



Growing up Italian-American was special for a boy given too much freedom by his grandparents after his parents' divorce. Many escapades occurred that could have landed the boy and his friends in jail. Read and see what happens to all.

I AIN'T DOUBL'IN BACK OR THAT ONE LAST DAY

By Joseph L. DeMeis

Order the book from the publisher BookLocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/12883.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**



**I AIN'T DOUBL'IN
BACK**

OR

**THAT one LAST
day**

Joseph L. DeMeis

Also by Joseph— From Joe's Desk: Making A School Smile, 2011, BookLocker.com, Inc.

Similar books by other authors: *And You Know You Should Be Glad, A True Story of Lifelong Friendship*, by Bob Greene; *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid*, by Bill Bryson; *Townie*, by Andre Dubus III; *Rust Belt Boy, Stories of an American Childhood*, by Paul Hertneky.

Copyright © 2023 Joseph L. DeMeis

Print ISBN: 978-1-958889-38-1

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-479-4

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2023

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

DeMeis, Joseph L.

I AIN'T DOUBL'IN BACK OR THAT ONE LAST DAY by Joseph L. DeMeis

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023904466

Cover Illustration: [Canstockphoto56924970.jpg](https://www.canstockphoto.com/photo/56924970)

Back Cover Illustration #1: [Canstockphoto15965662copy.jpg](https://www.canstockphoto.com/photo/15965662)

Ending Illustration #2: [Canstockphoto79732146.jpg](https://www.canstockphoto.com/photo/79732146)

Contents

Mangia, Mangia!!!	1
Jovy, Jovy	5
Just A Couple of Pressure Cookers	15
Walkers	30
Anton & Guido	59
Mr. Aspin	68
Our Aunt Moe	72
Georgio	74
Harrison School & Patsy Ricco	77
Goodbye Jack.....	96
The Interesting Cast of Characters.....	101
Mexico or Bust.....	106
No Home Alone	111
Dr. M. and Chloe	116
Jimmy, Putt, and Dently	126
Harrison School (Again).....	131
Oh, Boy! Did I Say Football?	134
Galen & King's Woods.....	140
Moving, Always Moving	155
Skeeter, Paulie, and Freddy	165
Tony Pisano and Va Va Voom Jackie C.....	186
Let's Move Once More.....	195
Roomers Again	203
Doubl'in Back.....	215
Frontpage Granny	224
Gents	233
Gents Turned 60.....	251

More Reminders.....	254
Fighting Coach J	268
“Towels To Furniture.....	282
Dancing The Nights Away.....	302
How She Could Cook	308
Paddling Polenta	314
Center Park.....	323
Cold Cuts	333
Everything’s Buzzin’ Up Here!!!.....	337
Cars and Rodent Too	340
What A Drive: The College Visit	350
College Is Coming	363
The Exciting Eggplant	368
Belly Flops At River View Swim Club	372
Marco Polo and Gene Carroll	380
Rock and Roll	386
The Parking Lot	389
More Thoughts-Losses Begin	397
Collegi-A School	400
The Grand Entrance	415
Full Speed in Reverse	424
On The Road Again	427
Last Lap	430
Epilogue	435

Mangia, Mangia!!!

“You know, weight lifting will not help you lose weight,” said the louder of the two women whom I could not help but overhear as they loudly chatted while rounding the bend. This was the first time I had seen the duo and their conversation could not be ignored.

“Yes, exactly, so why should I lift weights and get so tired and sweaty for such little return,” her friend chimed in.

It appeared that today my ordinary state of daydreaming while rowing was being interrupted by a couple of loud millennials attempting to complete a workout. Here they were talking openly as if no one could hear them while they promenaded closer to my workout area. I could not help but notice the women approaching as the pitch of their voices became louder and louder as they neared. The two of them, voices blaring, seemed to boom beyond the breaking point of the customary din heard throughout the rather large gymnasium. Their conversation was unusually loud and clearly understood above the white noise hum of the rowing machine where I had perched myself. Here I was again, rowing at the corner of the gym, by myself, daydreaming and wishing not only the time away but hopefully also shedding a few calories. Now, it seemed, my daydreaming mind would be occasionally redirected toward the two braggadocio women, strangers to me, whose conversation would invade my established solitude each time they rounded the track.

As the two walked closer I could not stop myself from overhearing their conversation and becoming irritated with their lack of gymnasium decorum, if there is such a thing. Almost everyone else exercised quietly while gazing straight ahead, seldom making eye contact with anyone while hoping to quickly finish their session before getting on with the rest of their day. How could these two bypass the informal rule of keeping one's conversation to themselves? Ordinarily, as I rowed, I fashioned myself as an uninterested spectator at an auto race hearing the whirring sounds of engines, courtesy of the rowing machine, crescendo as I watched the silent bodies of exercisers meander around the various strength-building machines. Now, these two magpies, who possessed the need to include everyone in their conversation, were likely going to be an unwelcome intrusion into my ordinarily solitary routine.

Yes, the rowing machines had become my salvation. They were saving me from having the top of my head blown off from being forever reminded by my wife that without cardio I could die within perhaps an hour or two. As irritating as her reminders had become it was at least reassuring that she loved me enough to want me around for a long time to come. However, I hate cardio, always have, as it is so slow and boring causing one to consider whether all the trouble is worth the added longevity. To make her happy, rowing seemed the lesser of the other cardio evils so I chose it over jogging, elliptical machines, and the tailbone torture of stationary bicycles. Yucko, as the kids would say, to all the forms of cardio, so I settled on the easiest form of exercise, at least for me, that is the rowing machine.

Fortunately, the machines were located in a corner of the gym on the side of the track away from the politically correct TVs. One TV always streamed FOX and another MSNBC. They were strategically placed side by side disallowing anyone from accusing the gym of

I AIN'T DOUBL'IN BACK OR THAT ONE LAST DAY

any political predisposition. The exercise club wanted to be known as an equal opportunity streamer thus enabling some to pass their time attempting to determine another person's politics by the TV they most often focused upon. The location of the rowers, off in a corner by themselves, usually offered me the convenience to think with only the glare of the sun streaming in from the ceiling glass. Today, it appeared, would be different. My ride in solitude would be interrupted by loud talkers, the heretofore mentioned female track strollers, who seemed intent on including everyone in the gym in their conversation.

The couple kept walking and talking ending their first lap. I simply rowed while shaking my head in disbelief as the image of the two became smaller with each step away from me. My rowing procedure usually included counting sequentially in my head the seconds I rowed rather than watching the built-in counter attached to the machine. Gazing at the counter was akin to waiting for water to boil making the drudgery of rowing that much more torturous. I had only counted to 100, a rather short amount of time when the booming voice of the loudest of the two women and the one with the brightest tights once again moved into earshot. This was only their second lap and their presence was already beginning to irritate me as their boisterous conversation came back into range.

“We just got back from a visit to see my husband's grandmother,” boomed the louder one. I decided that as long as I was going to have to listen to the duo, I would assign each one a name. I settled quickly on “Hipster” for the first one with her black-rimmed, oversized glasses.

“She’s in a nursing home, you know, and not doing very well; Alzheimer’s or dementia, one of those things.” I could not help but hear her announce.

Her buddy, who wore a fancy striped workout shirt I named “Stripes” quickly chimed in,

“Oh, so sad. I remember my grandmother went downhill pretty fast too. I never really liked her that much a n d t h a t ’s, I t h i n k, b e c a u s e s h e w a s,”

The pair had begun to pick up speed so I never heard the end of that last little report. I was left gazing, once again, at them rounding the bend. Their figures once more began to get smaller as they moved further down the track. As I tried to resume my counting, 119, 120, 121, my mind could not help but be lured back into its daydream. However, the loud walking talkers, my newly named workout mates, had succeeded in embedding the theme of their conversation into my otherwise sterile thoughts. Their discussion anchored my mind on my very own history, which included my grandmother, as I began thinking of a life lived long ago.

Jovy, Jovy

“Jovy, watcha tha machine, Jovy, watcha tha machine. Be-a careful. Non fa male,” a familiar phrase I will never forget. The phrase was something I grew up hearing almost every day as a child. Grandma always warned me not to get hurt, “no fa male.” I could always count on hearing those words in some form of Italian slang or another.

My grandmother was a worrier. She was especially nervous and anxious when it came to me but much of it was out of love. Grandma was always there for me and also for everyone in her circle and that circle was rather large. For a person who was born in another country, she knew how to make friends and friends learned to enjoy Granny.

My wife and I decided to visit Grandma during the late spring of 1985 just as we had many times before. This time, we knew, would be the last time the visit would be her own home. There was no doubt that this was her house, one of many she owned over the years and she had recently sold it. It was a duplex, one that my grandparents had built for themselves, and was situated right on the lake, that is, on the shore of Lake Erie. The house, like all past homes she and my grandfather owned would be her last at least the last where she would reign. My grandmother had always run the show and quite a show it had always been. She was the manager, the cooking and cleaning CEO who ran things no matter where she lived. In a way, this is what made life with her and Grandpa almost always exciting. As long as she lived in her own place grandma knew that she would be in charge and most people kindly moved out of her way to run things. Grandma, by the time of this last trip, seemed aware that her power was slipping. We could tell that she knew her independence was

waning. My wife and I clearly understood that from the moment we arrived. My grandmother somehow figured out that changes were on the way and had little choice but to accept them. Our visit this time would be different from all those previous visits as we immediately concluded soon after entering her house.

Grandma's ordinarily happy almost overly exuberant demeanor was this time slightly subdued. From growing up under her care I could easily recognize the difference. My wife witnessed it too and we wondered what brought the changes on so quickly. How did they materialize so fast? We concluded upon arrival that something serious must have happened to hasten the process. Something, some event, must have occurred to affect her mood and why did no one mention the situation to me? Perhaps being so close others did not notice her tempered attitude. Certainly, being in the midst of a move out of her own home was stressful but it should not have altered her personality so significantly. The noticeable shift in attitude was certainly disconcerting. We hoped the stress was the cause of her difficulty and that it would soon subside after the house was sold and she resettled herself. Then maybe Grandma would return to normal as she became comfortable in her new quarters as she would be living with my father and stepmother. Could the loss of independence be too much for her to absorb or process? Conceivable, maybe, but my wife and I knew we would have to discuss her new attitude and the reasons behind them later, privately. That is if there was time.

Without saying a word, a simple glance between my wife and I communicated that these conclusions, the stress of the move, was perhaps too easy an explanation for the personality change. The move was only partially the reason, partially the cause. We would later agree that the real culprit, the real reason for her change

involved more than the move itself. For starters we knew that Grandma's health, physically and mentally, was the likely culprit, serving as the impetus for her selling the home and not vice versa. She might be upset as the sale was near but there was more to it than that. After all, her possessions were readied for purchase but it was more than the loss of possessions that was weighing her down. The move was an unconscious signal to her. She must have known it was an end to her independence, and a lack of trust in everyone served as her only defense.

Yes, a noticeable lack of trust. Grandma's new attitude toward Deb and me was different, as mentioned, and we immediately felt it upon entering the house. One clue to the difference had to do with her possessions. Where she was overly generous throughout her life Grandma was quite touchy about the things she would soon be selling in preparation for her move. We had not planned for it but there would be numerous reminders of Grandma's past life scattered among the possessions she had throughout the house. Pieces of the house itself emphasized to us just how much she and her dwellings were the same. A part of her, a story was somehow connected to even inanimate objects composing her houses. Simply entering her home through the garage told a story about who she and my grandfather once were. When visiting we always entered through the garage. Entering through the garage was simple family-composed etiquette as I grew up. It never seemed strange at the time but really, who enters a house by lifting a garage door when there are other easier more acceptable ways to get inside? The duplex had doors, both front and back, but if you were a relative or regular visitor you knew you had to lift the garage door and enter through it. It did not seem to matter for most people but if you were family, a guest, or just anyone who had visited more than once, you learned to enter through the garage. While not an entirely "Italian" thing, I associated the entry

technique, right or wrong, with being Italian. It was a tidy way of doing things. Entering through the garage saved wear and tear on the ordinary entry points. Rugs remained cleaner, for example. This form of entry seemed to just fit in with all the other similar behaviors and cultural things I imagined Italians did and that I found different from those of “true Americans.” For instance, front doors in any of the Italian-American households where I grew up were reserved for priests, doctors, and heads of state like prime ministers and presidents should any of them decide to make a surprise visit. Ordinary people never entered our home through the front entrance. Entering through the front door was tantamount to lunacy in our neighborhood. Ringing the doorbell to enter, if you were a friend or family member, was considered a mortal sin punishable by assigning at least a few prayers, say 15 Hail Mary’s and 20 Our Fathers. I only recall ringing the doorbell one time for entry into my grandparents’ home. This occurred one evening when I was maybe 12 years old. I was late coming home after dark and the family was worried about me. My father was also quite angry so he decided to teach me a lesson and lock all the doors. As the door finally opened, my dad, who was reluctant to even answer my summons, was waiting for me as I entered the room. He opened the door and immediately began waving his belt in my face and swinging it at any body part within reach. He yelled that I was way past my curfew and I had to learn to never be late again. Fortunately, I was quick and agile and thus able to maneuver to my bedroom while only absorbing a mere three smacks to my extremities. This, by the way, was one of the few times I ever had to pay the price for any of my numerous transgressions, at least after my mother had already left town. Ordinarily, I was accustomed to slithering through life scot-free no matter what crime I committed. Even so, while Dad swung his belt, Grandma was busy screaming for him to leave me alone while grabbing his arm helping to interrupt his accuracy. “Loovie (Louie), no hurt-a Jovy, OOOOH,

Loovie stoppa. Pepine (my grandfather), aiuto Jovy (Joe, help Joey).” Grandma was good at running interference for me in all kinds of situations while I grew up in a crazy haphazard way.

Anyhow, entering our home through the front door was not the way we entered. As soon as Deb and I said hello to Grandma that day in 1985 we felt as if we had run head-first into a steel wall. Even the presence of our two children, ages three and one, did little to engender a smile or a hearty, “come bella,” how pretty, from Grandma’s lips. Instead of the usual unqualified acceptance and joy we were used to receiving, we immediately felt something heavy in the air and it was not the telltale smell of mistakenly burnt garlic bread. In place of a smile, there was a new kind of sadness, a self-protectedness and we admitted feeling a little unwelcome. We sensed that we were going to be a burden. Without a hint, we soon found that Grandma had begun considering everyone thieves and carpetbaggers and this had to do with the selling, the auctioning off, of her life’s possessions. Except for only a few, she began to believe people were out to steal her chattel. Deb and I were included and categorized as being listed on the stealing team. We represented two more people who were not trusted and it hit us squarely as we had always been at the top of her spoiling list, some of the few in her closest loved ones’ inner circle.

My grandmother cared for us deeply, especially me over the years, probably much more than I ever deserved. She was forever there as my protector no matter what the circumstances and I presented many while growing up under her care. This had always been the case and there was never any doubt about where I stood with her in the pecking order of our home. Growing up with granny as my surrogate mother placed me securely at the top of the hierarchy. She willingly served as my mother’s replacement after my parents divorced and

she spoiled me way beyond the standard acceptable grand-parenting threshold level. If there is such a thing. Grandma cooked, cleaned, and fed me first, before others, but even though I was on the top tier of her lavishness it did not end with me. No siree, her generosity included everyone within her orbit, including all her relatives, friends, neighbors, and passersby. She even treated enemies with kindness. Anyone who wandered through her garage and into the house, even those who mistakenly rang her doorbell, were fed. Feeding people, everyone, was her moniker. She never stopped working to make everyone, especially me, comfortable and welcome. That is why her noticeable change during our visit was so profound.

The trigger for this new demeanor of hers must have been pulled while we were living our lives many miles away. Something happened to rip apart the confidence and control of this woman, my grandmother who always retained command and usually had a plan for the next step. No matter how small or big the plan, the plan was hers. The move from her home, this last residence, represented something perhaps insurmountable. It was somebody else's plan and even we, thirty-somethings at the time, could figure that one out. At first, Deb and I recognized the change but could not foresee its extent as we were now facing a woman we did not recognize anymore. We would soon grow sad about what had vanished. While we did not fully predict it or realize it at the time, her lights had grown dim and they would never fully sparkle again.

My grandmother did welcome us into her home that one day but we could tell she was distant, and that her mind appeared to be on other things. Instead of offering us food and fawning over our children, she was more focused on her possessions, valuables, and the trinkets that defined her life in America. Small talk was set aside as Grandma

quickly ushered us into her den to witness for ourselves what was going on. “See, you come. ‘Vedi, Jovy,’ see what they do.”

As we made our way into the den, one of the many rooms in her home that was always vibrant, orderly, clean, and ever so neat, we were confronted by chaos and disorder resulting from an upcoming auction. Soon, 60-plus years of accumulating gizmos, gadgets, pots, pans, dishes, towels, and sheets would be up for sale to strangers who had no real idea of the history, the significance, surrounding each piece. Strangers who would not care about an item’s origin, or its story, but would soon bid on an item without knowing its background. The item would soon change hands and leave its tale behind. Lost forever would be the history behind each item. Most auctions are likely that way as they are not meant to be sociological undertakings. They are cold business transactions for all but the seller. Auctions are for buyers who have no interest nor care about the history of most things unless the item was once owned by someone like Monet, Nelson Mandela, or Elvis Presley.

Laying out before us on the den floor were articles of various sorts. The articles were not only important to my grandmother but many of them had special meaning for me too. A large portion of them represented inanimate friends acquired long ago while growing up, mainly as an only child in my grandparents’ home. The items personified life too as I began to understand something about my grandmother’s difficulty reconciling the upcoming auction. The items may have been packed away in attic boxes or maybe stored in closets but they remained in our home and their history was still preserved. Plus, besides my grandmother, I was the one who knew the inventory best. As an only child, due to family circumstances, I devoted way too much time assessing and mingling with most of the items scheduled for sale. I sneakily logged numerous hours scouring

through the house, especially those items in our attic stored away and along with us were transported to the various homes that we owned.

Let me explain. One item, for instance, immediately at my feet was a mandoline. Not to be confused with the instrument made famous by people like country musicians, Bill Monroe or Jethro Burns, but a device used to turn flattened pasta dough into individual strands of linguine. Using this device, one needed to lay the elongated flattened dough on top of the perhaps 50 wires and run a rolling pin over the top of it. The downward pressure pushed the dough down cutting it through the wires and forming them into individual strands of pasta. The pasta would fall between the wires of the mandoline and be caught by a silver mirror-like tray below. As a child, I remember discovering the strange object for the first time and figured that it was some kind of Italian instrument. I did not know its name or true function but enjoyed strumming its strings trying unsuccessfully to play, *Oh Sole Mio*, or some other recognizable tune from its metal cords. How I enjoyed snooping up in the attic all by myself hoping to find other treasures like the mysterious mandoline.

Next to the mandoline on the floor and still packed in their original boxes were what I considered the royalty of attic items, that is, the infamous family pressure cookers. Strange to think of the two pressure cookers as being famous but they represented in a kooky and bazaar way some of the irrational behaviors one learned to expect while living in our home. The pressure cookers were more a source of an argument than they ever were used for cooking. Strangely, neither cooker was ever used making the whole situation somewhat humorous. The two pressure cookers, made of thick and heavy metal, stood as the ultimate example of why gifts should be used right away rather than stored for another day. Whenever

someone in our home was in the mood for an argument or if they were searching for an example to prove a relevant point then all that was needed was to refer to the noteworthy pressure cookers.

Dad: “Ma, why don’t you ever use the pressure cookers we gave you for Christmas?”

Grandma: “Luigi, one-a dees-a days you see, I’m-a use.”

Dad: “We bought them to make cooking easier for you.”

Grandma: “Ima no lazee. Whym I need-a cook easy. Ima work-a hard. You go work-a easy, no me.”

Dad: “who said you were lazy? I didn’t say you were lazy or didn’t work hard.”

Grandma: “I no need-a fancy pot to work-a harr. My pots-a good. I work-a hard-a than you and these Madigan (American) women on-a-da TV set. Ima-a work hard, right-a Joe?”

Grandpa: “Shes-a worka hard. Why you start-a the argument o da pot. Shes-a no need-a the new pot. The pressures-a pot.

Mom: “Ma, try using the cookers. They are the modern way to cook. They were presents to make you happy.”

Grandma: “Mannaggia la miseria,’ Ima-a no happy? I’m-a happy. No need- the pot to make-a me happy. I’m-a cooks my way, I-a know how to cook the old-a way. Itsa the best-a way ana-how. From the old country, I’m-a learn. I no need the modern way. Old-a is-a da best.”

Joseph L. DeMeis

This argument and many like it were a regular part of growing up in our home. The arguments were both serious and humorous and went on for years. Most people got used to the back-and-forth blather and the ever-present chaos they mustered.

Just A Couple of Pressure Cookers

Small things, like gifts, almost anything could easily escalate into a mild battle in our house. The battles may have been often but they were meant to be forgotten after an hour or at the most a full day. This argument was over the two pressure cookers but the reason for the next argument could be over just about anything and when it occurred, which it surely would, the two unused pressure cookers were often applied as examples by someone to help bolster their concern.

The cookers, never used for cooking, were so famous that I decided to name them. After all, they had become family lore. At an early age I strangely named them, Fred and Ethel, after the famous married couple on the popular, *I Love Lucy*, TV series of the 1950s. Fred and Ethel were portrayed as arguing over small things too and that seemed to sum up the story behind our pressure cookers. While the pots were securely hidden from sight up in the attic, their presence was always just an arm's length away especially when one wished to emphasize a point. I was told the story behind the pressure cookers many times as they were the spoiled leftovers from another thwarted attempt to provide a useful gift designed to bring a coveted smile to Grandma's face.

My father and mother, before their divorce, drove to Cleveland to buy the two cookers at the now-defunct Higbee's Department Store thinking that pressure cooking, the new style sweeping the 1950s, would make cooking quicker and easier for Grandma. The gifts, of course, missed their intended goal even though my parents' intentions were honorable. The gift, the cookers, represented one of many good-hearted attempts to make Grandma happy but ended up

mostly being a focal point for a misunderstanding and surely a good old-fashioned argument. My parents' failed attempt at locating the correct gift was not alone in its failure to please my grandmother. Finding a gift to make her happy was on a scale equal to locating gold in the Sierra Madras Mountains. People tried in vain over the years to discover gifts, perhaps even something practical, to please Grandma Mary but making her happy was way too elusive for the amateur gift giver. It took a professional, maybe a fortune teller, to know what would make her happy. The pressure cookers represented a basic problem that vexed many well-intentioned people over the decades. Finding something she would covet and use was near impossible. Much of the time, I concluded after considerable analysis, that failure was mainly due to misjudging Grandma's needs from the beginning. That is, most people never really understood her from the start. If they did, using the pressure cookers as an example, they would realize that she did not want cooking to be easier. People always mistakenly wanted to make Granny's life easier in some way but that is what they envisioned was her need. What she wanted for herself was something different. All she wanted, the minimum, was a little respect. Just like Aretha Franklin, she wanted some respect and acknowledgment that someone thought of her. Cooking was her life and she did not want some invention to come along to signify that she had been doing things the hard way, the wrong way. The old way of doing things, just like it was done in Italy, the old country, was the only way food or for that matter, life should be prepared. She was simply happy that someone thought of her before they visited her and ate her food.

Each birthday, Christmas, or Mother's Day people would tax their brains trying to uncover an ideal gift for Granny. The search was on for the one present in a million that would satisfy her. She needed nothing as she had all that she truly needed. Social custom, however,

prescribed that she was not respected if one showed up for her birthday or a holiday event empty-handed. Therefore, she most often silently demanded and required a gift of some sort even though it would likely never be used or appreciated. It was certain that Granny's mostly Italian friends, similar women from the old world, would likely find out that their friend, Marietta, the diminutive form of Maria, was publicly embarrassed by someone who turned up empty-handed. The news of this *faux pas*, arriving without a present, would surely sweep the Italian community by storm. This is how it was in our ethnic mainly working-class little town in the 1950s and 60s. The guilty parties would not know the significance of their error, showing up empty-handed, until much later when it was already too late. Their indiscretion, with no malice intended, would likely be the topic of conversation long after they returned home ending up potentially as a story dredged up, perhaps being discussed alongside the pressure cooker story, during some future family argument.

Understanding the gift-giving situation requires explanation. The empty-handed soul, a guest, for instance, would never be directly confronted. Confrontations were not part of the culture, in most situations like this at least. No, these matters, showing up empty-handed, were handled silently, internally. Pity the poor soul who did not know all of the unwritten rules in the Italian-American household. In this case, Marietta would not let on that a major error had just been made. She would certainly, however, never forget the slight blunder. No siree, she would not let it be immediately known that a gift, some type of tangible gesture, would have been better than no gift at all. A bad gift was likely expected, but at least there was a gift. Showing up without one, however, placed the visitor into the minor league of visitors earning them a tier-one crime. The only immediate response given to an empty-handed visitor would be a

smile. However, as soon as the party went home that is when the real debate began. I can almost hear it playing in my ears, that is, granny beginning to blame herself for the mistake.

Grandma: “Niente, Hanno portato niente,” nothing, they brought nothing. “Maybe they no like-a my pasta. I’m-a no make-dem a happy, maybe-ah? Maybe I no give-a dem enough?”

Dad: “Don’t worry about it, Ma. It’s not important. You told them you don’t need anything anyhow. Some people just don’t know. Maybe they forgot or are too cheap. Who cares?”

Grandma: “Cheap-a skate, maybe. I’m-a no knows nothing no mo. Everybody knows to bring soma-a-ting. Maybe a cookie, cake ana-ting. How they no know?”

The conversation concerning the giftless visitor would continue to dominate as a topic for quite some time. It was easy to see that Grandma, who had the biggest heart in most instances, was also quite complicated. Her response to situations, such as this one, illustrates just how treacherous life could be for individuals who were not equipped with the rule book. Granny tended to take things personally. One needed to learn the rules.

“Maybe they no lik-a my house-a so much-a,” she might add. Or worse yet if the person had any reputation for being cheap. “They poot-a evry penny in-na da banka, them cheap son a ma betcha.”

Mostly, however, Grandma was perplexed and disappointed that the rules were not followed. Everyone knows the rule, don’t they? How could the empty-handed people not realize that a gift, some token of appreciation, was polite, a social norm that required strict

adherence? Did the visitor not know they would be treated to a four-course meal while visiting? Did they not know they would be sent home with enough food to have another dinner the next day? Nothing brought to reciprocate the hospitality? Anything less than showing up with some small token of appreciation, a small trinket of some sort to Grandma could signal the end of civilization itself. She believed everyone knew the rules or at least should know them. For her, the rules were simply universally recognized. Were these people ignorant, cheap, or what? There had to be a reason. Oh, she conjectures that would be advanced when the coast was clear. Trying to explain to her that everyone did not understand the rules did no good. Deep down I think my grandmother, and many older Italians, in those days anyway, somehow believed that this etiquette, Italian etiquette, was universally understood. If quizzed, Grandma and her pals might even believe that knowledge of the rules is genetic or at a minimum part of some United Nations resolution. Anyone who did not adhere to the rules was considered a “chooch,” that is, an idiot. Everyone should know, by adulthood, how to behave when you visit, especially during a special event, and know without saying that you will be fed until your stomach explodes.

Eventually, through body language, gossip, or perhaps even acts of God, flubbed mores of this sort were usually corrected. Those who intended to repeat their visits to Grandma’s house, and many did, would learn the rules of engagement sooner or later and then, without hesitation, follow them in the future. People were always accepted into my grandparents’ home, no matter what, but those who followed the rules were especially welcomed with perks. Besides, after sampling her pasta, homemade rolls, and Italian wedding soup one was addicted and had no choice but to make repeat visits. Therefore, learning the rules was in everyone’s best interest. Besides, and perhaps more importantly, everyone enjoyed my

grandparents' company, especially my grandmother. Even without the food and generosity, Marietta, quirks and all, was a character, a real personality to be loved. She was entertaining, engaging, and eccentric. Everyone thus wanted an ongoing relationship with Marietta.

By the way, "Marietta" was just one of her many names, some correct, others mispronounced, that people used when addressing her. No matter how bad the mispronunciation, Grandma never corrected them. Officially she was Maria Loretta but was seldom referred to as either of those two names. Most friends referred to her as whatever sounded phonetically correct to them when they were first introduced. More than likely Italians were saying Marietta when making the introduction but it sounded different to various people. Muddy-eta was one of the most common mispronunciations but there were many others. Since no one knew Marietta was the diminutive form of Maria, all kinds of mispronunciations of her name were developed. Some referred to her as Muttu-eta or Mee-etta, while others Mary-eta, and Mootietta. One person kept calling her Mary-etti while another said, Martietta. Some played it safe and simply called her Mary or Aunt Mary or even Mrs. Many of my friends referred to her, just as I did, as Grandma and that was fine with her too. Granny was a sort of earth grandmother anyhow so why not just call her Grandma too? Italian friends often referred to her as, "Coo-mahd" from the Italian "comare," one way of saying, "godmother," or an old friend. These were the days before the TV show, *The Sopranos*, made the word, a Sicilian slang word, "Goomah," unsavory given its assigned meaning, that is, a wise guy's mistress. Believe me, my grandmother was nobody's mistress.

Likewise, close Italian friends referred to my grandfather as "Goombah," or comrade. Many called him Pepino, Pepine, Zio

(Uncle) Pepine, or simply, Joe. Few referred to him as Giuseppe. Nonetheless, I got a kick out of listening to people chop up their names, especially Grandma's names. However, mispronunciations never seemed to bother her. She took whatever name she heard right in stride. Nor did she or anyone else ever step in to suggest a correction. Not once did anyone ask Grandma or anyone in the family to spell her name. I cannot prove it but I bet people in our own family did not know how to spell the correct version of her name, that is, Marietta. One thing I always knew was that whatever name a person first began calling Grandma, right or wrong, well that was the name that stuck and they used their version forever. There could have been four people all visiting at the same time with each one repeating Grandma's name differently and each would stick to their pronunciation no matter what. I enjoyed hearing all those pronunciations and miss hearing them now.

Our house was a lively place back then. Boy was it ever and I deemed it commonplace that everyone in America had daily visitors who brought things with them whenever they visited. Items like homemade Italian bread, fruit fresh from their tree, or wine fermented down their basement. These were some of the offerings enjoyed regularly and the visitor would, in turn, leave with a plate of some goody, such as the pasta du jour, Grandpa's tomatoes, or a carafe of some exotic soup. People were always dropping by, most every day. It was a natural people-watching environment and without knowing it I was being educated in the fine art of getting along with almost anyone. Grandma's house was like the stereotypical small-town barber shop or an early form of *Starbucks*, a place where people dropped by regularly to simply catch up on life and be with others. However, the main difference between our house and a modern-day coffee shop was twofold. No computers, instead people communicated usually through loud talking, and limited

listening while all the while engaging in the fine art of using numerous hand gestures to get their point across. One certain thing was that people arrived with opinions and were not afraid to announce them. Conversations in our house were not for the meek. Why should they be hidden, everyone was usually talking all at once so it was unlikely that an opinion would be heard by anyone else anyhow. Secondly, at our house, a bag full of homegrown banana peppers or perhaps a large zucchini or two bought you a cup of coffee, a torrone cookie, or on a lucky day a slice of Italian lemon cream cake. My grandparents were always prepared. No matter who stopped or when they dropped in Grandma was continually prepared to not only serve up some tasty snack but also after a heated discussion, send the visitor home with some other tasty treat. Perhaps they would leave with a whole lasagna. One never knew. So, whether or not someone came equipped with something to barter no one went home hungry or empty-handed. Most people, I would wager, left our house with more than they arrived with.

Over the years this system of give and take slowly filled our house with every conceivable type of bric-a-brac or device. Everyone did not bake bread or grow zucchini. To pay back Muttietta and Pepine for their generosity, gifts of various sorts turned up at our doorstep all the time. Everything from bread boxes to scarfs to toaster ovens was offered as payback for my grandparents' generosity. Most items landed in the attic or if it was wool, it filled our home's numerous cedar storage areas. The smell of cedar often permeated our household, depending on which cupboard was opened. Now the smell of cedar, when confronted, immediately causes me to think of my grandmother's home. Mostly, these non-food items were stored and never used right away. New articles were to be savored, put away, and saved for a rainy day. After all one never knew when another Great Depression would hit our country. My grandfather,

particularly was certain that another severe economic downturn was just around the bend and he wanted to be prepared. New things, except some food, were stored, and forced to stand in line waiting for other things to wear out. My grandparents always wanted to be prepared for any contingency like an economic downturn so storing was their way of being ready. In some ways, they were early survivalists. Sometimes, however, the system backfired since stored items could be forgotten. Stored gifts could spoil or deteriorate over time as they were simply never needed. Things rotted, styles changed, or gifts simply vanished as well but overall, the attic grew fuller. Unfortunately, many of the stored items were never used and many of them were now on the floor being readied for auctioning off. I can, nonetheless, still hear my grandfather's prediction.

Grandpa: "Jovy, yu see, these-a no good sonna-ma-betcha inna Washynotona DC they gonna make a nudda depresh (Great Depression). Yu sees Ima right some-a-day soon."

Me: "Maybe Grandpa. We'll see."

Another object I discovered, in what seemed to be the vastness of my grandparents' overstuffed attic, seemed magical to me at the time. Snooping around up in their attic in one of our homes, one located on 21st Street, I discovered what turned out to be dad's U.S. Navy seabag. My snooping in the attic must have begun around the late 1950s more than a decade after he returned from the war. I was maybe seven or eight years old when I first discovered the bag. I remember unpacking and repacking that seabag a dozen times seemingly always noticing something new each time I opened it. See, my dad enlisted in the Navy during WW II and according to Dad, Louie, he preferred dying at sea rather than being shot on land if the occasion ever came up. The war provided my father with years

of experience as the U.S. Navy provided him the chance to visit exotic places throughout the world that he would not have otherwise been able to experience. Many of Dad's favorite stories, especially as he aged, were about the war and the ports where his ship docked. The war condensed years of travel experiences into his 36 months of enlistment. Dad lived into his nineties and remained most animated when reliving his days while in the Navy serving as a gunner's mate on troop transports and supply ships.

The one story that never fails to resonate with me, especially since becoming a father myself, was the day Louie tells me he left for basic training. Dad has repeated the story to me many times explaining in detail how my grandfather, Giuseppe, accompanied him to the designated bus pick-up area in front of the old post office on Main Street in our hometown. I can only imagine the masculine emotions shared as my dad describes his father's tears as he hugged his son goodbye, telling him how proud he was for enlisting and to please return home safely. It is difficult for me to imagine sending your child, in this case, an only child, off to fight in a foreign land knowing the odds were great that he would never return. While my friends and I would eventually complain about how life had dealt us some bad cards, at least none of us had to fight a war, especially one of the magnitudes of World War II.

That seabag up in the attic for some reason held my interest even though at the time I had little idea of the circumstances surrounding the war and the sacrifices people made through their enlistment. I knew Dad was in the Navy but seeing the shirts and other articles made it so much more real. As a child, all I knew was that I was enamored with the U.S. Navy shirts, a deep blue with stripes on the collar and patches on the arms. As I modeled the shirts I imagined men standing at attention as I barked out orders. The wool pants,

complete with bell bottom cuffs, seemed even to a kid too scratchy for anyone to wear. After putting them on once I quickly refolded them and returned the pants to the very bottom of the bag never to be worn again. I wondered how my father or anyone else could have worn the things in a war or for that matter anywhere else.

As I searched the contents of the sea bag I was enamored by all the interesting and strange objects inside. One object was unusually different to me as it appeared as underwear but I was not exactly sure why it was so flimsy and shaped so strangely. Starring right at me was my first confrontation with a jockstrap. Being uneducated about its use I wondered why the Navy required sailors to wear such unusual kinds of underwear especially since the wool pants were so scratchy. I remember that the strap appeared so complicated that I had no idea which side was front and which side was back. This was one article of clothing from Dad's seabag that I refused to model. Dad eventually did explain the use of a jockstrap and that knowledge would eventually come in handy in junior high school. For example, all the guys in seventh and eighth-grade gym class were forced to wear a jock by our physical education teacher the notorious Mr. Zapper. Mr. Z. was pretty old by the time we entered his class at Hawthorne Junior High as my father also had him as a teacher when he was in school. The one thing I recall most about the old teacher was how he felt quite strongly about the benefits of wearing the jockstrap during physical activity. From the very first day, Mr. Z. was obsessed with making sure each of us wore one during class. He did not leave wearing one to chance either. What he did to make sure each of us was donning a strap was to individually check each guy out before every class. Mr. Z's system included having us stand in a straight line facing him. Next, he would command, "Attention," followed by, "About face." Next, the wiry Mr. Z would begin moving down the line pulling back each boy's gym shorts, checking

to see who was or who was not wearing a jock, and then letting go of the elastic waistband allowing it to zap right back in place. During each class there was always some poor sucker, maybe two, who forgot their jockstrap and they would, unfortunately, have to pay the ultimate price. Guys without jocks were required to run the infamous gauntlet. That is, they would have to run or crawl through a tunnel of guys as each one of us was required to swat the jock-less fellow with our hands as they passed by. More than one guy had to fight back tears as he maneuvered his way through the human tunnel. It all seems so antithetical that he wanted us to wear a jock for protection yet when it was forgotten a kid was pommeled and put in danger of genital injury just to remember to wear the protective device the next class. I can only imagine what would happen to a teacher now who pulled back a guy's gym trunks viewing hundreds of rumps each day while searching for a missing jock let alone send a kid through the gauntlet. Crazy stuff but true.

For years I recall wearing my dad's endless supply of white, Dixie cup sailor's caps which seemed to be the only practical thing in the bag for a kid to wear in public. The only time I saw Dad wear any of his stuff from that seabag was when he retrieved one of those white caps and wore it as he painted the house. The remainder of the bag's contents, metal belt buckles, a knife, an ammunition belt, a metal cartridge box, and many pictures of guys Dad knew as he served his country, were left as memories in that old white seabag up in the attic. I imagined that the items in the bag were happy to have someone, me, rummage through giving life back to the clothing that at one time fought in a war. Stuff in that bag was just the type of thing that captured a kid's imagination during a time when WWII movies filtered through the TV screen. The seabag was one of many objects that captured a little boy's attention as he searched around in

the attic. The attic was a special hiding place for me that seemed miles away from the rest of the house and the real world.

The attic, closets, and basement in my grandparents' home were filled with many unused treasures and were a living testament to my grandparents' immigration success story, let alone their generosity. Even now I daydream about all the gifts Marietta, in particular, received decades before especially when I watch my own family open their holiday or birthday presents. I can still see Grandma Mary delicately unwrapping the decorative paper making sure not to rip it as maybe it could be used again someday. Once inside she would eventually and slowly open the box as everyone waited in anticipation for her reaction. While no one said a word most were thinking, will the gift be a success with Marietta or simply satisfy the custom of giving? People would gather around her, the family matriarch, as Marietti first pretended that the gift should not have been purchased followed by her customary frown while repeating that no one needed to buy her anything since she had everything that life required. Once the gift was revealed everyone in the room silently wagered what her reaction would likely be as she gazed upon the treasure. Grandma would never immediately reveal whether or not she liked the gift Whatever the prize, there would first be a scowl met next with an angelic, "Grazie." However, her, "Grazie" would soon be followed by, "Hai sprecato soldi," you wasted your money, a stock response to almost every gift.

As explained, everyone knew that a bad gift, even one where money was wasted, was better than no gift at all. So, to my parents' credit their attempt at finding the perfect gift for my grandmother, those pressure cookers, was thoughtful and full of honest intent but as noted finding the right gift for Grandma was almost impossible. She was a difficult and tricky person to buy for so ultimately the rejection

of my parents' gift of pressure cookers should have been expected. Mom and Dad tried and failed at providing, "Ma," as they called her, with a gift she would both like and find useful. Instead, I figure that their gift, since I was not as yet born when the pressure cookers were first given, received the standard, "Hai sprecauto," followed a few days later with my grandfather being ordered, when no one was around, to store the cookers upstairs to their ultimate resting place, the attic. Years later with my mom safely miles away and their divorce papers finalized, I would one day uncover those two pressure cookers for the first time. To an eight-year-old, the pressure cookers were certainly not as interesting as discovering my first jockstrap but the tale of the disrespected pressure cookers would become a humorous part of family lore for years to come.

Now, as my wife and I gazed at the objects laid out on Grandma's den floor, many that began as gifts, we could only shake our heads as we understood what the objects represented. We knew some of their history and their place in Grandma's life story. Those godforsaken pressure cookers in their original boxes were the prime example. There they played a gift to my grandmother that lasted through a divorce, a remarriage, and decades of living. How could mere objects take on an existence of their own? While we all lived downstairs, those cookers listened from above, stored in the attic, confident that they would be moved from house to house within our hometown. They and most of the other items were all leftover symbols, artifacts of a life well lived, a life lived Grandma's way.

My wife and I could also foresee the obvious as we predicted what was coming next. We could see the mistake that were the future. With good intentions, those time-saving objects, designed to make life easier were considered by Grandma as making life harder for her. Now, with good intentions in mind, selling the house and

I AIN'T DOUBL'IN BACK OR THAT ONE LAST DAY

moving elsewhere was similarly designed to make life easier for her as well. Both, however, would accomplish the same thing, that is the exact opposite. Life was going to get much harder for my grandmother.



About me: Living in Sewickley, Pennsylvania by way of Ohio; Morgantown, West Virginia; Geneva, New York; and Wellesley, Massachusetts. Living in retirement up a steep road among the trees and the hills after a career serving as a school psychologist, an elementary school principal, and later as an academic coach. The best jobs, still paying wonderful dividends, are husband, father, and now grandfather.



Growing up Italian-American was special for a boy given too much freedom by his grandparents after his parents' divorce. Many escapades occurred that could have landed the boy and his friends in jail. Read and see what happens to all.

I AIN'T DOUBL'IN BACK OR THAT ONE LAST DAY

By Joseph L. DeMeis

Order the book from the publisher BookLocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/12883.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**