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La Porta D'Oro

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Winner of The Redwood Empire Mensa
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La Porta D'Oro

Christina H. Dunbar

Basato Sulla Storia Di Mio Nonno

**Note: This story contains depictions of violence.
Reader discretion is advised.**

Joseph woke up to an earth-shattering clap of thunder.
“*Mio Dio in cielo*” cried his father lying next to him.

Despite having four members of the family, there were only two beds for the several week trip from Sicily to New York City. Joseph sat upright, knocking his head on the bunk over him with an audible thud. “*Merda!*” he muttered under his breath, only to receive a slap across his back for swearing.

He twisted his legs over the pathetic cushion they called a bed and looked up. His little brother was puking into a bucket due to the rocking of the boat. The sound of retching was not as bad as the metallic clanging of his sick splattering on the bottom. It was rank and smelt of spoiled goats’ milk. Joseph was intimately aware of that smell because he long ago left a jug out in the sun for several days. He had paid for it with a beating to his backside from his mother’s rolling pin.

“*Vado a fare una passeggiata,*” he called over his shoulder as his feet rested on the damp floor. It was hard to tell if the floor was moist because of a leak, bodily fluids or a combination of the two. Soothing his internal reflexes, he pretended he was walking on the beach instead. Pacing the ship at night was idyllic. You got to see everyone when they were in their most vulnerable state; small, alone, and sleeping. Even the biggest bully on the ship, a former mafioso who went by the name ‘*Un Occhio*’ slept like a little boy. But he did keep his hands on a visible gun.

Tonight, it quickly became obvious that not everyone was finding rest. The water was choppy, leaning the boat violently one way or the other. The loud clanging of what sounded like hail sized raindrops made such a cacophony it could drive a man. Several children were up; lighting matches and quietly trying to play cards or jacks without waking their parents. A slight boy who was an outcast by the others for his strawberry marked face, played ball against a wall alone.

"*Questo è il marchio del diavolo,*" he had heard his father say under his breath when he first observed him at the docks.

Pity swelled in his heart for the poor child. He knew what it was like to be alone. Joseph dared not talk to him for fear of experiencing a beating worse than a sleepy assault on the back. Wincing at the thought of it, he moved on.

Further along, the smells and sounds of other passengers throwing up or shitting themselves were pungent and clear. One frail older man who had been sweating for two days straight, was crying to God for land. He was doing this trip alone, sent for by his son. He was lucky, it was not unusual for split families to never see each other again.

A woman with her head buried under a black scarf, was crying silently for a lost child.

The baby once had an insatiable cry that pierced the air at all hours. For days it screamed in pain, not taking to milk or food. Joseph's own mother attempted one of her superstitious rituals on the baby. Stealing an egg from the pantry she kneaded it along the child's body, begging God to remove the curse. It was useless, and a few days later the pathetic thing closed its mouth one last time, quiet at last. The mother had held on to that corpse as long as she could, not willing to admit her child was dead. But a mutiny to throw it overboard had been successful. She asked for a priest to recite a blessing, but it was no use. The baby would not be buried in hallowed ground and would remain in purgatory forever. At least they didn't have to listen to it cry.

They were all suffering on this journey to America. "*Cos'è l'America?*" Joe frequently thought to himself. No one they had known had ever come back from America, yet everyone wanted to go. He approached the end of the passengers hold and sat on an soggy barrel. Out of a microscopic window he could see the moonlight peeking through the dense clouds.

"*L'America è la terra delle opportunità!*" his father had exclaimed when he initially told the family about it. "*In America, tutti possono trovare un lavoro! In America, non devi rispondere alla mafia! In America, possiamo avere la vita che Dio ha programmato per noi!*"

America. America was the land God had promised them. The land where they could work and not pay the mafia for protection, because the police would defend them. Where no one

would discriminate against them for being Sicilian. Yet, what they had to do to get to America. Scraping up every *lira* they could find. Selling off their animals and possessions. Performing risky jobs from *mafiosos* for payment. Even then, they could die merely trying to immigrate.

"Non ho mai visto una foto dell'America" Joseph thought. If he had never seen it, how could he know it was real and not mythical?

Joseph stood up and stretched. The waters were calming and maybe now he could get some sleep. As he turned, a small glint flashed in the slice of moonlight from the window. A coin twinkled from underneath the edge of the barrel. He assumed it must have been left there from a previous group of people. Picking it up he realized he had never seen this type of money before. So many people were traveling, taking to the seas to find their future it could have been from anywhere. Rotating it in his hand he read "United States of America." His first piece of American money. Pocketing it he headed down the makeshift hallway in the hold.

Everyone was slowly drifting off except for the little boy with the ball. He sat with his head in his hands looking somber. After surveying the area to see if anyone was looking, Joseph quickly bent to one knee and pulled out the American money. He forced the boys head up and put the coin in his hand.

"Per dolci in America," he said with a wink.

For the first time in the entirety of their journey, he saw the little boy smile. He rustled the cap on his head affectionately and went back to his bunk. Sliding onto the cushion softly to not disturb the beast he shared it with. "In America," he thought to himself, *"i bambini dimenticati possono comprare dolci."*



Joseph struggled to catch his balance as he rocked on the top rotting stair on the way to the basement. The door slammed loudly whacking him in the backside. Scrambling to find the door handle he pushed back forcefully, but it was useless. He had already heard the haunting and unmistakable sound of his father latching the door behind him.

The worst things about the basement was the unnatural darkness that filled the room. The darkness occupied every inch of space, you could not escape it, and it was suffocating. He extended his hand and touched the exposed brick wall, he could tell where he was on the stairwell by the texture of the brick. Some were covered with a damp, smelly moss that formed from the humidity. Others were bare, cold, and naked.

The only sounds that could be heard in the basement were the loud banging and high-pitched hissing from the ever-faulty water heater. It had been designed to accommodate twenty tenants, not the sixty plus that now lived in the slum apartments. Even with his father's work and the boys dropping out

of school for odd jobs, it was not enough to escape the squalor. In America there was such an abundance of laborers. Hired to do the jobs other people didn't want for less money. They were "filthy, immigrant laborers" as some politicians called them. Any hope they had of lessening racial tensions had long passed once they stepped off the boat. It was no longer the Italians vs. the Sicilians. Now it was the Jews fighting the Poles, fighting the Irish, fighting the Italians for jobs. Joseph's father rapidly had to learn that in America they didn't care if you were Italian or Sicilian, they lumped you all together. One dream about America, dead.

His hand finally hit a notch he had carved in the crumbling brick a month ago, signaling the end of the descent. By running his hand down the wall, he gently withdrew a loose piece. Wiggling free a wedged box of matches and a lonely cigarette he had bought off a vagrant. He squatted low before lighting up. The taste caused him to feel sick but older, like an adult.

"Thanks for the offer" came a voice from the back of the room. His little brother Pasqual's newly deep voice was still unnerving to hear.

"Where are you?" Joseph asked, his eyes had not and would not adjust to the darkness. The embers from the end of the cigarette only made him more blind.

"Near the table. Some hobo left a blanket here a few weeks back, think it has bugs but it's warm," Pat said nonchalantly.

Joseph spun so he was facing the far wall and counted five steps before his toes hit the base of the water heater. Turning right, he walked ten more paces before the table on the far side made direct contact with the middle of his femur.

"*Minchione fetuso*" he said at the stinging in his leg.

"You're getting too tall, Joe," said Pat.

"*Stronza*" Joseph said back with a snap in his voice.

Pasqual laughed, "the only words you remember in Italian are bad," he said. Joseph sat next to his little brother, passing the lit cigarette to him.

"Well, yeah. Dad would kill me if he heard us speak Italian. You remember what he was like when we got here."

"We are in America. We speak America now," they said in unison with each other. But it hadn't solely been their father who had the issue with the language. Once on the docks, a shipman had overheard them talking with a friend from the old country. They had been sent home without pay. That was the end of Italian for them. No one could afford not to work.

They sat in silence until the cigarette reached its end. The high-pitched wailing of the heater was joined by a slow dripping of water.

"When did it start today?"

"The second he got home. He came in, poured himself a glass of that putrid dandelion wine and didn't say anything. Just stared at nothing like a

mad man. Mom dropped a glass because she was so scared and that's when he laid into her." Pasqual said vacantly.

"What was he saying?"

"Hell if I know," replied Pat. "I love how we can't remember Italian anymore but the second he gets upset it's all he will speak in. It's like a fucking code now."

"Yeah," Joseph said robotically.

"Nicky and I tried doing that thing where we stack mom against the wall with our bodies, so he can't get to her. But he got in the front and got knocked square in the head before running away."

"Any idea where he went?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, I hope that little man got as far away as possible," said Pat. "I'm used to getting knocked around, but the whole point of the stacking is so he doesn't get hurt either."

There was another pause.

"He's getting worse, isn't he?" said Pat, a tremble in his voice.

"Yeah," said Joseph, staring glassily at the darkness. "Sometimes I ask myself why God is even doing this to us in the first place."

Pat whacked his wrist against his brother's shoulder. "Watch yourself," he snapped, "that's blasphemous!"

"Are you telling the priest?" Joseph said indignantly, before reaching to share a bit of the moldy blanket. They huddled underneath it and Joseph could distinctly feel a beetle run across his hand. "You were right about the bugs," he chuckled.

"Wish I could see them," said Pat, "they could be my pets whenever we are stuck down here." The boy's shared a genuine laugh before falling silent.

Silence was an underlying theme of these frequent visits to the basement. Sometimes they would be too sore to have the energy to speak. Other times they would be so distraught they couldn't find the words for their feelings. On one occasion, Joseph was so tired he fell over in a faint and slept for two days.

"I saw our neighbors the other day, in the hallway, the Pollok," said Pat. "You know, Nowak or whatever their name is? Funny guy. Not much of a talker."

"He probably doesn't want to start trouble. There's no privacy in this place."

"Do you think they can hear mom...you know..."

Joseph waited before responding, "probably," he said, "but that family has enough to worry about without dealing with our father."

The sudden urge to pee brought Joseph to his feet. He stretched a hand out to find where the table ended before counting his four steps to the wash bin they used as a latrine. The smell of several weeks' worth of piss and shit was so overpowering it was an assault on the nostrils. But the stench did help

with making sure one's leak ended up in the bucket and not on the floor.

"We have got to figure out how to clean this out," Joseph said over his shoulder.

"Well, how do you propose we do that?" said Pat.

Shouting and the sudden sound of urine hitting the slosh residing in the bucket awoke a creature in the corner. The movement was small but noticeable. Joseph assumed it was one of their rat friends who lived in the basement when an unmistakable human groan came from the corner.

"Nicky?" he said. "Hey Pat. I think I found Nicky." Joseph walked to the corner, dragging his feet on the ground so he wouldn't inadvertently step on someone or something.

When the toes of his work boots hit a large fleshy mass, he bent down and lit a match.

The light was just enough to see the outline of the face of his youngest brother, with a huge lump on his forehead.

Nicolo had been born eighteen months after their arrival. Even more poor than they were now, his mother had been forced to give birth in the basement of an Italian bakery with no doctor. A rather stern looking Russian woman who lived on their floor assisted her, barking out commands to the rest of the family. Their mother endured a brutal fifteen-hour labor. The primal sounds that came from the basement that night still gave him nightmares. Frail and early by two weeks, no one expected Nicky to make it. Their father even mentioned how convenient it would be if the baby died on its own accord, so it was one less mouth to feed. Both Pat and Joseph took care of the child while their mother recovered. Seeing him after a beating broke Joseph from the inside out.

Defly picking him up, he bore the small boy to be with his brothers. Nicky was breathing, but it was hard to tell if he was unconscious or sleeping. Yet, once his back laid across the laps of Joe and Pat he instinctively cuddled into both of them, as though he knew he was protected.

No one spoke. Pat broke the deafening sound of the child's breathing,

"Do you think Dad knows we are sending him to school instead of having him work?"

Joseph jerked his head vigorously before responding. "No there is no way, I give Nicky money every day on his way home from school to give to Dad." He paused, "he's probably just getting old enough that Dad doesn't care anymore."

"Yeah," said Pat, grimly. "I wish I could go to school. Wasn't that the whole point of us coming here? A better future for us?"

"I don't even know anymore," said Joseph, "but if it was, maybe one of us will get out of this alive; one is better than none."

As they both held their brother closer and settled in for the long night ahead. Joseph whispered with vitriol under his breath.

“Voglio tagliargli la sua fottuta gola.”
“Me too,” replied Pat. “Me too.”



There was an unusual skip to his step today as Joseph made his way down the last turn onto Congress Street. He wasn't quite sure why. It had been a miserable day at the plant. Several of the machines had broken which set them behind production. The owners had made it quite clear how unhappy they were with their workers, threatening to dock pay or lay off people. Unbeknownst to them, the workers had just decided to join the local union. Maybe that's why he couldn't help but smile to himself – he knew that soon there wouldn't be someone who could hold any power over him. In a short time, he would be free.

The brisk Buffalo air stung his face as the colorful leaves fell to the ground. The snow would be coming in and soon the cold would make it impossible to walk to work. Salts on the road would wreak havoc on his prized Chevrolet, but that was a problem for the future.

He liked living in an Italian neighborhood in such a sizable city, though only a fraction of the size of New York City. It instilled in him a sense of community. Plus, you knew exactly where to find Mike after he had embarrassed you at the last Knights of Columbus meeting and give him a piece of your mind.

Even though he knew there was a home cooked dinner waiting for him; something about the cold autumn air caused him to crave pizza, hot wings, and a nice cold beer. Resisting temptation, he stopped in at the local bordello and picked up a soda as a treat for his young son.

“Hiya Steve,” he said to the man behind the counter.

“Hiya Joe! How you been you, old son of a gun?” replied the man with an overly jovial smile on his face matching his large beer belly.

“Oh, you know, same old, same old. At least we are on this side of the grass!” They chuckled that deep, full bodied laugh that only dads know how to make.

“Heard your youngest is going to St. Martin's this year, between that and St. Mary's how on earth are you guys managing it?”

“Oh, you know...” said Joe, skirting the issue, “...we manage! Say hi to the wife and kids for me!” he shouted as he exited.

Reaching the duplex, he could smell the distinct scent of his wife's home-made tomato sauce. The sound of her singing along to Sinatra filled the air. They had married young. She was the last of twelve siblings and needed to stop being reliant on her parents. He needed to get out and far away from the sins of his family. They had met three weeks prior to his proposal.

As he unbolted the front door, the music stopped abruptly and the unmistakable sound of his children's feet running down the stairs filled the room. By the time he turned around, they would all be seated and ready to eat. Walking

to the table, he set the soda down in front of his son. Pouring himself a glass of homemade dandelion wine before sitting he instructed his daughter to say grace.

“Bless us, Oh Lord, for these Thy gifts which we are about to receive from Thy bounty, Christ Our Lord. Amen.” They all chanted along.

Conversation was polite, but almost forced. It was strenuous relating to people he was supposed to be so close to but led a completely different life than he did. By the third glass of wine, he was relaxed and happier.

Joseph was scarcely finishing his after-dinner salad when he looked up and something caught his eye which altered the whole mood of the night. Without taking his eyes off of it, he walked over to the dishrack where a complete set of Corelle dishes laid. Washed, but not put away. A rage bubbled up within him. As he reached the rack, he gradually took the dishes out. One by one and flung them on the floor. He could hear the silence laced with fear behind him.

“Dad...” implored his eldest.

“Why,” CRASH, “aren’t,” CRASH, “they,” CRASH, “put,” CRASH, “away?” He bit the words as he spoke, they were measured and deliberate. He knew exactly how to produce the impression that he wanted. Looking up at his wife, she stared at him with vacant eyes, emotionless and empty. Didn’t she know how hard he worked to provide for this family? And what was she doing all day that she couldn’t complete a straightforward task?

A pulling on his lower pant leg made him turn around. It was his son, grasping him and crying. Joseph picked him up and thrust him off; he screamed louder. How ungrateful both his children were. They didn’t have to work, they got to play; they got to attend a private school, not a public one. Tuition took almost a third of their monthly income. Sometimes they could barely afford the roof over their heads. But having them raised in a non-Catholic environment had been out of the question.

“You two go to your room!” he barked at them, they were both sobbing now. “And you!” he said turning on his wife “I’ll deal with you later.”

He pushed open the back door and marched out, past the tomato plants, and into the garage. The anger was slowly subsiding. He turned on the radio to the local news with an overly aggressive punch of buttons. Joseph hated when he got like this, but he understood it as he got older. Working desperately hard, for long hours and everyone lets him down. Maybe if he hit his family like his father had, they would obey him. This brief thought made his stomach churn as the face of a fifteen-year-old Nicky flashed before his eyes. Joseph had left him with his father. But he had needed to get away. He needed freedom. He hadn’t seen him since.

Pouring himself a small glass of whiskey from a flask he kept under the workbench he lit a cigarette before plopping down on an old lawn chair.

“New layoffs at another factory in Buffalo, New York, this week. Analysts begin asking, ‘Is this the end of manufacturing in the city?’” With a sudden panic he unplugged the radio. It wasn’t helping.

Reaching under his chair he groped for yesterday’s paper. He was making an effort to read more, but it was slow going. Instead, he found a crudely drawn crayon image of the American flag crossed with the flag of Italy. Joe Jr. gave it to him last night. He had barely even noticed, he had been so tired and angry, the two feelings he was most intimately familiar with now.

As he stared at the drawing, it became obvious how different his children’s understanding of what it meant to be an Italian was. They displayed it as a badge of pride, as a fun party trick they could bring up to their friends. They didn’t know about the boat, or the docks, or the sacrifices that had been made to make that possible. They didn’t know what it was like to really be Italian. But then, he didn’t know what that meant anymore either. America had been the dream of his father. A land of opportunity, of promise, and of hope. They had suffered so much, and yet their livelihood was always in limbo. One minor change and they could topple over and end up in a poor house. That wasn’t the America he had been promised.

With bitter distaste in his mouth, he walked over to the metal waste-bin in the corner of the room and laid down the drawing. Flicking the end of his cigarette into the bin, he watched a stray ember burn a hole through it. He poured himself another glass of whiskey.

The radio in the house had been turned back on to try and bring a sense of normalcy to the children. This time it was Bing Crosby crooning.

He slumped in his chair, leaned back, and closed his eyes. Dreaming of being far away from here. In the place, he loved most. Of a beautiful life with no factories, or buckets, or Knights of Columbus. Somewhere with radiant skies, beaches, rolling pins, and jugs of fresh goat’s milk.