

BY THE AUTHOR OF
The Shoemaker's Wife

*Very
Valentine*

A NOVEL

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Very Valentine

—A Novel—

Adriana Trigiani

 HarperCollins e-books



*In memory of my grandfather,
Carlo Bonicelli,
a shoemaker*

Contents

- [1](#) Leonard's of Great Neck
- [2](#) 166 Perry Street
- [3](#) Greenwich Village
- [4](#) Gramercy Park
- [5](#) Forest Hills
- [6](#) The Carlyle Hotel
- [7](#) SoHo
- [8](#) Mott Street
- [9](#) The Hudson River
- [10](#) Arezzo
- [11](#) Lago Argento
- [12](#) The Isle of Capri
- [13](#) Da Costanzo
- [14](#) 58th and Fifth

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Other Books by Adriana Trigiani](#)

[Credits](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

Leonard's of Great Neck

I'M NOT THE PRETTY SISTER.

I'm not the smart sister either. I am the funny one. I've been called that for so long, for so many years, in fact, that all of my life I thought it was one word: *Funnyone*.

If I had to die, and believe me, I don't want to, but if I had to choose a location, I'd want to die right here in the ladies' lounge at Leonard's of Great Neck. It's the mirrors. I look slimsational, even in 3-D. I'm no scientist, but there's something about the slant of the full-length glass, the shimmer of the blue marble counters, and the golden light of the pavé chandeliers that creates an optical illusion, turning my reflection into a long, lean, pale pink swizzle stick.

This is my eighth reception (third as an attendant) at Leonard's La Dolce Vita, the formal name for our family's favorite Long Island wedding factory. Everyone I know has been married here, or, at least everyone I'm related to.

My sisters and I made our debut as flower girls in 1984 for our cousin Mary Theresa, who had more attendants on the dais than guests at the tables. Our cousin's wedding might have been a sacred exchange of vows between a man and a woman, but it was also a *show*, with costumes, choreography, and special lighting, making the bride the star and the groom the grip.

Mary T. considers herself Italian-American royalty, so she had the Knights of Columbus form a crossing guard for our entrance into the Starlight Venetian Room.

The knights were regal in their tuxedos, red sashes, black capes, and tricornered hats with the marabou plumes. I took my place behind the other girls in the procession as the band played "Nobody Does It Better," but I turned around to run away as the knights held up their swords to form a canopy. Aunt Feen grabbed me and gave me a shove. I closed my eyes, gripped my bouquet, and bolted under the blades like I was running for sane.

Despite my fear of sharp and clanging objects, I fell in love with Leonard's that day. It was my first Italian formal. I couldn't wait to grow up and emulate my mother and her friends who drank Harvey Wallbangers in cut-crystal tumblers while wearing silver sequins from head to toe. When I was nine years old, I thought Leonard's had class. Never mind that from the passing lane on Northern Boulevard it looks like a white stucco casino on the French Riviera by way of Long Island. For me, Leonard's was a House of Enchantments.

The La Dolce Vita experience begins when you pull up to the entrance. The wide circular driveway is a dead ringer for Jane Austen's Pemberley and also resembles the valet stand at Neiman Marcus, outside the Short Hills mall. This is the thing about Leonard's: everywhere you look, it reminds you of elegant places you have already been. The two-story picture windows are reminiscent of the Metropolitan Opera House, while the tiered fountain is strictly Trevi. You almost believe you're in the heart of Rome until you realize the cascading water is actually drowning out the traffic on I-495.

The landscaping is a marvel of botanical grooming, with boxwood sheared into long rectangles, low borders of yew, privet hedges in cropped ovals, and bayberry sculpted into twirly ice-cream-cone shapes. The manicured shrubs are set in beds of shiny river stones, an appropriate pre-motif to the ice sculptures that tower over the raw bar inside.

The exterior lights suggest the strip in Las Vegas, but it's far more tasteful here, as the bulbs are recessed, giving the place a low, twinkling glow. Topiaries shaped like crescent moons flank the entrance doors. Beneath them, low meatball bushes serve as a base for the birds-of-paradise, which pop out of the shrubs like cocktail umbrellas.

The band plays "Burning Down the House" as I take a moment to catch my breath in the ladies' lounge. I'm alone for the first time on my sister Jaclyn's wedding day and I like it. It's been a long one. I'm holding the tension of the entire family in the vertebrae of my neck. When I marry, I will elope to city hall because my bones can't take the pressure of another Roncalli wedding extravaganza. I'd miss the beer-battered shrimp and the pâté rillettes, but I'd survive. The months of planning this wedding nearly gave me an ulcer, and the actual execution bestowed on my right eye a pulsating tic that could only be soothed by holding a frozen teething ring I bogarted from cousin Kitty Calzetti's baby after the Nuptial Mass. Despite the agita, it's a wonderful day, because I'm happy for my baby sister, who I remember holding, like a Capodimonte rose, on the day she was born.

I hold my martini-shaped evening bag covered in sequins (the wedding-party gift from the bride) up to the mirror and say, "I'd like to thank Kleinfeld of Brooklyn, who knocked off Vera Wang to strapless perfection. And I'd like to thank Spanx, the girdle genius, who turned my pear shape into a surfboard." I move closer to the mirror and check my teeth. It ain't an Italian wedding without clams casino dusted in parsley flakes, and you know where those end up.

My professional makeup job provided (at half price) by the bride's best friend's sister-in-law, Nancy DeNoia, is really holding up. She did my face at around eight o'clock this morning, and it's now supper time but I still look fresh. "It's the powder. *Banane* by LeClerc," my older sister, Tess, said. And she knows: she was matte through two childbirths. We have the pictures to prove it.

This morning, my sisters, our mother, and I sat on folding chairs in front of Mom's Golden Age of Hollywood mirror in the bedroom of their Tudor in Forest Hills, pretty (almost) maids all in a row.

"Look at us," my mother said, lifting her face out of her neck, like a turtle. "We look like sisters."

"We *are* sisters," I reminded her as I looked at my actual sisters in the glass. My mother looked hurt. "...and you...you're our teen mother."

“Let’s not go *that* far.” My sixty-one-year-old mother, named Michelina after her father, Michael (everyone calls my mom “Mike”), with her heart-shaped face, wide-set brown eyes, and full lips glazed the color of a terra-cotta pot looked smugly into the mirror. My mother is the only woman I know who arrives fully made up for the makeup artist.

The Roncalli sisters, minus our eldest sibling and only brother, Alfred (aka the Pill), and Dad (called Dutch), are an open-all-night, girls-only club. We are best friends who share everything, with two exceptions: we never discuss our sex lives or bank accounts. We are bound together by tradition, secrets, and our mother’s flat iron.

The bond was secured when we were small. Mom created “Just Us Girls” field trips; she’d schlepp us to a Nettie Rosenstein retrospective at FIT, or to our first Broadway show, *’night, Mother*. As Mom hustled us out of the theater, she said, “Who knew she’d kill herself at the end?” concerned that she’d scarred us for life. We saw the world through Mom’s elegant opera glasses. Every year, the week before Christmas, she took us to the Palm Court at the Plaza Hotel for holiday tea. After we filled up on fluffy scones smothered in clotted cream and raspberry jam, we’d take our picture, in matching outfits, including Mom’s, of course, under the portrait of Eloise.

When Rosalie Signorelli Ciardullo started selling mineral powder makeup out of her trunk, guess who Mom volunteered as traveling models? Tess (dry), me (oily), and Jaclyn (sensitive). Mom modeled for the thirty to thirty-nine age group, never mind that she was fifty-three years old at the time.

“All great artistes begin with a blank canvas,” Nancy DeNoia announced as she applied pancake makeup the color of Cheerios to my forehead. I almost said, “Anyone who uses the word ‘artiste’ probably isn’t one,” but why argue with the woman who has the power to turn you into Cher on the reunion tour via the tools in her hand?

I kept quiet as she patted the sponge on my cheeks. “We’re losing the schnoz...,” Nancy said, exhaling her spearmint breath as she applied small, deliberate strokes to the bridge of my nose. It felt exactly like the firm pressure applied on an ice bag by Sister Mary Joseph of the MASH unit at Holy Agony when I was hit by a line-drive baseball in seventh-grade gym. For the record, Sister Mary J. said she never saw so much blood come out of one person’s head in her life, and she would know, as she had a hitch as a nurse in Vietnam.

Nancy DeAnnoying, like an architect, stood back and surveyed my face. “The nose is gone. Now we can salvage.”

I closed my eyes and pretended to meditate so Nancy might take the hint and stop the play-by-play of my crap features. She picked up a small brush, dipped it in ice water, and swirled it around on an inky chestnut brown square. I felt my eyebrows tingle as she painted on tiny hairs. I grew up on Madonna, and when she plucked, I plucked. Now I’m paying for it.

My face felt cold and painterly until Nancy dipped a Kabuki brush into the powder and buffed my skin in small circles, like the wax-finish feature at Andretti’s car wash. When she was done, I resembled a newborn puppy, all big, wet eyes and no nose.

In the ladies’ lounge, I’m taking one of many lipstick timeouts because I actually *eat* at

weddings. After weeks of dieting to fit into my dress, I figure I deserve a round of pink ladies, all the passed hors d'oeuvres I can throw back, and enough cannolis to leave a dark crater on the lazy Susan in the center of the Venetian table. I'm not worried. I'll work all this food off dancing to the long-play version of the *Electric Slide*. I fish the tube of lipstick out of my purse. There is nothing worse than bare lips with a suction-cup tattoo of plum pencil around the rim. I fill in between the lines where the color has faded.

My sisters and I have played a game since childhood; when we weren't dressing up as brides, we played Planning Our Funerals. It's not that my parents are morbid, or that anything particularly horrible happened to us, it's that we're Italian, and therefore, tit for tat, it's the law of the Roncalli universe: for every happy thing, there has to be a sad thing. Weddings are for young people and funerals are the weddings of old people. Both, I have learned, take long-term planning.

There are two unbreakable rules in our family. One is to attend all funerals of any known person with whom we have ever come in contact. This mandate includes people we are related to (blood relatives, family by marriage, and cousins of family by marriage) but also extends beyond close friends to encompass teachers, hairdressers, and doctors. Any professional person who has rendered an opinion or given a diagnosis of a personal nature makes the cut. There is a special category for those who deliver, including "Uncle Larry," our UPS man who went quickly on a Saturday morning in 1983. Mom pulled us out of school the following Monday to drive us to his funeral in Manhasset. "Respect" she said to us at the time, but we knew the real reason. She just likes to get dressed up.

The second rule of the Roncalli family is to attend all weddings and dance with anyone that asks you, including icky cousin Paulie who was kicked out of Arthur Murray for groping the instructor (the case was settled out of court).

There's a third rule: Never acknowledge Mom's 1966 nose job. Never mind that her remodeled nose is a dead ringer for Annette Funicello's, while we, her biological children, have the profiles of Marty Feldman. "No one will ever guess...unless you tell them," my mother warned us. "And if anyone asks, you simply say that your father's nasal gene was dominant."

"There you are!" My mother bursts into the lounge like a frapped tangerine, all chiffon and feathers, as though someone stuffed her ensemble into the blender and hit Crush. "Aren't these mirrors amazing?" Mom turns away from the mirror and then looks over her shoulder to check the back of her dress. Satisfied, she says, "I'm a sylph. Don't let anybody tell you otherwise, Jenny Craig works. How's your table?"

"The worst."

"Oh, come on. You're at the Friends' table. You're supposed to"—and I hate when she does this but she does it anyway, makes two fists and egg-beats them—"liven things up."

"Mom, please."

"That toxic attitude is holding you back. It's spilling out of you like offshore oil." My mother looks at me as she applies her lipstick without looking in the mirror. She snaps the silver cylinder shut. "You should have brought a date if you didn't want every couple we know offering up their single sons to you like meatball skewers."

“The Delboccios want to set me up with Frank.” I lean against the wall and cross my arms because God knows I can’t actually sit down in this dress. The Spanx would crush my spleen.—

“Fabulous news! See, it was kismet to seat you at the Friends’ table.”

“Ma, Frank is gay.”

“Oh, you girls. You use that gay card every chance you get. So what if the man’s forty-three and never married and takes his mother’s entire mah-jongg club to the islands every spring? That doesn’t automatically mean he’s gay. Maybe he’s just a straight man who happens to smell good, knows how to dress, and talks to old people like they matter. Do me a favor. Date Frank. Go dancing! Go to museums! Restaurants! You’ll be dressed up and out on the town and having fun with a good-looking fella who knows how to treat a woman! *Party hearty*—now that’s the true meaning of the word *gay*.”

Mom looks at me, and whatever expression she sees on my face melts her heart, and it has since I can remember. She’s on my side and I am always aware of that. “You have so much to offer, Valentine. I don’t want you to lose out. You’re a winner! You’re funny!” My mother gives me a big hug. “Now, let me look at you.” Mom puts her hands on my face. “You’re a total original. Your big, beautiful brown eyes are set just far enough apart. Your lips, thank God, take after my side of the family. The Roncalli lips are so thin they need Velcro to chew. And your nose, despite what Nancy said today—”

“Ma, I’m okay.”

“She was rude. But I bit my tongue because there are two people you should never argue with: makeup artists and plumbers. Either can ruin you. And your nose is perfect. You’ve got a sleek bridge which is lovely in profile, and it’s straight, whereas mine had a bump.”

I’m stunned that my mother refers to The Operation. “It did?” I’ve never even seen her old nose. There’s only one photo of Mom’s face with the old nose in existence, but it’s a group shot of her high school French Club and her head is so small, it’s hard to see.

“Oh yes, there was a hideous bump. But you know, I looked at that bump for exactly what it was. A glitch I could fix. There are things in this life that you can fix. So fix them, then move on.”

“Are you saying I need a nose job?”

“I wouldn’t touch it. Plus, a tall person can carry a nose. So be grateful that you got all the tall in the family.”

“Thanks, Ma.” In the general population, five foot eight is hardly tall, but in my family, I’m a giant redwood.

Mom opens up her sequined martini purse and takes out an atomizer of Dolce & Gabbana red cardamom and sprays it on the back of her neck. “Want some?” she offers.

“Nah. I think I’ll go with my natural musk at the Friends’ table.”

Mom raises her arm high and spritzes above her hair, a croissant-shaped upsweep dotted with

coral sequins, which, depending upon your latitude and longitude under the dance floor lights, could blind you for life.

When I was little I'd watch her transform in front of the mirror before a night out with Dad. Efficient and organized, she stood at her makeup table and surveyed her tools. She'd snap open compacts, unscrew the tops off tubes, and shake vials. Then she would think as she twisted the eyeliner pencil in the sharpener. Eventually, a waxy chocolate brown S would fall into the wastebasket. She'd take the pencil and smudge it under her eye in preparation for the broad strokes. She would select a brush and dip it into a palette of powder, and then, as if she were Michelangelo painting the eyelash of a saint on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, she'd make tiny brushstrokes on her brow bone.

“Is something wrong, Valentine?”

“No. I just love you. That's all.”

“I can't wait—,” my mother begins, then stops to think. “You know what, if you're my only child who remains single until old age, I will stand proudly with you all the days of your life. *If that's what you want.*”

This might be what I like most about her. Mom believes being single is an infirmity, the equivalent of missing a hand, but she never makes me feel I have to agree with her. “Mom, I'm happy.”

“You could be happier.”

“I guess that's true.”

“Aha!” She points her finger at me. “You can reinvent your life on your own terms. You don't have to live with my mother and make shoes.”

“I love my job and I love where I live.”

“I'll never understand it. All I ever wanted to do was move away. And I never wanted to be a shoemaker.”

Mom and I walk arm in arm back into the reception, looking like two asteroids, one pink, the other bright orange, skimming through this Tiepolo-blue sky. Then I realize that's not why the guests are watching us. It must look like I'm holding my mother up—therefore she's either had too much to drink or, God forbid, she's old enough to need assistance. I can practically hear the gears in my mother's brain spin as this realization dawns on her, too. Mom lets go of my arm with a flourish, and does a full 360-degree pirouette in the center of the empty dance floor. I bow from the waist as though we planned the move. Mom gives me a youthful wave as she sashays over to the Parents' table, leaving me to return to the tyranny of the Friends.

My sister's brand-new mother-in-law, Mrs. McAdoo, wears a fussy corsage of purple roses, which hangs off her lilac crepe dress like a ruby red tire. Mrs. McAdoo's pale skin blends into her hair, cut to her chin in a simple bob. My mother would never allow a strand of white hair on her head

The only gray you will ever find in direct proximity to my mother's person is the terrazzo floor in the foyer of our family home. ~~"Matrons belong in prisons! Besides, I don't believe in going gray,"~~ my mother would say. "It's an advertisement for death. Go gray and you might as well say"—as she beckons off in the distance—"come and get me, Grim Reaper!" No, Mom is rich sable brown, now and forever (or for however long L'Oréal makes it).

I look around the room, 312 guests strong. Last night they were a bunch of Post-its on a board in my mom's kitchen, and today, they're at the table they have earned in our version of Italian-American hierarchy. First tier: Parents, Close Friends, Professionals, Coworkers, Cousins, Kiddies. Second tier: In-laws. And third: the Island (relatives we aren't speaking to because something bad went down, never mind that we don't remember what); Rude (late responders); and Dementia (don't ask).

I must look lonely on the dance floor. Why didn't I bring a date? Gabriel offered, but I didn't want him to feel obligated to flap to the chicken dance with cousin Violet Ruggiero in this heat. How can it be that out of all the people in this room, I remain the only single person under forty? Sensing the inert shame, my brother, Alfred, takes my hand as the music starts. It's a little weird to waltz with your only brother, with whom you share a strained relationship, to "Can You Feel the Love Tonight," but I make the best of it. He is, after all, a dance partner, even if he is a blood relative. We take what we can get. "Thanks, Alfred."

"I'm dancing with all of my sisters," he says, as if he's ticking off a to-do list for the mechanic Midas mufflers.

We sway for a few moments. I have a hard time making conversation with my brother. "You know why God invented brothers in Italian families?"

He takes the bait. "Why?"

"Because He knew that the single sisters needed someone to dance with at weddings."

"You'd better come up with a better joke for your toast."

He's right, and I'm not happy about it. My brother is thirty-nine years old, but I don't see a middle-aged father of two, I only see the persnickety boy who made straight A's and had no friends in school. The only time his cranky mood would lift was when the cleaning lady came on Thursdays and he'd help her scrub the tile. This was when Alfred was the happiest—when he had a brush in his hand and ammonia in a bucket.

Alfred still has the same cowlick on the crown of his head and the same serious countenance of his youth. He also has Mom's old nose and the thin upper lip of Dad's side of the family. He doesn't trust anyone, including family, and he can talk for hours about the evils of the Media and the Government. Alfred is at the ready with a doomsday report any day of the week. He's the first to call when a house is burning live on New York 1 and the first to send mass e-mails when the bedbug infestation on the East Coast is announced. He's also an expert on all diseases that run in families of Mediterranean descent (autoimmune disorders are his specialty). We spent last Christmas dinner listening to his tutorial on prediabetes, which really made the baba au rhums go down smoothly.

"How's Gram doing?" he asks.

I look over at our grandmother, my mother's mother, Teodora Angelini, who got stuck at the Dementia table so she might sit with her cousins and her last living sister, my great-aunt Feen. While Gram's peers are hunched over their plates, sorting through the walnuts on top of the salad, she sits upright, with military posture. My grandmother is the lone red rose in a garden of gray bramble.

With her bright red lipstick, two-piece red linen summer suit, coiffed white hair, and large octagon-framed glasses in jet black tortoise, she looks like a gracious Upper East Side lady who has never worked a day in her life. The truth is, the only thing she has in common with those society matrons is her tailored suit. Gram is a working woman who owns her own business. We've made custom wedding shoes in Greenwich Village since 1903. "Gram is doing great," I tell him.

"She can hardly walk," Alfred says.

"She needs knee replacements," I tell him.

"She needs more than that."

"Alfred. Except for her knees, she's in excellent shape."

"Everything is always rosy with you," Alfred sighs. "You're in denial. Gram is almost eighty years old and she's slowing down."

"That's ridiculous. I live with her. She runs rings around me."

"That wouldn't be hard."

And there it is. The Jab. I don't want to fight at my sister's wedding, so I let go of him, but he goes on.

"Gram won't be around forever. She should retire and enjoy the kids. There's a nice assisted-living place out by us."

"She loves the city. She'd die in the suburbs."

"I'm the only person in this family who can face the truth. She needs to retire. I'm willing to buy her a condo."

"Aren't you generous?"

"I'm not thinking about myself."

"Then it would be the first time, Alfred."

The law of the sibling jungle springs into effect. Alfred's tone, the look on my face, and the fact that we've stopped dancing sends a silent alert out to my sisters. Tess, sensing a fight, has come to the edge of the dance floor and locks eyes with me. She shoots me the *Need me?* look.

"Thanks for the dance." I turn my back on Alfred to make my way to the Friends' table, which is now empty because everyone over the age of sixty stampedes the dance floor for an uptempo version

of “After the Lovin’.”

I squeeze past Mom and Dad in the stampede. “It’s our song!” Mom chirps as she holds Dad’s hand high in the air, like a May Day ribbon. They pull each other close as Mom plants her cheek on Dad’s. They look like Siamese twins joined at the blush line. Engelbert Humperdinck used to be my mother’s favorite singer, until Andrea Bocelli provided the first emotional catharsis of her life. She listens to Bocelli in the car, drives around Queens, and weeps. Through her tears, she says, “I don’t need therapy because Andrea taps my grief.”

I sit down at the empty Friends’ table, pick up my fork, and stab my salad. I’ve lost my appetite. I put the fork down and survey the crowded dance floor, which, when I squint, looks like a pointillist painting of sequins, jet beads, and Swarovski crystals on a canvas of lamé.

“What did Alfred say to you?” Tess says, slipping into the chair next to me. Tess, my older sister by a year and a half, is a busty brunette with no hips. The bridesmaid gown gives her the shape of a champagne glass. Despite her bombshell physique, she is the brainiest of the three sisters, perhaps because Alfred used her as his flash-card moderator from the time she was four years old. Tess has Mom’s heart-shaped face, and the second best nose in the family. Her wavy black hair matches eyelashes so thick she never has to wear mascara.

“He implied I’m a loser.” I yank up the front of my dress like I’m pulling a full Hefty bag out of a trash can.

“He told me that I’m a bad mother. He thinks I let Charisma and Chiara run wild.”

I look over at the Venetian table, where seven-year-old Charisma pokes a hole in a cannoli and hands it to five-year-old Chiara, who blows out the filling. Tess rolls her eyes. “It’s a party. Let them have some fun.”

“Alfred wants Gram to retire.”

“He’s on a campaign.” Tess checks her lipstick in the butter knife. “You know, those assisted-living places can be really nice.”

“Don’t tell me you agree with him!”

“Hey, I’m on your side,” Tess says gently.

“Every time Alfred brings it up, it’s like he stabs me.”

“That’s because you care about Gram.” Tess dips the knife in a butter rosette, then spreads it on what remains of Bob Silverstein’s dinner roll. “And the shoe company is your livelihood.” My sister looks weary, which tells me she had the same discussion with Alfred and got nowhere.

I don’t want to ruin the reception, so I change the subject. “How’s your table?”

“Why did Ma spread us out like UN peacekeepers? Doesn’t she get that we actually *like* each other and want to sit together? Okay, maybe put Alfred and Clickety Click at the Stuck-up table—”

“Call her Pamela. You want an in-law war?” I look around to make certain there aren’t any in the area. Alfred has been married to Pamela for thirteen years. She’s four feet eleven and wears five-inch stilettos, even at the beach and, rumor had it, during labor. We named her Clickety Click because that’s the sound her heels make when she walks in rapid little steps. “The petite inherit the earth. Nothing is more alluring to a man than a woman who can fit in his wallet.”

“I’d love to be tall like you,” Tess says supportively. “At least you have gusto. Pam has no gusto. Anyhow, they’re completely suited for each other. Alfred is shut down and Clickety is positively bloodless. This spoon”—Tess holds it up—“has more personality.”

Tess looks over at Charisma and Chiara, who have taken black olives out of the crudité dishes and placed them over their eyes. The girls laugh as the olives roll off their faces and onto the floor. Tess motions for them to stop. The girls scamper off. Tess waves to her husband, Charlie, to watch the girls. He’s stuck at the Rude table listening to the guests gripe about their lousy seats near the kitchen.

“Look at Alfred’s boys,” I tell Tess.

Our nephews, Alfred Junior and Rocco, look like miniature bankers with their bow ties and the crisp napkins on their laps.

“I heard Pamela sent them to the Good Manners and Me class at Our Lady of Mercy. So well behaved.” Tess sighs.

“Do they have a choice?” I yank up the front of my gown again. I check my watch. It feels like it’s been fifteen years between the soup and the salad. “Mr. Delboccio put his hand on my ass.”

“Disgusting,” says Tess.

“To tell you the truth, with the Spanx on, I couldn’t even feel it. I could sit on a hot griddle and wouldn’t know it.”

“So how do you know he took a feel?”

“The look on Mrs. Delboccio’s face. I thought she was going to pick up the candelabra and beat him.”

“He probably had too much to drink. And it’s so hot out. The liquor just goes right to the brain and pickles it. Promise me you’ll get married in a blizzard.”

“I promise. I also promise to get married at city hall on a Tuesday.”

“C’mon, you’d miss out on all of this.” Tess turns in her chair and looks out at the sea of our relatives. She turns back around. “Okay, city hall is fine. We’ll wear suits. Day suits and wrist corsages.”

The tuxedoed waitstaff pours out of the kitchen and through the galley doors like chocolate chips into cake batter. With one hand, they carry enormous silver trays loaded with plates covered in metal hats. With their other hand, they snap open metal racks and place the trays on top of them. In quick succession, dinner plates filled with succulent beef tenderloin, a delicate purse of whipped potatoes,

and spears of fresh asparagus are placed on the table. At the sight of the food delivery, the dance floor empties instantly. The guests return to their tables like a football team heading for the locker room at halftime. Tess gets up. "Gotta go. It's the entrée."

The Friends take their seats and nod approvingly at the plates. The tenderloin is pricey, thus demonstrating a level of opulence, which Italian Americans appreciate more than the dissolution of the cold war and tubes of anchovy paste on demand.

"So, how's it going at the shoe shop?" Ed Delboccio asks. His bald head looks like the sterling-silver platter hats the waiters have stacked in the corner. "Tell me this. Does anybody even want handmade shoes anymore?"

"Absolutely." I try not to snap, but I must have since everyone at the table looks up at me.

"Don't take offense," Mr. Delboccio says and smiles. "It's just a query for discussion's sake. Why would anybody order custom-made shoes when you can buy them cheap at those outlet malls? Shirley here is a regular at those warehouse sales. KGB—"

"DSW," his wife corrects him.

"Whatever. The point is, I've saved a lot of wampum at those discount joints, believe me."

Mrs. Delboccio nudges him. "For God's sake, Ed, it's a different thing altogether. You don't buy shoes from Valentine like you buy them from Payless. They're deluxe. And Valentine works with Teodora, she's..." She waves her fork at me, searching for a word.

"She's a master and I'm her apprentice."

"You take care of your grandmother, too, don't you?" Mrs. Delboccio says.

"She takes care of herself."

"But you live with her, which is so nice. You're giving up your freedom to take care of Teodora. That's very generous." Mrs. Delboccio smiles, her lips pulled tight, like the zipper on a change purse. Her magenta hair is piled high on her head and sprayed to a shiny finish. She adjusts her bold *stampato* gold necklace. Her purple nails match her gown, which matches her shoes.

"In this day and age, it's rare to find a kid who will take care of an old person," Mr. Delboccio says, leaning toward me and breathing. His breath is a mix of cinnamon and headcheese. Not awful, just refrigerated. "That's why I'm saving up. I'm going for one of those assisted-living condos. I'm gonna have to pay for what my parents and Shirl's here got for free. When the time comes, God forbid, I don't think our kids will take us in."

Mrs. Delboccio shoots him a look.

"Well, they wouldn't, Shirl. Face it." Mr. Delboccio takes his knife and pushes some potato onto the meat already on his fork and pops it into his mouth. "They've got their own lives. It's not like our generation. We took in all family members, regardless of their mental status. I can't see our kids doing the same."

“Why did you become a shoemaker?” Mrs. La Vaglio asks. She’s a tiny blonde with the Linda Evans haircut from *Dynasty*. Still, ~~The La Vaglios live in Ohio, so I guess my story didn’t spread to the Midwest.~~

“I was teaching high school English in Queens—,” I begin.

“And then you had that bad breakup with your boyfriend. How many years did you go with him?” she interrupts. I guess my story seeped into Ohio after all.

“College and then some.” I’m not going to give these people a timeline. They’d brand an *L* for Loser on my forehead with the olive paste.

“Your first love,” Mrs. Delboccio says and looks at her husband. “Ed and I have the same story, except we have a different ending. I met him when I was eighteen. We were married at twenty-four. And here we are.”

“You’re an inspiration to all of us,” I say, oversalting my salad.

“Thank you,” Shirley says smugly.

“At the time, your mother was so worried about you.” Sue Silverstein reaches over and pats my hand.

“There’s nothing to worry about. I love the twists and turns my life has taken.” This is lovely. When my parents’ friends have too much to drink, they tell me things my mother won’t.

“A positive attitude is everything,” Max Silverstein says, shaking his fork at me.

“You know, our son Frank is totally available.” Mrs. Delboccio sips her wine. “He’s not gay,” she says quickly. “He’s just picky.”

“Well, I’m looking for picky.” I force a smile.

Mrs. Delboccio squeezes her husband’s thigh under the table so he’ll remember that I said something positive about Frank.

“How long ago were you dumped?” Mr. Delboccio asks.

“Ed!” his wife shrieks.

“Three years,” I mumble.

Mr. Delboccio whistles low. “Three years of your prime time.”

“Are you seeing anyone now?” Mrs. La Vaglio asks.

“If she was, she’d have brought him to the wedding.” Mrs. Delboccio talks about me as if the wine I’m guzzling is a magic potion that has made me invisible.

“She could get a date. Look at her.” Mr. Delboccio looks at my breasts as though they are two exotic fish swimming in opposite directions in a tank. “She must want to fly solo.”

“Let’s not worry about me,” I say, gritting my teeth. “I’m fine.”

“Nobody said you weren’t.” Mr. Delboccio finishes his bourbon and iced tea and clonks the glass down on the table like an ax. I look around to the waitstaff. Somebody cut this guy off, will you? The waiter interprets my signal and brings a gravy boat of *jus* instead. Mr. Delboccio takes it and douses what’s left of his meat. “Valentine, here’s the thing. As a woman, you got a window. A window of opportunity where you got the face and the figure and the pep to attract a man. Ergo, you got to grab a guy while the window is open, because once it closes, bam, you’ve lost your chance, and you’re in an airless closet. Alone. Okay? Oxygen is cut off. No man can survive in there. Got it? Tick. Tock. A man can always find a woman, but a woman can’t always find a man.”

“Ed, no more bourbon for you.” Mrs. Delboccio moves his glass. She looks at me apologetically. “Valentine has a lot of life in front of her.”

“I never said that she didn’t. But you remember my sister Madeline, who moved in with Ma when Ma got the brain tumor? My poor mother afflicted with a tension headache that turned into a cancerous mass overnight. Anyhow, how old was Mad back then? Thirty at the most. She moved in, took care of Ma until she died, may she rest in peace, and then Madeline stayed, where was she gonna go? She was the spinster aunt.” Ed looks for his roll to butter. He’s already eaten it so he reaches over and takes his wife’s. “Every Italian family has one of you.”

I open my mouth to disagree, but no words come out. Maybe he’s right. I imagine my future in an old-folks’ home for single women. The TV room in the Roncalli Home for Singles would have the heads of Phyllis Diller, Joan Rivers, and Susie Essman mounted over the fireplace. Big-game catches for girls who deliver big laughs. The way this evening is going, I may have to reserve my room sooner than I thought.

“Madeline was a saint. She took the burden off the rest of us. Of course, we were raising children and had our own lives,” Mrs. Delboccio says, smoothing the napkin in her lap.

“Being single *is* a life,” Mrs. La Vaglio pipes up.

The table falls to dead silence as the Friends saw their meat. I look down at my watch. Anyone who believes time flies should come and sit at the Friends’ table where the main course has lasted longer than the Peloponnesian War. I’d do just about anything to be stuck at the Rude table right now.

Mr. Delboccio leans over, practically peering down my gown. “God meant for man and woman to pair off.” I lean back and pull my dinner napkin up over my bodice and around my neck like a dickey.

“How many shoes do you make a year?” Mr. Silverstein wants to know, God bless him.

“Last year we made close to three thousand pairs.”

“How big is the staff?”

“Three full-time and four part-time.”

~~“Wow, that’s a pretty healthy operation.” Mr. Silverstein smiles approvingly.~~

The band plays the opening riff of “Good Vibrations”; the Friends drop their knives and forks. “Hi-yo, it’s the Beach Boys medley!” Mr. Silverstein announces. They get up; the women adjust the waists, hips, and rears of their dresses, then head to the dance floor with the husbands in tow.

I stretch out at the empty table and put my feet up. Tess slips into the seat next to me as Dad deposits Aunt Feen at the Dementia table. Dad surveys the room and then walks toward us at a clip. He’s only five feet six but well proportioned, so he seems taller. He has a thick head of salt-and-pepper hair, the prominent Roncalli nose, and the tense lips of his people.

“Jesus crimanee, I’m broiling.” Dad adjusts his bow tie as though it’s a dial on an air conditioner. “I just took Aunt Feen out for a cigarette and I thought she was gonna have a stroke.” Dad sits down next to Tess. “You know she still smokes a pack a day? Her lungs must look like a spaghetti strainer. How you girls holding up?”

“Great,” we lie.

“Your mother wants me to sing ‘Butterfly Kisses’ to your sister, but I don’t know the song at all.”

“Cut off her liquor. Or else she’ll sing ‘You Gotta Get a Gimmick’ from *Gypsy* like she did at your twenty-fifth,” Tess says.

“She had sciatica for months afterward,” my father says and nods, remembering.

“Don’t try and sing, Dad. Tell them to play the CD and you can dance with Jaclyn instead,” I suggest.

“That’s what I said, but you know your mother, she thinks weddings are an opportunity to hold auditions for *American Idol*. I work for the parks department, not Simon Cowell. Any Roncalli, Angelini, or Coo-cootz off the street is expected to get up there and sing. Any minute my brother’s gonna get up and perform the first act of *Man of La Mancha*. Trust me. He’s one gin and tonic away from ‘The Impossible Dream.’”

Our sister Jaclyn is breathtaking in a simple strapless bridal gown with a fluffy tulle skirt. Her tiny waist twists as she threads through the tables looking like an electric-mixer beater dripping with white frosting.

Mom suggested that Jaclyn’s white peau de soie bodice be piped with an iridescent mint-colored ribbon to bring out her green eyes. It was a brilliant move. Gram made Jaclyn a beautiful pair of leather pumps in petal green. I buffed the leather until the green was almost completely rubbed away leaving only a hint of antiqued patina. From head to toe, my baby sister glitters like a citrine.

Jaclyn plops down in Mrs. La Vaglio’s chair. She is a true beauty, her delicate features in perfect proportion, framed by her shiny black curls. “Was your meat tough?”

“No, no, no,” Dad, Tess, and I chime.

“I needed a chainsaw on my filet.” Jaclyn fans herself with the engraved menu card. “Valentine, you’re gonna have to kill with the bridal toast.”

“No pressure here,” Tess says wryly as she surveys the guests.

“Do me a favor. Make sure everybody at Gram’s table has their Miracle-Ears turned on.” I feel a sweat bead on my forehead.

“Don’t let this bother you, but my mother-in-law hates everything.” Jaclyn takes a sip of my ice water, then puts the glass against her cheek. “Always with the comments. Like the Irish know how to tell a funny toast. Please.”

Tess and I look at each other. The Irish invented the toast, not to mention the well-told story, and they happen to be very good at them.

“Watch yourself, Jac. Mrs. McAdoo is family now,” Dad says. “Be kind. The most important thing in life is getting along with other people. Without other people, you’re alone. And when you’re alone, you’re alone.” My father whisks his index finger on the inside of his shirt collar like he’s getting the last bit of face cream out of a jar.

“Everything will work out. It usually does,” says me, the voice of optimism. Meanwhile, I’m biting my lip so hard, it’s giving me a headache.

“Valerie! You’re on!” The bandleader points to me.

“Valentine!” Tess and Jaclyn shout to correct him.

“Whatever!” He waves the microphone at me like a drumstick.

I look across the dance floor. The best man is by the drum set chugging a fuzzy navel with a group of frat boys.

“Knock ’em dead!” Dad says cheerfully. Jaclyn and Tess give me a thumbs-up with smiles peeled so wide open, they look like they’re having their teeth bleached. I look over at Alfred, who is giving a dissertation on gluten allergies to the Cousins’ table.

“Good evening, family and friends.” I slip the microphone into its stand and adjust the height. I’m five feet eleven in these three-inch heels. I’m not sure, but I may be taller than the groom. I know for certain I’m taller than anyone at the Friends’ table due to spinal disk collapse and hipbone deterioration, which they discussed freely during the soup course.

The chatter in the room dulls to a few lone voices, then suddenly falls to silence. The only sound I hear is the whistle between Aunt Feen’s dentures and her gums as she breathes. “I’m Valentine Roncalli, a sister of the bride.”

“We know who you are!” Lorraine Pinuccia shouts from the remote Island table, so far away her wave resembles a distress signal.

Tess rises up out of her chair slightly and shoots Pinooch a dirty look. I look over at my mother,

who has a smile of support plastered to her face identical to the one she had when I blew my line as the “Gloria in Excelsis Deo” angel in the kindergarten Christmas pageant in 1980. “You can’t help me now, Ma,” I want to shout to her, but she looks embalmed.

“Well, thank you, Cousin Pinooch. You know we’re now the Roncalli-McAdoo family and maybe the McAdoos haven’t met us all yet,” I explain. It could be the sweat in my eyes, but I think Boyd McAdoo, the thrice-divorced electrician brother of my new brother-in-law is leering at me, another reason to cut this short. “God was in his heaven,” I begin, “and decided that it was time to create a country...he wanted to create a great country, with gorgeous vineyards, and lush fields, and glorious sunsets—”

“The first country!” My father bellows as he makes a number one in the air with his pointer finger.

“Dad. Please. You might want to save your upper register for ‘Butterfly Kisses.’” I dive back into the story. “God knew He wanted to call it Italy.” My dad’s brother, the eternally inappropriate Uncle Sal, yanks a rose from the centerpiece at the Parents’ table and stands, waving it like a flag. “*Viva Italia sempre!*” he cries.

Mr. McAdoo stands and yanks another rose from the centerpiece. “To the Emerald Isle!” he counters.

“E pluribus pizzazz!” my mother heckles.

“To the world!” I raise my arm high in the air to include all global humanity.

Tess applauds. Alone. “Anyhow...,” I continue, “God had to fill Italy with people, and He wondered, ‘Shall I create woman first? Or shall I create man first?’ The debate went on for several months until He decided. ‘I shall create women first so they can have dinner ready for the men.’”

Gram, Tess, Jaclyn, Mom, and Dad wait a beat then look around, and finally, in solidarity, they force their laughs. The remaining guests sit in a blue pool of silence lit by low votive candles, which makes them look like out-of-work circus performers in a Fellini movie.

“All right then.” I regroup. “Do you know why God created brothers in Italian families? Because he knew their single sisters needed somebody to dance with at weddings.” The self-deprecating humor goes over worse than the pointed joke. I am dying up here. It’s so quiet in this room, I can hear the ice melt in Len Scatizzi’s rum and Coke.

Mr. Delboccio, the fanny feeler, shouts, “I asked you to dance, Valentine.”

“She said her feet hurt,” his wife pipes up. “Of course, why would a shoemaker’s feet hurt? Doesn’t make sense.”

“Regardless, I’m not gonna force,” Mr. Delboccio retorts.

“You should never force,” Mrs. Delboccio snipes back.

“Okay, you two. Let me hang up this routine so you can get back out on the floor and show us

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