There was one time, though, when I was sure that TaTa was going to forsake his peaceful nature and -give it" to Ma,

but good! They were having a running argument — I don't remember what about — and TaTa was shaving in the kitchen (we had no bathroom sink). I think Ma was getting the better of the argument and TaTa's fury increased with each verbal arrow with which she assailed him. Each time Ma delivered a particularly nasty blow, TaTa would wince and cut himself with his razor. Finally, his face was a bloody mess and he bled from a dozen wounds.

Suddenly he had enough! La Cafona (the peasant) had gone too far! He removed the towel from about his neck, grasped it with both hands, and advanced on Ma as if to strangle her with the towel. We children trembled with fear but Ma did not retreat, a look of defiance on her face. TaTa was in striking range now. He ceased advancing and did something very peculiar. With a particularly fearsome imprecation, he brought the towel to his mouth and — bit it! Honest! Ma laughed! Our fears allayed, we children laughed! And finally TaTa laughed, too, as heartily as the rest of us!

I think it's time that we removed the spotlight from TaTa for a while. But, of course, he'll be back because this is the story of two people who married in 1914 and lived together in

relative harmony for 41 years, until August of 1955, when TaTa quietly passed away in his sleep. That they got along so well is surprising considering the great difference in their nature and outlook, to say nothing of their ages: TaTa was 12-1/2 years older than Ha.

Let us now take a look at the distaff side of this mismatched duo. She was christened "Maria Micheiina" and answered to both names but was most commonly known as "Hagqie", a nick-name with which she was gifted by the Irish girls who were her co-workers at the Pass and Seymour Factory in Solvay. Of course, the children called her "Ma", but to everyone else, friends, neighbors and relatives, she was "Maggie".

Ma's birthplace and where she spent her early years before coming to America is the town of "Vieste" in the Province of "Foggia". It can be found even on small maps because of its prominent location on the easternmost tip of the "Gargano" promontory, which juts boldly into the Adriatic Sea and was the .. bane of many a ship and crew.

Vieste is the opposite of TaTa's home town, Pietramelara, as beautiful as the latter is squalid. The climate and the vegetation are similar to the best of Southern California and the town is most picturesque, with a great park in the center. And then, of course, there is the sea and a great sandy beach which stretches on and on. (Oddly, Ma dislike the sea and never learned to swim. To my knowledge, none of her brothers ever swam either and I never was aware that any one of them bathed in anything but a bathtub.)

When I visited Vieste in 1969, the area was enjoying a building boom. Hotels and motels were going up as the seacoast was \_\_,\_\_, transformed into a vacation paradise for visitors from Northern Europe, especially the Germans. A highspot of my visit was seeing the very house in which Ma and her family had lived 60 years before. I wonder if it's still standing? If you visit Vieste, the address is: La Via Tre Piccione Numero Sesanta Hove — No. 69 Street of the Three Pigeons.

Ma's family were farm laborers — landless peasants who hired out as laborers on the lands of others and worked for wages. They were "Cafoni". The owners were most often "Latifundisti", owners of large holdings, but the Catholic Church also owned farm land and hired Cafoni, too. A large crop in the area was olives and so there was work for children as young as five picking the olives. Ma was particularly adept and boasted that she received a penny more each day than the other children because of her nimble fingers.

Ma's father, although also a Cafone, was a notch above most. He worked for one owner, as foreman of the farm. In practical terms, the distinction was important: the pay was greater and so was the respect he was paid by other Cafoni. Then too, as Ha put it, they ate meat more often than ordinary peasants;

whenever a sheep or a goat broke a leg and had to be destroyed, the foreman received a portion of the meat.

Ma's father's name was Ignazio Vescera, last name pronounced Ve'-sheh-ra, accent on the first syllable, as nasty an old fart-as I ever got to meet, and it was said that I resembled him closely both in looks and temperament. He had a sister but I never learned her name. This is the extent of my knowledge about the Vescera clan except that, when I visited, I found the name to be quite common. His wife, Ma's mother, was named "Maria", last name "Piccolo", but I never ^2" much about the family. According to Ha, they were gentle rOIK <sup>who had</sup> been impoverished as a result of some misfortune or other.

Ignazio and Maria Vescera produced eight children, all of whom survived through adulthood and beyond, a compelling

argument for the thesis that it is better — healthwise at least — to be a well-fed Cafone than a starved Artigiano (artisan)! The first born was Michele, in 1886. Then came Giuseppe a couple of years later, followed by two girls: Carmella, the elder, and Ha, born in 1894. Four more boys followed: Salvatore in 1896, Anthony in 1898, Angelo in 1900 and Ralph in 1905. They proved .. to be, on the whole, a long-lived tribe, and five of them survived well into their eighties. Angelo smoked himself to death at the age of 56 and Ralph died when he was barely 50 of bitterness and rage\*

Incidentally, true to custom, Michele, Giuseppe, Ma and Salvatore each had a son named Ignacio and a daughter named Mary. Carmella and Anthony were childless, Angelo had only a daughter and Ralph, the youngest, broke with custom and named his three children James, Albert and Linda.

The bulk of the family came to America in 1910 and were welcomed to the new world by Michele, who had come to America— in 1904 at the age of 18. In six years, besides supporting himself, he saved enough money by dint of hard work to pay the passage fare for his parents and for his seven siblings. Ma never got to see the sea or the Statue of Liberty; she was seasick during the entire two weeks it took to cross the Atlantic!

Let's face it! The Vesceras were a dynamic, highly motivated bunch who, unfortunately, failed to pass the traits on to their offspring, a mediocre lot. All eight enjoyed two traits in common: the desire to make money and also the ability to realize their goal. Pardon me, there's another thing they had in common: They were illiterate when they made landfall at Ellis Island! All succeeded to a greater or less extent except Ha.

In terms of wealth, the most successful was Michele (Mike) who became a millionaire. Giuseppe, the second son, became a largely self-taught musician, composer and owner of a store which sold musical instruments. TaTa disparaged him by referring to him mockingly as "Giuseppi Verdi", but that was just professional jealousy. Unfortunately, we did not get to know this uncle or his children very well because they moved to Detroit shortly after his wife abandoned him and the children. Salvatore became the owner of the largest food-importing company in Utica; Anthony operated a successful plumbing and heating business and retired at a young age to a motel which

he bought and operated along the St. Lawrence River; Angelo owned several businesses including a small boat factory and a— lumber yard; and Ralph did very well with a small broom factory. Even Carmella, married to a happy-go-lucky man with no drive, managed to amass a considerable estate.

And Maggie?? Her misfortune was to be born a woman and to be married to a man who adamantly refused to allow her to lead him into the world of business. Then too, she had a third misfortune — children who lacked the wit, the drive, and the temperament to be financially successful.

She tried in vain to get TaTa to open a shoe repair and sales business, the area of his expertise. He finally did, much later, during the Great Depression, working in the cellar of our house. But as soon as work picked up at the Nettleton Shoe Factory, down came the "Shoes Repaired" sign and this superb craftsman, who was capable of making a pair of shoes by himself, performing each and every operation, (he often made shoes for me and Jerry) went back to his semi-skilled job at the factory.

So Ma did whatever she could. She sold a little wine to the neighbors during prohibition, but not very much because TaTa was not a good winemaker and the wine at times was not very good. Besides, having been arrested during prohibition for selling alcoholic beverages in violation of the prohibition amendment during his restaurateur days, he was not the least bit anxious to repeat the experience.

We owned a two-family house on Townsend Street. The kitchen was very small and Ma decided to have it enlarged. The hitch was that she had no money. She decided to get the money from the fire insurance company -- she set fire to the kitchen. Of course, she wasn't the only person who tried to make money via the arson route. But she succeeded, while others failed and some even went to jail. The new kitchen was a huge improvement.

Once upon a time, after the five of us were born, Ma became pregnant again, inadvertently, I'm sure. She lost the pregnancy and, whether it was a spontaneous abortion or whether she aborted herself, I don't know. She decided to turn the situation to financial gain: so she took a ride on a street car, simulated a fall and then threatened to sue the traction company on the grounds that the Conductor's erratic operation of the conveyance had caused her to fall and lose the pregnancy. She collected on that one, too.

. So determined was she to get money, not so much for her own sake as for her children, that she tried to contrive a romance between me and my cousin, Mary. Uncle Mike's daughter.

She was an incredibly good money manager and could make a dollar go a long way. We were poor, but not poverty stricken, and always ate well and dressed respectably even during the Depression. However, there was no frivolous spending. Most families had an ice box but we did not until '93. When Ma learned that TaTa, in company with his fellow workers at

Nettleton, enjoyed a coffee and donut break costing ten cents a day, she screamed bloody murder and accused him of betraying the family. She could enjoy a treat "en famiglia" but was incapable of buying even an ice cream cone for herself alone.

At one time our tenants in the upstairs flat were a couple with two boys under five years old. The milkman delivered two quarts a day to this family while we, with seven in the family, could only afford a pint of milk. But Ma took care of what she considered a gross inequality. Each morning she rose early, carefully removed the caps from the tenants' milk bottles, siphoned off most of the cream for our use, replaced the stolen cream with water and carefully replaced the bottle caps. The tenants were never the wiser!

There was a dark side to Ma, the result of an unhappy childhood. One thing that bugged her was the knowledge that her older sister was much better looking. Ma was far from being beautiful and her appearance was not enhanced by the half dozen smallpox scars on her forehead. Carmella, on the other hand, was blessed with a handsome face and a stylish figure. Her parents hoped that her looks would enable her to make a good marriage. She was taught to sew. Ma was sent out to pick olives.

I've mentioned the extra penny Ma received for being a superior olive picker. One day she asked her mother to buy some nice cloth and to have the dressmaker sew a new dress -- a Sunday dress. Grandma agreed and in due course the dress was

delivered and Ha was ecstatic. And then Grandma said: "This dress would really look great on Cannella. I'm going to give it to her. Someday we'll make a nice dress for you."

If the reader is one of that tribe who believe we tend to imitate those we profess to despise, read on: It's many years later, Ma is a mother now and also has two daughters. The older girl is pretty, the younger one is drab. Ma buys the younger girl a beautiful maroon short coat which she loves. The older daughter tries on the coat and loves it, too, and it looked better on her than it did on the younger sister. Guess who got to wear that coat!

Ma was afflicted with a strong streak of paranoia. I was her confidant and when I was six or seven, she told me that, after Jerry was born, TaTa and his Mother, Mamela, had conspired to kill her. They had the baby now, the first son of a first son, and the Mother wasn't needed anymore. The method they had devised was this: her long hair had become matted during the latter stages of the pregnancy and they instructed her to soak her head with olive oil and this treatment would untangle the hair. But this was merely a ruse. What the conspirators really wanted was for Ma, her hair and head constantly wet, to contract pneumonia and die. And the proof of their evil intent was that TaTa had removed her wedding ring, ostensibly to prevent the discomfort that would ensue if her finger were to swell because of the enforced idleness. But the real reason was to forestall the possibility that he might forget to remove the ring from her finger before the undertaker closed the coffin.

Of course, I believed her and many years were to go by before I realized that no effort to get rid of her had existed. The sad thing is that she told me this story more than ten years after the event was supposed to have occurred, proving that she continued to believe that her perception of the event was correct.

Here is a true story that could have come from the pen of deMaupassant. Before he married. Uncle Angelo "rode the rails", meaning that he hitched rides on freight trains and traveled from place to place. He returned to Syracuse and always with a gift for his big sister. Ha — a bag of dirty laundry for her to wash. He also availed himself of the opportunity to stoke up on a lot of Ha's delicious cooking. His only show of appreciation was to congratulate Ha on the quality of the cuisine.

On one of his visits Uncle Angelo handed Ma a small package and asked her to put it away for him against the day when he would need it. The next day he asked for the package and left for the evening. It was obvious to Ha that he had a big date!

Ma had been a little miffed earlier that day. She surmised that the package contained a gift for a lady, proving that Angelo was familiar with the custom of giving gifts. She decided to teach him that a loving and caring sister could deserve a gift, too. She carefully opened the package and

beheld a pair of very expensive silk stockings. She removed the stockings, replaced them with a pair of paint-spattered -cotton stockings and re-wrapped the package. When Uncle Angelo came back from his date, he never said a word to Ha.

And now, a little tragedy. One day, during the time that TaTa was repairing shoes in the celler shop, a woman brought in a pair of shoes and requested new lifts — 15 cents. She promised to return later that day. TaTa was out but was expected shortly. Hours went by and still no TaTa. Ma began to worry. Fifteen cents in those days would buy enough pasta and round steak to feed the whole family, she decided to put on the new lifts herself. After all, she had seen TaTa do it a hundred times.

Soon one of the lifts was in place. She started on the other one when — suddenly — tragedy! The heel broke in two! About this time, TaTa returned. Off he went to buy a new pair of heels — seventy-five cents. A 15 cent gain had become a sixty . cent loss! A small tragedy! Life goes on! But Ma cried a while.

A terrible tragedy befell Ma's youngest brother, Ralph. When Grandma Vescera died in 1921, Uncle Mike asked his father to give up the house and come live with him. The old man assented. Unfortunately, the invitation did not include Uncle Ralph, who was only 16. He was on his own.

He drifted around and ended up in Pennsylvania where he met an older man who convinced Uncle Ralph to join him in robbing a candy store. The effort failed and both of the would-be robbers were apprehended and jailed.

The older man had been around. He hired a lawyer and received a sentence of a year and a day. Uncle Ralph "didn't know his way around." He lacked the money to hire a lawyer. He appealed to his big brother, Mike, who was already well-to-do. There was no response. Ralph served six years in the penitentiary. One can only guess what he endured during his incarceration. He never recovered from the experience.

TaTa swore that this happened and Ma denied it, but without real conviction. Anyway, the story goes like this: When Michele laid eyes on his sister, Carmella, he "flipped". She had been a child of 12 when he left for America. Now she was a beautiful young woman of 18, in full bloom. He "got the hots" for her. He had to have her! He did have her!

Is the story true? TaTa was not even acquainted with the Vescera family at the time so he had no first hand knowledge of the alleged event. On the other hand, something in Aunt Carmella's subsequent behavior may be a clue: she gave up Catholicism and joined an Evangelist sect — the Christian Assembly — and became a fanatic who constantly railed against sin and was unable to speak even one sentence that did not contain hosannas to "Jesu".

Ma's Catholicism was eclectic. She professed to believe in God, but during the years we were growing up she rarely went -to Church. She had never heard of Martin Luther, but believed that she did not require a priest to act as intermediary but could deal with God directly — the essence of early Protestantism. She asked God for favors, such as sunny Mondays (her washday). If the day was suitable. God had granted her wish. But, if it rained — well, she had an explanation:

Someone else had needed the rain that particular Monday more than she had needed the sunshine.

When I was about 12, a little scandal touched our family. TaTa accused Ma of having an affair with the then tenant of the upstairs flat. The man was a plasterer and an energetic and personable fellow. Ma denied the involvement, the family moved away, and the matter was dropped.

Did she? Who knows? The fellow had a beautiful wife but that, in itself, proves nothing. Her marriage to TaTa, having been arranged by a marriage broker, it's quite possible that Ma was looking for something which was lacking in her life. Many years later, after the sexual revolution of the 60's made talking about about such things permissible, Ma said that she had never been orgasmic. Part of her problem may have been her fear that TaTa would infect her with a venereal disease acquired from the prostitutes he sometimes patronized.

Thinking about and writing down these recollections of a by-gone time has made the distant past come to life. The more I write, the more I remember, and the more I want to write. If it were not for "sloth", my faithful companion who is always by my side, this narrative could go on and on.

I would tell you a lot more about Uncle Mike (Michele) who was a lot more than just one of the six vescera uncles. In fact, his impact on our lives was far greater than that of the five other brothers put together. At times, he eclipsed our



father, TaTa, in importance, unfortunately, some of his excessive interference in our family matters did not proceed from the best of motives. Even now I can't be sure whether his interest in our family was more bane than blessing. Unfortunately, to do him justice would require a dozen more pages.

I would tell you more about Grandpa Vescera, the busy-body who made a career out of sowing dissension and discord in the homes of his offspring. He died at the age of 82 in 1945 after spending a whole night, in bitterly cold weather, in a water-logged street excavation into which he had fallen accidentally.

I could tell you about eating "pane cotta" which was stale bread dipped in hot water to soften it so that it could be eaten. Ugh! Throw away stale bread? Are you serious?

I could tell you about how we dashed out the door when we heard the organ grinder coining down the street with his monkey.

Of jumping on the back of the Ice-man's wagon while he was across the street making a delivery and grabbing a loose ice shard and sucking it greedily on a hot summer day.

Of TaTa returning from work one day in August of 1927 and telling Ma, in a voice compounded of sorrow and anger, "They have killed Sacco and Vanzetti." (Two Italian immigrants — anarchists — framed on charges of murder during the anti-red hysteria following World War I. They were finally electrocuted after a seven-year, world-wide fight to save them.)

Of huddling around the big, black coal-burning kitchen stove as we dressed for school on a cold winter morning.

Of noisy street cars clanging by our house day and night.

Of being able to buy all kinds of firecrackers at the corner grocery store, and shooting them off for a whole week before the Fourth of July.

Of eating off a china plate and knowing that, in the "old country", your parents had fished the pasta out of a common pot with their fingers.

Of how proud we were of Al Capone, an Italian immigrant who had "made good".

Of helping TaTa make wine every year.

Of religious "Fiestas", the Italian Colonial Band blaring away and the Madonna being trundled through the streets.

Of ignorant Cafoni listening respectfully and appreciatively as the band played the overture from the third act of Verdi's "La Traviata".

Of a mongrel dog named "Queenie" who was run over by an auto and who was buried -- tearfully -- in the back yard of our house.

Of a beat-up old "phonograph" that had to be wound up before it would make music.

Of the sawed-off broomstick, conveniently hung over the kitchen door and dubbed "la ragione" (justice) by Ma. She relied on it to mete out justice to disturbers of family peace and decorum as often as she felt necessary.

Of the musical hits of the 1920's: "Barnie Google with the Googaly Googaly Eyes" and "Yes, We Have No Bananas".

Of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin, those immortal laugh-makers of the silent screen.

Of the bawdy, irreverent songs brought back from France by the Doughboys; The Prince of Wales was put in jail for riding a horse without a tail. And mademoiselle from Armentiers who hadn't been fucked in 50 years. The crazy marines who ate pork and beans and shit over the deck of the submarine. And the soldier boy who took his girl out riding, and laid her in the grass, when a bumblebee came along and stung her in the ass.

Of women's skirts, and how, in 1930, they soared above the knees!

Of a time when one breadwinner per family sufficed. And of many other things.

Instead, I'll end this story by telling you a couple of stories that Ma told us many many years ago, before even the age of radio. She was a great narrator and held up spellbound despite the fact that we had heard the stories before — many times. What a pity that none of us thought to write them down.

The first one concerns "Pasquale", a country bumpkin who, after receiving his pay, decided to go to town and have some fun. Poor Pasquale had a passion for figs but had never had his fill of the fruit. He decided that he was going to remedy that situation so he bought a big bag of figs and munched happily as he walked toward town.

After eating a prodigious quantity of figs, he was finally sated. He couldn't imagine ever wanting to eat another fig as long as he lived. He dumped the remaining figs into a ditch by the side of the road. To emphasize his satiety, he paused to urinate on them. He then resumed his trek to town.

Alas, our hero did not fare too well in town. He was set upon by the local denizens, both male and female, who separated him from his money in short order. He had no choice but to turn his steps homeward, sadder, but hopefully, wiser.

He had walked a great distance when he realized that he was hungry. He wasn't just a little bit hungry; he was famished. And he still had a long way to go. Suddenly he remembered the figs, and that he was approaching the spot where he had discarded them. He lengthened his stride and, in a few moments, was standing at the very spot where he had dumped the figs. O, joy! O, blissi And then it hit him! He remembered what he had done!

But wait! All was not lost. Sure he had urinated on the figs, but wasn't it possible that some of the figs had escaped the golden effluence? Pasquale knelt down to investigate. He picked up a fig, examined it and decided that it had escaped the urinary baptism. He popped it into his mouth. He examined another fig, and again he was in luck; it, too, had been out of the "mainstream". And so it went. When he had eaten the last fig, he resumed his homeward trek!

The second story concerns Signor Filippo, a widower who lived with his nubile daughter, Angelina. She kept house and cooked for her father.

Now Angelina was "well stacked", had a winsome smile and so it was inevitable that many young men became aware of her visible charms and sought to court her. Did this please her father? No! Signor Filippo liked things just as they were. If Angelina married, he would have to clean the house! He would have to get his own meals!

He devised a strategy to thwart the amorous swains who sought to wreck his comfortable existence: He made an art of finding fault with each suitor who showed his face. Luigi was too tall; Antonio, on the other hand, was much too short. Francisco? He was too fat. Michele? That fellow was skinny as a reed. In short, he found each suitor to be fatally flawed and unfit to marry Angelina. And then a fellow named Leonardo came calling.

Signor Filippo could see at a glance that the ploys he had used successfully would not work with this fellow: He was a fine figure of a man. Besides, papa could see that Angelina was smitten with the guy. A new strategy was required. Signor Filippo was equal to the task.

"My daughter, as you can see, is beautiful and deserves the very best. The man she marries must be strong, healthy and robust. Prove that you possess these qualities by sleeping on

the roof tonight, in just the clothes you are wearing, and tomorrow you may court my daughter. \*\*

Leonardo was appalled. It was winter. After a night spent on the roof, he would cease to be a suitor and would be a candidate for a pine box! He was about to decline when a furtive wink from Angelina made him hold his peace. Intrigued, he decided to put his trust in her. He assented to Signor Filippo's terms.

Come sundown, the father escorted Leonardo to the roof, wished him good repose, and returned to the house. He and his daughter immediately retired to their bedrooms. But Angelina did not sleep. She crept to her father's door and listened to the sound of his breathing. In a few minutes she was satisfied the Papa was sound asleep. She climbed to the roof, laden with blankets, and gave them to Leonardo, then she wished him good-night and returned to her bed.

.. Angelina awakened at dawn. First she retrieved the blankets. Then she roused her father. Signor Pilippo bounced out of bed and raced to the roof. But when he got there he beheld not a half-frozen corpse, but a smiling Leonardo.

"But - but - but, however did you manage not to freeze to death?", he stammered. Leonardo should have "played it straight" and simply stated that his great constitution had seen him through and that he was obviously a fitting mate for

Angelina. However, the thought that he was now on his way to enjoying Angelina's hidden, as well as visible charms, made him cocky (no pun intended!). He had to "ham it up"! He replied, "It was a trifle chilly, Signer, but the heat from a candle burning in the steeple of the church warmed me nicely."

"Aha!", ejaculated the older man. "You have failed to prove that you possess the fortitude and vigor required to pass the test I set for you. It was the heat of the candle that you saw through the night. Away with you!" and he escorted the young man to the door.

Angelina had witnessed the scene between her father and Leonardo. However, being a good and obedient daughter, she did not remonstrate. She did, however, -manage to give Leonardo another furtive wink, and a maidenly smile as well.

When Signor Filippo returned from his labors that evening he was still basking in the glow of his victory over the villain . who had sought to deprive him of his daughter/cook/housekeeper. He asked Angelina what she had prepared for supper. "Pasta and beans. Papa", she replied. "Sit down at the table because it's ready to eat." She set the plate of food before him and retired to the other room.

In a moment her father bellowed to Angelina, "Have you lost

your mind? The beans and pasta have not been cooked. How do you

expect me to eat them? Come in here at once!"

Angelina approached her father. She-eyed him coolly. "You must be mistaken. Papa. I set the beans and the pasta very close to the stove, not more than a foot away. if Leonardo could be warmed by a candle which was 500 feet away, then surely the beans and pasta, which were much, much closer to the stove, must certainly be cooked."

Her father looked at Angelina, who was smiling sweetly, and realized that he had lost. The very next day Leonardo commenced his courtship of Angelina.