

What happens to a large Italian family when the mother is sent to the state hospital? Did the father make the right decision to insist they stay together, thus, sending them to an orphanage? One family's story.

WE WERE NOT ORPHANS

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REVIEWS

A moving story about a large Italian family fractured by loss and mental illness. Jerry writes from the heart about the transformative power of music, spirituality, love and community. This is about endurance, determination, and survival: to become whole and to love.

~Linda Joy Myers, PhD., author of *Becoming Whole: Writing Your Healing Story* and *Don't Call Me Mother*, Berkeley, CA



It is not so much courage as inner necessity that has required Jerry Smith to continue her role as family storyteller by bearing witness to the truly extra-ordinary story of her family and herself. It still is somewhat mysterious how one child, not to mention several, can survive a truly heartrending childhood so well. We speak of “parentified children,” and it’s true, Jerry seemed forced into that role by circumstance. She could have chosen to “act out,” but she did not.

Sometimes, though, a child enters the world with a special connection to Something Larger (call it what you will,) here represented by Jerry’s connection with spirituality and by her deep connection with music.

The story is no “easy retreat to God,” denying the role of human emotion. It is instead a story of a deep spirituality, present from birth, severely tested, but which supported Jerry allowing her safe passage through sometimes devastating emotional lows and highs of her life.

No doubt her remaining siblings would have a different story to tell, and one hopes they might do so. But this is Jerry’s story.

It is my privilege to commend it to you.

~Karlyn Ward, PhD., Jungian Analyst, Mill Valley, CA



Jerry Smith has written a moving account of the power of the human spirit to transcend loss and difficulty, even when we are very young. *We Were Not Orphans* is an inspiring testimonial to the strength of families to heal even the deepest of wounds.

~Rachel Naomi Remen MD, Author, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*

We Were Not
Orphans

Geraldine M. Smith

We Were Not Orphans

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CHAPTER ONE

THE DEPARTURE

*M*y sisters and I watched from the front window of our house on Josephine Street as a black car pulled up in front and stopped. A woman wearing a dark coat and carrying a black handbag and black notebook got out and walked to our door.

I hoped this wasn't the social worker Daddy had said would come for us. She had gray hair, wore glasses but no lipstick, and had on old-fashioned shoes with thick heels. Her thin lips made her look stern. Maybe she was expecting to have a fight with Daddy. I knew he did not want us taken away from him.

Daddy bent his head as he answered the door. The lady came in and stood with her coat on, refusing his invitation to sit down. "Are the girls ready?" she said briskly. "They don't need to take anything with them. They'll be getting clothes and shoes at the orphanage."

It was nineteen forty-four and I was twelve years old and I had heard about this orphanage. I thought only children with no parents were orphans and couldn't understand how we could be taken to an orphanage when we had our Mom and Dad, but I was afraid to ask questions. My little sisters clustered around me and I tried to be strong.

Soon the lady ushered the four of us down the stairs. Daddy hung his head and followed. Why didn't he say anything? He was in his dirty work clothes, with cement still sticking to his khaki-colored shirt and pants. I looked up at him. He had always seemed so tall and strong. He had to be, for his work at Mondo Construction Company—paving streets, sidewalks, and driveways, digging ditches for sewer pipes, and laying bricks for foundations. I knew he was proud of his strength.

But now, I saw tears streaming down his ruddy, weather-beaten face. This was the first time any of us had seen him cry. He was still a handsome man, with black curly hair and a rugged face, but today his shoulders were hunched. Today he did not seem strong. He just looked sad, beaten down, and upset. Our family was being broken up because Mom had been taken to the state mental hospital, and there was nothing Dad could do to prevent it.

Charlotte was just three and Doris five. They began crying, too. I kept from sobbing by clenching my teeth and tightening my lips, as I still do as an adult. I needed to take care of my sisters, like I was used to doing. Rosalie aged ten, looked very frightened but she didn't cry until Daddy hugged and kissed her, stroking her curly auburn hair.

When he leaned down to hug and kiss Doris and gently tug her pigtails, she began wailing, "Daddy I want to stay home with you!" Charlotte picked up the refrain and cried louder, "Me too, Daddy." He picked up Charlotte and hugged her, stroking her kinky, light-brown hair.

"You gotta go with Jerry, Rosalie, and Doris to the orphanage," he told her quietly. "I'll come see you. You know you are my '*piccialidda*,' my little girl."

Doris clung to one of his legs and Charlotte to the other, but Daddy released their grips, took their hands, and walked the four of us to the social worker's car. Charlotte was carrying the rag doll Mom had made for her. There had never been enough money to buy dolls or other toys, so this one was special.

The social worker said in a cold voice, "Okay, girls, climb in. It's time to go."

We crawled into the sedan one by one, Charlotte and Doris still crying as I helped them step up into the car. All four of us huddled together in the back seat. Rosalie was drying her tears on the hem of her dress, trying to act very grown up. My eyes were watering, too, but I fought back the tears. I was worried about Daddy being left alone. He came and stood next to the car, took his red handkerchief from his back pocket, and wiped his eyes. Then he leaned over and said "*Stata tenda*." Take care. He was always saying that.

The social worker slammed our car door. We all jumped. Before she got into the driver's seat, Daddy asked, "You sure I visit my children? *Promesa*, they come home some Sundays?" When he was upset, he always mixed Italian in with his English.

The lady in black reassured him in a voice that sounded annoyed. "Yes, Mr. Messina, you can visit some evenings and every weekend, and you can even bring them home sometimes." He shook his head as if he wasn't sure he could trust her words.

As we drove away, I realized that none of the neighbors had come to say good-bye, though they were probably watching us from behind their living room curtains. I wondered if we would ever see any of them again.



Baby Fran, Josephine St. House
Syracuse, NY

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