

Papa and I

Polish the Comet

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When I got home that night it was real late, maybe about two o'clock, and Papa must have been waiting up for me and heard me come in and get into my upper bunk over my little brother Benito because pretty soon he came in and stood next to the bed and his face was real close and he said:

"You sleep, Tonio?"

"No, Papa," I said. This was like the last time Papa came in just like this with his face so close. That last time was my sixteenth birthday. The night he showed me his medals. He got me out of bed and took me down the hall to the linen closet. Then he got this old ammo box out of the back, and

opened it up and I saw campaign stripes and the purple hearts and the sharpshooter's medal all of which he never showed me before. Then under this piece of cloth that smelled like oil was a Luger that Papa unwrapped and showed me. He got it off a Nazi in a bombed out building in Italy. He said it was empty because all the bullets had gone into the Nazi's heart. Papa said: "Look here, this is his blood on the handle. I shoot that close." And he put the gun right up to his own heart to show me how close it was he shot the Nazi from. So there I was about a year and a month later and Papa was standing next to my bunk with his face real close and dark. Only this time he wasn't talking. I told him how everything was set for two weeks from then and he didn't have to worry because Angela and me really would get married and the kid would be born with his parents married and Papa didn't even say anything to that. He probably nodded in the dark though. Then we were both quiet. There was something he was having trouble saying. Then finally I heard, just barely:

"Tonio, when your Mama is bride, she very shy."

I didn't know what to say. But I guess he expected me to say something because he waited. When I didn't say anything he said in this whisper:

"I teach your Mama about the babies. How they come."

"Oh," I said, but I really didn't know what in hell he wanted me to say. Then I said: "I'm sorry."

But there was so much time between the two things I said that Papa must have forgot the subject because he said:

"Sorry about what you do to Angela?"

"No. Sorry about you teaching Mama."

I guess I hurt his feelings. He went and opened the door and stopped there for a minute and looked back and I could see his shadow because the nightlight in the bathroom was behind him and I thought he was going to tell me to sleep well but he didn't. Instead he went back to his and Mama's room and I heard the bed squeak as he got in and he let out a long breath that was crossed between yawning and moaning. Pretty soon I heard his snores.

I thought about how once when I was maybe fifteen and it was summer he started talking about how he and Mama got married. And what it was like for his family in the old days. You see Papa came over in his mother's stomach on this boat that was loaded with shoes and furniture from Italy. But the shoes and furniture didn't belong to the

Italians that were also in the boat. They were coming with nothing. Because maybe they had relatives in this country which they called the land of the free and the home of the rich or maybe they read ads in Italy about how they could get work in Chicago. Which is what made my Grandpa come with his family in 1923. About a month after they got to Chicago Papa was born, and that was real important to Grandpa. Papa was a real American. And that's also why Papa got drafted so easy in 1941 and sent to Italy as an interpreter. But that comes later. In between there was the bad years when Grandpa Paglioni couldn't get work except sweeping and other shit jobs. Then about 1927 he got a job making sausage near the stockyards in a company that went bust in 1930. But Grandpa Paglioni just went out and got himself a shop and started making his own sausages that he was proud to make without donkey or flour. He made such good sausages that Italians from all over Chicago came and bought them and Papa told how sometimes big black Buick LaSalles pulled up in front of the store and the chauffeurs went in and bought about ten pounds of the best kinds of sausages. So when everybody else almost was real bad off Grandpa Paglioni was feeding his family and about 1932

which Papa said was the worst year of the century Grandpa Paglioni bought this little white house a couple of blocks from his store and he moved in his family which included Grandma, and Papa, and my Aunt Berticia who's older than Papa, and the twins who were younger than Papa and named Gito and Gino.

I remember how Papa told me all this out in the backyard after we finished waxing his new Comet. He had a 102 Beer and I had a Nesbit's and he got onto the stories about the war and then started in on the same shit about Patton. Patton was Papa's general. For a while. Papa used to get real excited about how Patton got the shaft for punching out a coward and then Bradley who Papa thought was a banana puff got kicked up the stairs over Patton. But I'd heard that crap a million times and so I said:

"What about you meeting Mama?"

"I meet your Mama after the War."

"She says she remembers you from before."

"Sure, but then she is girl. After the War, she is woman."

What happened was he didn't get interested in her till he got back from Italy and was a local hero. But first he had to go through the story about how he came in at the Union Station or maybe

the Illinois Central he didn't remember which now and then he caught the bus to his neighborhood. Everybody on the bus was real friendly and slapping him on the back and congratulating him for a good job and for his medals and he just smiled and thanked them even though he wished they'd shut up. Because he said civilians didn't have any idea what it's really like. What it's like when the shells come in or what the shit in a dead guy's pants smells like or what human guts on a tank tread really look like. So Papa just smiled at them and played along. But then this drunk Irish guy got on the bus and came straight over to Papa and called him a dagowop and said how he didn't understand what in hell the Army wanted with an Italian who would probably be a deserter if he wasn't a traitor first. Except maybe if they wanted him to clean latrines and make lasagna on some island in the South Pacific nobody could get off of because of sharks. Then Papa told the asshole that he fought in Italy and showed him the Sicilian and Peninsular campaign stripes. Papa said to the Irishman that he didn't want to fight on the bus. At least Papa didn't want to fight on the bus that was taking him home. Papa asked him to please keep his trap closed.

But the Irish guy kept saying things. Papa saw how the bus was coming into his part of town and he kept his temper. The whole bus was getting mad at the drunk who was probably on the wrong bus anyway. There were a couple of Italian kids who said to Papa in Italian that they'd help him take this guy if Papa wanted. But Papa had had enough fighting I guess because even though the guy was now saying how anyway you cut it and look at it an Italian in uniform was either a traitor to the United States or a traitor to Italy Papa kept his lid on. The bus got to Papa's stop. Papa hauled off and smashed the guy's nose. It was like he hung in the air for a whole minute and then went flat on his back right down the aisle and the two Italian kids put their feet on him and held him. Papa said how the last thing he saw was the Irish guy's bloody nose and screaming face and the whole bus was laughing and clapping and cheering. Papa said he felt a whole lot better. Papa got off the bus and turned around and waved goodbye and forgot about the fight.

He was only about six blocks from home and he swung his duffle up on his shoulder and went along the streets past the little houses that looked like the one his Papa bought. At this

point in the story in our backyard in Cucamonga Papa saw Benito by the backdoor looking at us and Papa called to him and said for Benito to bring him another 102 Beer. Benito brought it out and Papa didn't say anything while he was around. I waited. Papa looked at the sky some and Benito hung around and Papa finally looked at me and said:

"Where was I?"

"You just got off the bus."

"What bus?" Benito asked. He was picking at himself.

"No bus," Papa said.

Then we sat around and Benito just stood there with his cowlick pointed at the sky and tugged at his weinie through his jeans. Finally Papa said to him:

"Me and Tonio talk about something private."

That surprised me.

"What private stuff?" Benito asked.

"Just private, ya dodo," I said.

"Shh," Papa said to me, and then to Benito he said: "Go to the bathroom."

"I don't need to," Benito said.

Papa gave Benito the Don't Give Me No Shit Look.

Benito went back in the house. I waited some

more while Papa looked at the sky and started his new beer. Papa's shirt was open and under the white hairs I could see his scars. Then he told me what happened when he got back to the house.

What he had in mind was that he was going to walk right into the house and shout "I'm home!" and "When the hell's dinner!" just as if he had only been downtown for the afternoon. But he only got out the "I'm home!" part when my Grandma came running out of the kitchen and yelled and hugged Papa and then yelled for everybody to come and Aunt Berticia who is two years older than Papa came from upstairs and she yelled for happiness and grabbed on to Papa who was still being hugged by Grandma. Then from the basement the twins Gito and Gino came in and had to wait their turn and then they hugged Papa too, both at the same time. Then while Gito and Gino were checking out the campaign stripes and medals like the purple heart for the shrapnel in the chest things quieted down and Papa looked around and everybody was real funny looking and he said:

"Where's Papa?"

Nobody said anything.

After a couple minutes Gito and Gino each took an arm. Grandma, she looked away. Aunt Berticia, she could look at Papa, and Papa said how one minute

she had happy tears and now they were sad. She came over and took Papa's face in her hands and looked into his eyes. Papa said that by that time he knew, but he didn't feel anything yet. He just knew. Whatever he was going to feel would come later when they used words. And there in the backyard Papa put down his beer can and he took my face in his wet cold hands just like Berticia did to him about twenty-three years before and he looked into my eyes the same way she did to him. My heart and my brain and my guts were going up and down and then he said what Berticia said:

"It was his heart. You remember his heart?"

There was no more explaining that Papa needed. Or that I needed. Papa stopped. He sat back in his chair and looked around for his beer can. He had himself a swig and another and then tilted back the can and got the last drops and then crushed the can with one hand. He sighed real loud and started to talk again.

Papa pushed away from his brothers and went and sat on his duffle that was by the front door. He put his face in his hands and cried. It was soft crying. He said he never once cried in North Africa or Sicily or Italy. Not even when his buddy got divided into five parts by a land mine near

Messina. Not even when he filled the Nazi's chest with bullets. But now when he found out his father was dead he was crying, and for about five minutes nobody bothered him but just let him cry it out and watched him from the other end of the living room. Then it was Berticia who went first and she took Papa's head on her breasts and said:

"We thought fighting was enough for you to worry about."

Papa nodded against her and kept on crying, only real soft now. Then his mother came over, and she got down next to him and she was crying too and she put her arm around him and he put his arm around her. The twins came over too, and stood close. Pretty soon nobody could tell if they were crying because Grandpa was dead or because Papa wasn't. Papa started to laugh. Then Berticia started, and then Grandma Paglioni, and then the twins, but they didn't laugh as hard, because they were too young to know what the laughing was about. But they learned, because both of them got their chance in Korea. Finally Papa said his second line:

"When the hell's supper?"

And feeling better they all went out to the kitchen and Grandma put a plate at Grandpa's place that she said was Papa's place now.

Papa stopped talking and I noticed how it was getting dark and pretty soon Mama would call us for supper. I still wanted to know about him and Mama but I figured it wouldn't help much to pretend to be in a hurry. Because I really wasn't. In a way I didn't want to know, because for the story to be a secret made it something I wanted to have, but as soon as I had it I knew I wouldn't think it was as neat as it was not having it. So I didn't push him. I remember Papa sitting there, turning over and over the smashed beer can, and every now and then looking at the kitchen window where we could see Mama's head as she worked over the sink. Pretty soon she opened the back door and called us and Papa and I got up and he put his arm over my shoulder and we walked to the house. Inside he went over and hugged Mama, who was by the stove. But she wasn't so busy she couldn't be hugged a minute. I watched them. Papa whispered something and she stood back and smiled, but said, sort of shocked like:

"Giorgio!"

She pretended to slap his face with the wood spoon and he laughed and then the two of us went and washed our hands and the whole time he whistled some opera music which meant he was feeling good.

It wasn't until the next time we polished the

Comet that Papa got around to finishing the story about how he decided to marry Mama. Maybe it was the Turtle Wax that reminded him. He went through his speech about Patton and I asked him what happened after dinner the day he got back from the War.

When Aunt Berticia and Grandma were cleaning up and after Papa told the twins he didn't want to talk about fighting right then Papa decided he wanted to look around the old neighborhood. So he went out. He started down toward where Grandpa used to have his sausage factory which was really a store with a big room in back with a cold storage locker and for a long time all Papa could think about was how his old man was dead. It came out at dinner that the old man was working in the sausage room and was lugging some cases of head cheese around when he had his heart attack. So Berticia thought it was the lifting that did it to him. But Grandma had a different idea. The news about the landing at Normandy was on the radio that Grandpa always kept turned on. It was on D-Day that he died. The family thought that Papa might have been on the beach. But he wasn't. He was still in Italy. And Papa was walking along through the houses thinking how maybe if they had let him tell

where he was then his Papa would be alive. But he knew he couldn't do anything about it now. And there might have been some other news, like about the shrapnel in his chest, that would have killed Grandpa. Besides, maybe Berticia was right. Maybe it was the lifting that killed Grandpa.

Pretty soon Papa came to the store that his old man used to rent and the windows were all boarded and the door locked and the only thing that remained was the sign over the door that said "Paglioni Sausage Company, Wholesale and Retail." Papa looked at it a couple minutes. Then he went down a few more blocks to Steinmetz's Delicatessen. Grandpa and Steinmetz didn't get along. Because Grandpa wouldn't sell Steinmetz sausages. Grandpa said all had pork in them. Steinmetz said he wanted some sausages that didn't have any pork. Grandpa said it was impossible to make Italian sausage without pork. Even though that isn't true. He just didn't want to sell to his nearest competition. But Steinmetz didn't have anything against Papa and it was at Steinmetz's that Papa used to buy penny candy and beef jerky and Root Beer when he was a kid. So when he got to Steinmetz's he went in to see if the place had changed any.

My Mama was standing at the counter asking for

half a pound of provolone. The last time Papa saw her was the day he shipped out. She was sixteen and standing on the other side of the hedge when he came out of the house in his uniform with his whole family behind him and Mama and Berticia crying, and his Papa being brave and the twins not knowing what to say so instead wrestling on the grass. There was a taxi waiting that Grandpa insisted on paying for to take Papa to the station. So the family one by one hugged Papa and then just when he was hugging his mother he saw over her shoulder the girl in the next yard who was Sophia, this kid he never paid much attention to. She waved at him real shy and then blew him a kiss. Then she ran down the street to her house. Then Papa left for two years. He didn't see her during his leave because she was at her cousin's in New York. So it was four years later that he saw her, and she was standing in front of the cold counter at Steinmetz's Deli.

Old Mr. Steinmetz was cutting the provolone and Mama waiting. Papa stopped and watched her. She didn't know he was in the store. She was beautiful, he said. In four years she had got real pretty, and he was sure that she was married by now. But he didn't see any ring.

Then she looked over and saw him standing next to the dairy case, and when he was telling me this he stopped rubbing the bronze hood of the Comet and stood up straight. He looked at me and said:

"I was then in love very much, Tonio, and scared. More scared than in battles."

Papa grinned. He had big teeth that didn't meet right in front. He started polishing again and didn't say anything for a few minutes.

"She was so very beautiful," he said when he was bending over to wipe the chrome strip along the windshield. "She looks at me and is surprised and then smile and then blush and then look at the provolone. Steinmetz, he knows. He gives her the provolone. and looks quick at me and then at Mama and then at me and he winks. And I am angry because he winks. And then I understand I am in love. Just from the Army six hours and I have found your Mama. So when she pays she starts to go to the door and doesn't look but blushes when she passes me and I am so stupid I let her go by. Then I stand. Until Steinmetz the old Jew points his finger after her and lets me know I must follow Mama. And I need nothing more, and I jump into the street and run up to your Mama and say, "can I carry the provolone."

And there Papa stopped and stood straight and grinned. Mama, she let him carry the cheese, and he walked her home talking about the old neighborhood and nothing about the War and when they got to her house which was about three blocks from Papa's he gave her back the cheese and asked for a date. She said yes. Papa skipped home, he said, even though he was still in his uniform. At home, Aunt Berticia, she told Papa that Mama didn't have any steadies or anything like that and Aunt Berticia said she was like a sister to Sophia and loved her and Papa already had a pretty good idea what was going to happen next.

We were on the back end of the Comet. Papa got real serious, and said:

"And then in 1947 there was your sister Lucia. There are two more, Tonio, that come out dead, and then you. There is another dead, and then Benito.

I never heard that before. I didn't know what to say. Papa wouldn't look at me while he was polishing and I wondered if Mama really wanted me to know about the dead babies.

"After Benito," Papa said, "we go to the priest, and tell him we can have no more. He says we must try. I say no, I will burn in Hell but your Mama will have no more. He says nothing, and

your Mama cries and will not take my hand to leave. She wants more. The next is a boy, the doctor said. He lives six hours, and your Mama bleeds. After, the doctor says she is alive, but there can be no more babies. It is something he had to do to her. I cried for her."

I couldn't do nothing. I stopped rubbing the wax into the paint. I just stood there with my face hanging open. Papa, he polished. He couldn't look up.

"And Tonio," he said, "the work is not good. I have seven jobs between when I marry Mama and you come. I work in the stockyards for half a year. One day I cut the throat of two hundred pigs and I cannot go back because that night I dream of Sicily and North Africa. Then we move to Gary and I work in the steel mills for the first time. But your Mama, she is not happy. And so we come to California. I tell her to forget the priests."

Papa looked at me once, real quick, then set the can of wax on the trunk and went into the house. I finished polishing the Comet by myself.

And lying there in the dark, I thought how the old man was still working in the goddam steel mill. He was snoring next to Mama. Angela was asleep and knocked up at her house. Benito was underneath

me, and every now and then rolling over and making
sucky noises. I thought about the little brother we
didn't have, and how if he was alive then he'd
probably be the baby of the family, and Benito would
be part me and part him. And then I wondered about
the other three and what it's like to be in such a
big family. It was starting to get light out and I
could hear lots of different birds and was spooked
out. I guess I fell asleep. Next thing I remember
is that it's day and the bunk beds are jiggling
around and I look down and Benito is trying to jerk
himself off. He must have learned it from me,
because he was still ten and that's too young to
figure it out by yourself.