

PROLOGUE - NANA ROSE

Years ago, when I got into business school, wanting to share the news, I called my grandmother Rose. I was using an old black dial up phone I'd taken from a garbage bin and hooked up the previous week. I had cleaned it with comet and then soap and water and then sprayed it with Opium perfume. It still smelled funky. I lay in my tenement railroad flat in my bunk bed, the one I'd hit my head on jumping up and down when I'd gotten the news. A beige envelope had arrived, the acceptance letter on Basildon Bond paper with a watermark. No one in my Italian trailer park family ever wrote on paper like that.

I was staring at the ceiling, which was only a foot or two away, rolling about, pulling on the phone cord. "I got into business school, Nana."

There was a long pause, the kind that happens between grandmothers and granddaughters when ancestors turn in their graves and their kin can practically feel the dirt. "Busy school – I know." She pouted. "Always busy."

I could hear her pulling her apron on, the flop flop flip of her slippers on the kitchen tiles. "Nana?" When my grandmother was upset she scurried away to the kitchen. I did not know if her cord went that far.

"When you gonna come and visit me?" She lamented, more childlike than demanding. Her gravelly voice sounded disapproval of all things that kept her granddaughter away. "I no see-a you anymore!" Grandmothers invented seduction. It was the sort of thing they got certification for before having children who would have children. They even got plaques they could hang on their walls or, more effectively, hide in the extremis of their closets: "Ability to Manipulate and Seduce 101: Grade A+"

“Soon, I’ll come soon.” I played with the lone ear of my stuffed lamby-bear, reduced to the state of a 10-year old. I tried again. “I got into Harvard Business School, Nana. It’s a good school.” I shredded lamby-bear’s ear.

There was a clink of pans, Nana caught in mid-lasagna. There was always lasagna to prepare. “Busy school. I know! Bah!” Nana -- either Nana -- would by now have the phone tucked under her chin, lips pinched with prayer, and eyes rolled up to Christ for the miracle of her granddaughter’s return.

I poked at the holes that were lamby-bear’s eyes. She was nearly as old as I was. I had brought her with me to my first apartment in the big city, which Nana thought was far away enough. I had been living on my own for two years. “Come on, Nana. Please don’t be that way.”

“And where is this busy school?” Nana knew the school was not in Bellerose, where she had her little house and vegetable garden. Bellerose didn’t have a fire or police department or even a main street with stores. Bellerose, which meant beautiful rose, was anything but beautiful. Bellrose was lucky to have a Burger King and a nice name. More clanking. More clinking of pans. The sound of pearls and beads – probably fagioli beans, hard, hitting the bottom of the pasta pot. Running water. This meant minestrone soup, plus lasagna, a double dose of grandmother upset-ness.

“It’s in Boston.”

“Boston?” Nana’s lips pursed.

“Yes, Nana, Boston.”

A moment of eerie quiet. I imagined her standing straight up at this point, wooden spoon and pots in hand. “Aunt Lucinda, she live in Boston. Thatsa far away.”

“Uh... yes.”

“Aaaaiieeee!!! Boston!” The clanking and clattering resumed, accompanied by the slamming of cabinets, as Nana scuttled around the room.

“I mean, no! It’s not so far – ” I sat straight up in the bed hitting my head on the ceiling.

“Madre di Jesu! Maria di Santa Marie!” Nana was crying, pots and pans clacking like castanets. Perhaps she banged them purposefully overhead. “Why, why, why you gotta go to Boston?”

“But it’s a good school, Nana. It’s the Harvard Business --”

Nana spat back. “We gotta a busy school here. Right around the corner.” She tapped her foot, impatient, insistent, flip, flop, flip, flop, flap.

“That’s a community college, Nana.”

“What? Now, you no like-a the community?” The clinking and clanking continued, with a triumphant edge. “You gettin’ too big for your bridge.” She was a whirlwind now, opening and pouring from cans, tossing in cascades of cut vegetables, the sounds grown suddenly soft.

“No, Nana, that’s not that.” Groaning, I flung myself back down on the bed. “Those schools don’t teach what they teach at the Harvard Business School.”

“Like-a-what? What they teach that your Nana no can teach?”

I was flummoxed. “Well, things... like – ”

“Ooooh! I get it.” She positively sang out. “You gonna be a doctor!” Nana liked this. There was the hum of rapid stirring. “My granddaughter going to be a doctor!” Nana loved this, her granddaughter, Dr. Kil-dame. “I like-a that.”

“No, Nana, I’m not gonna be a doctor.” I pulled out a piece of my hair and spilt the end right up to the hair shank.

“Whatsa matter you? Why not?”

“It’s Harvard Business School, Nana, they don’t make doctors.”

“Unbelieve!” Bang. Clank. Clatter. “Why you gotta go this stupid school.”

“It’s not stupid! It’s the Harvard Bus--”

“Oooh, ho ho! Now I see!” she cut me off. “You make-a me crazy, you,” she went on. “Your Nana, she understand these things.”

“You do?” I chewed on my hair, like I did in kindergarten.

“You no foola me. Aiiiiieeee! My granddaughter -- she gonna marry a doctor!”

“Uh. Nooo.”

“Meet a doctor?” She was adding onion, now. And bitter herbs.

“They don’t make doctors at the Harvard Business --”

“Date a doctor?”

“NO, Nana!” I actually yelled. “I mean, I might date a doctor but not a doctor that... what I mean to say is... I mean, what I wanted to tell you was --”

“Oh, Po-lal-la. Povera ragazza! You minestrone. All mixed up.” She poured in a bit of basil, the flakes an inky green line. The sauce was perfect now and she said with great authority, “I fix up the room above the garage. You move-a in with me.”

“Nana, no.” Like basil disappearing into sauce. Black and squiggly.

“You come-a and you live-a with me.”

It was as if she had offered me a taste of her sauce, sweet and steamy, held up the spoon to me, as if I was by her side. I could smell my grandmother’s sweat, and feel

against my hands the tie of her apron, worn from so many years.

“Yes, Nana.” I said, quietly. Which meant no, of course.

This kind of non-communication made for love, Italian style.