A Peachy Life
Waiting on Tables and Beating the Odds in the ’60s — An Italian-American Woman’s Story

Leonora “Peachy” DiPietro Dixon
I dedicate this book to my brother Vincent and his wife Grace for all of their technical help in the preparation of the book. I also dedicate the book to my sister Rosie for all of the pictures she gave me to use in the book.

I started the book just to remember all of the days of my childhood, and it blossomed into a story of my life. I would also like to thank all of my family and friends who helped me to go in the right direction with my life.

There are also two other people who helped me through all of the good times and bad times. I came out just perfect with their guidance. Thanks, Mom and Dad.

And last but not least, my brother Johnny for all of the many times he came to my rescue.

Thank you all; I love you so.
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All families should have a Leonora “Peachy” Dixon in their lives. She is the keeper of stories, the historian without the fancy degrees. She is the heart overflowing with love for the immediate world. Now she has written *A Peachy Life*, and every page evokes the charm, and sometimes the pain, of life on the east side of Baltimore over the last two-thirds of a century.

How’s this for a slice of long-ago Highlandtown? “My dad, Carmen, worked hard at Bethlehem Steel, at Sparrows Point. When Dad came home, he would be grimy. He needed a bath. I can remember Mom always going into the bathroom to wash his back. Dad would say, ‘Phyl, come here, I need my back washed.’ She would go because she always did everything for him. They loved each other very much. They were Edith and Archie Bunker in disguise. After dinner, in the summer, Dad would sit outside at the corner of the alley in a rocking chair. He used to say he was catching the breeze coming up from the alley. In his hand was a portable radio, and he would listen to the Orioles game. Before evening’s end, my parents’ close-knit neighbors would bring their chairs over and sit and talk to Mom and Dad until dark.”

That’s all. The small pleasures of the world before air conditioning and cable TV turned us all into hermits, our lives filled with so much packaged entertainment and so much self-inflicted isolation.

Peachy recalls a time of mixing together. She spent her early school years at Our Lady of Pompei and graduated from Patterson High School. Her uncle was the late city councilman Mimi DiPietro, and she worked as a waitress for John Unitas at the Golden Arm. She’s been a fixture at Sabatino’s in Little Italy for as long as anybody can remember. She wrote her 200-page story, she says, because, “I started this just to remember all the days of my childhood, and it blossomed into a story of my life.”

But it’s more than that. It’s the story of all those around her, the
story of lives that revolved around family and neighborhoods that were the fixtures of Baltimore and are sometimes still its greatest strength.

And it’s about the sweet times we make for ourselves when we don’t count on outside sources to fill our hours. How’s this for a celebration? “Every New Year’s Eve,” Peachy writes, “Dad and Mom would have a big party at their house in the basement. Dad had dug the basement out years ago when they first moved into the house. It was six-feet deep and as long as the house, so there was plenty of room for everyone to sit around and dance. All of my aunts and uncles, on both sides of the family, would come over. My cousin played the accordion.

“Around twelve o’clock, my Uncle Fritz would get one of my mother’s old bed sheets, wrap it around himself, and run up and down the street and pretend he was the New Year’s Eve baby. My Aunt Lena, who was Uncle Fritz’s wife, would say, ‘Fritzy, what are you doing? Stop acting crazy.’

“We would all tell him to keep on going—‘Don’t pay attention to her; you’re having a good time!’ Oh, what a great time we all had, so much fun for so little money. How I miss the innocence of those times, just full of lots of laughter.”

The past gets away from us too quickly. Every family should have somebody like Peachy, to write it down and hold onto the details. That way, we get to relive the glad times, and pass them on to those who weren’t there, so they fully understand where they come from.

There were rough times, too. There was an abusive marriage for Peachy, but it produced two loving daughters. Money was always tight, but there were joys money couldn’t buy.

There’s the tale of her parent’s courtship, with a parlor filled with grandparents, uncles, aunts, and priests, too, “…to make sure they weren’t doing anything wrong.” There’s the first family car, which they proudly drove to Grandpop Gaetano’s, “…who only lived right down the street from us.” There’s the tender scene, after Peachy’s father has died, when her sister gives birth to a boy, “…and we all knew that Dad had come back to us.” When a family has someone like Peachy keeping track, no one ever really goes away.

Michael Olesker
One day while I was talking to my sister Rosie, I started to remember my past. I began telling her how nice it was when we were young living under the protection of Mom and Dad, and having Mom’s tender touch and soft words of encouragement. I was lost in my childhood for a while, remembering how protective Dad was for all of us. The more we talked, the more I remembered. I could not believe how all of these memories poured out of my head. It was unreal. I wanted to tell my sister how important it is to stay connected to our family.

This book is a story of my immigrant grandparents coming to America, the virtually unknown, building a life for their family here, and withstanding all the obstacles they had to overcome just to raise their children.

My grandparents were devout Catholics and they instilled a deep faith in their children, who in turn carried their devotion on to their children—my brothers, my sister, and me. My grandmother was always helping out at church. She was the person who initiated the union between my mother and father. Mom was the secretary for Our Lady of Pompei Church. When Dad saw Mom, he fell instantly in love with her, but Mom’s father strongly resisted the union between my parents. However, through the persistence of Dad’s mother and with the help of the priest from the church, love prevailed.

It’s the love story of Mom and Dad. My father could not get enough of Mom. He loved her so much, and Mom in turn did everything for him. All of Mom’s brothers and sisters adored their wives and husbands. They were truly committed to each other, so unlike in today’s world, when you hear about so many divorces. Their love was a lasting love; the kind that revealed itself when they looked into each other’s eyes.

When my paternal grandmother was alive, I could understand everything that she said to me because I could also speak Italian.
When I asked her to teach me Italian, she would always say, “English, English, speak English.” She wanted me to talk to her in English. Grandmom said that when she came to America people embarrassed her and called her a dumb “dago.”

It is a story of a young girl, me, growing up in a warm, loving Italian family, with all the affection that you could not believe possible in one person’s lifetime. During the years of growing up, there were many family parties for special occasions or just a simple gathering for an excuse to eat some delicious homemade food. In the hurry up world of today, when families live all over the country, it was so different to have all my relatives living in close proximity. Everyone was there to help out in times of crisis and everyone was there in times of joy. We were all Italian and the most important thing in our lives was family and food, all homemade and all delicious.

It is a story of the closeness we had with neighbors and how we all respected one another. We became friends in this small neighborhood called Highlandtown, which was located in east Baltimore, Maryland. When Dad bought the first TV on the block, all the neighbors and some of our family members would congregate in the living room watching this new invention. Highlandtown was a popular place to live because in addition to good people, we had all the conveniences like the butcher, the baker, the chicken store with fresh eggs, the bank, the post office, the library, the novelty store, the department store, and so on. How lovely it was to be surrounded by all these marvelous people, places, and things.

After attending nine years of Catholic school, I entered public school. This experience was one of the most dramatic ones in my life. After being under the strict direction of nuns, I was suddenly allowed to make my own decisions about what courses I wanted to take.

I also had two wonderful brothers. They were so intelligent that they were able to attend college to further their education. One brother majored in science and physics long before it was the popular thing to do. The other brother focused on the financial world. Both of them acquired great jobs. Most importantly to me, they were always there to help me along the way.

But life’s path wasn’t always so easy. After growing up in such a
caring family, my life turned into a world of both physical and mental abuse from a husband that put me through a horrendous marriage. The only good thing that came out of the marriage was my two lovely children. I took many beatings from this man, even if I just answered him the wrong way. After the beatings, he would leave me alone to heal my wounds. I had no idea why he was treating me this way or when this violence would stop. I just kept thinking he would change, but he never did.

I was learning about drugs in the ’60s, something I knew nothing about. They took over my husband’s life and turned him into a drug-crazed person. The addiction was so bad that drugs consumed his life, but I had two little children who depended on me. I had to save them from this monster and the horrible life he made for us.

All of which inspired me to record the events of one life hoping they would in turn help other lives. I wrote this book to inspire women to stand up for themselves and to encourage women to know that they do not have to take abuse from anyone. I want to help women to understand that with the help from God, your family, and friends, you can make it. Have confidence in yourselves. Take the initiative to stand up for yourselves. You can do it. I know if I walked away from seven years of this awful abusive marriage, you can too. I want this book to aid women who are suffering in abusive marriages to come out of their shells and take charge of their lives. I believe that if you stand tall and put your mind to it you can not only survive, but thrive. You can accomplish whatever you want to make of yourself. I want to stress to you the importance of a close connection with your families because they will always come through for you when they see that you are sincere.

I had to devise a plan to leave my husband who did not care about me or our children. I had to make a decision fast to come up with a way to support my children. I met a person who changed my life for the better and encouraged me to become a waitress. She gave me the confidence to move on with my life and make changes. She told me that waitressing was easy and I could do it. She told me that after becoming a waitress I would have money to provide shelter, get medicine, and buy food for the children. When I finally made the move, I felt so relieved. The burden was lifted.
Venturing into a world of the unknown, I went head first into the job of waitressing. After many blunders, I landed a job at a restaurant owned by my heroes, Johnny Unitas and Bobby Boyd. During this time I met many famous people and to my surprise they treated me as their equal. The excitement of waiting on football stars and movie stars set my head whirling. Just to be in their presence and having the opportunity to serve them amazed me.

While I worked at the Golden arm, I met new friends, went to the Super Bowl in Florida, and really started coming into my own as a woman. But times were not so friendly for women. I tried to buy a car, but could not get a loan because the dealership told me I needed a man’s signature on the note. I was flabbergasted! I was the one who paid all the bills, but the system was against women.

I then went to work at a German restaurant called Haussner’s, which looked more like a restaurant that had popped up in a museum. Pictures lined every inch of wall and statues surrounded every table. Their food and desserts were so incredibly good that people lined up around the building every evening.

Then I came to work at Sabatino’s, one of the busiest Italian restaurants in Baltimore’s Little Italy. Everything was homemade and made to order. At this restaurant I met so many wonderful customers, movie stars, politicians, entertainers, musicians, artists, and athletes. Most of the customers came to the restaurant repeatedly and, because I saw them so often, I developed a close relationship with my regulars.

I hope this book provides some perspective of how wonderful family life was back in the 1950s and ’60s. I also want to describe how difficult it was to take care of my children in a world when women had to prove themselves in everything that they did, but how one woman had a “peachy life.”

*Tutto il mio amore!*

*Peachy*
I grew up during a simpler time in a quiet little place called Highlandtown in east Baltimore. People walked the streets at any time of the day or night and never worried that anything would happen. We slept with our doors and windows open at night without worrying that someone would break into the house. Everyone was friendly and neighborly and we all tried to help each other out. We all knew other people’s circumstances, their ups and downs, their hardships and joys.

Everyone’s immediate family lived in the same neighborhood. For me, this included my aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. If you lived in Highlandtown in the mid-twentieth century, you knew someone in your family would always be close by to help you out in case of an emergency.

I was born on Friday the 13th, and if that was not enough of a bad omen, my baptism was held the following month on December 7, 1941, the same day the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. With these two strikes against me, you might guess that my life would be full of turmoil, but in my close-knit neighborhood, everything and everybody appeared safe to me.

3510 Claremont Street

Our house was a rowhome located near the corner of an alley on a small city street called Claremont Street right off of Conkling Street, which was three blocks from Eastern Avenue, Highlandtown’s main shopping district. My home was a wonderful place. As soon as you walked in the door wonderful smells coming from Mom’s kitchen greeted you. And then Mom would flash her beautiful smile and would ask, “Do you want something to eat or drink?” Everyone felt welcome right away.

In the living room with a large window there was a big sofa, two
end tables, lamps, and a recliner that was Dad’s, with an ottoman for him to rest his feet, and on one side of the recliner was a small telephone table.

Dad made a wedged recliner to prop himself up and watch TV while lying on the floor. He made this object out of wood that he bought from the local lumber company. He wrapped foam and fabric around the recliner that he purchased from our neighborhood supply store, at the corner of Conkling and Claremont Streets. The store was called Conkling Salvage Exchange foam shop. Mr. Mike, the owner, was a very accommodating person who always helped his customers. He especially took care of his neighbors. He sold everything for all occasions—Christmas, Easter, summer, winter. Mr. Mike also sold artificial flowers and wreaths for placing on graves, along with material and foam for making cushions for things like the wedged recliner that Dad made, which he invented way before anyone else.

The living room spilled into the dining room, which was another large room with a window. It had a dining room table and chairs and another couch that opened into a bed, mainly used when members of the family spent the night. The next room was Mom’s kitchen with a large table and chairs, china closet, stove, refrigerator, sink, and another large window. Dad made the kitchen larger than a normal kitchen so that Mom had plenty of room to move around and cook her wonderful dinners for all of us.

In the back of the kitchen, Dad had extended the house and added a bathroom, which included a bathtub with fancy legs, a toilet, and a window. The back door led out into our beautiful rose garden. Dad built the addition when my parents first got married because they lived on the first floor and their kitchen was then in the basement. They rented the upstairs to help cover their expenses. After I was born, my parents took over the whole house because they needed room for their growing family.

My bedroom was in the back of the house. I had inherited my Grandmother Gelsomina’s feather bed, which consisted of two long pillows, stuffed with soft, fluffy feathers. The room was cold in the winter and hot in the summer. My two brothers slept in the middle room on twin beds. They had no privacy at all, and there was just
one window. It was a huge room with no closets that opened toward the stairs and the hall that led to the bathroom. The bathroom door did not completely close from all the layers of paint Mom put on it every year.

Mom and Dad’s room was in the front of the house. Their room was large with a high ceiling and two large closets. It had two large windows and two doors. One door was always closed for privacy while the other door was left open. When my sister Rosie was born, they put the crib in their room.

The house also had a basement that Dad dug out practically by himself. He made it six-feet high and as long as the house, about sixty feet. Because Dad was short, he considered six feet a high ceiling. He whitewashed the walls so that the basement would always be clean, and it was especially immaculate because of Mom and Dad’s impeccable cleaning habits.

The backyard rose garden blossomed with twelve beautiful rose bushes that Dad planted in 1938. Every year he fertilized the garden and took such special care of it, so that even today some of the rose bushes still thrive. Our garden also included two fig trees that produced so many pieces of the soft, light-bulb-shaped fruit that Italian’s consider a delight. We broke the figs open and let the juices run into our mouths. Italians wait anxiously every summer for the trees to yield the sweet juices from this wonderful fruit that tastes absolutely delicious.

Mom

Phyllis DiPietro had chubby cheeks and brown eyes. She was beautiful, with a little nose and soft features. She wore her thin hair just below her earlobes. Mom never dressed fancy, normally wearing a floral printed housedress with her slip showing just ever so slightly. She was an extremely modest and shy person who loved to take care of her children and her husband, Carmen. She was a little on the heavy side, although she always tried to watch her weight because she had diabetes.

Her father, who was a little stocky, died from diabetes. When he got a sore on his foot, the doctors wanted my grandmother to have
his leg amputated. Grandmom adamantly refused, so the doctors called my Aunt Jenny, Mom’s sister, into the hospital to try to persuade Grandmom to let them amputate Grandpop’s leg. Aunt Jenny would not agree to this procedure either because she did not want to go against her mother’s wishes. Sadly, a little while after this episode Grandpop became dreadfully ill and passed away. Therefore, Mom really tried to take care of herself so nothing like what happened to Grandpop would happen to her. Who would take care of us if she became sick?

Mom kept the house spotless all the time. My aunts always commented, “You could eat off of your kitchen floor, it is so clean in here Phil.” Mom was always cooking one of her delicious dishes, such as her homemade chicken noodle soup or her fabulous tomato sauce or her homemade chili con carne. These dishes took her hours to prepare, so the smells went all through our home, and all the people who walked by the house knew she was cooking one of her special dishes. She worked diligently over the stove cooking her delicacies for hours at a time or she stood at the sink doing dishes. Mom was forever doing everything for each and every one of us.

Dad

Carmen DiPietro worked extremely hard on the swing shift at Bethlehem Steel, one of the largest shipbuilding companies in the world, located seven miles east of Highlandtown in Sparrows Point. His job at the steel mill consisted of binding steel coils after they were produced in the coke ovens. The men at the steel mill mixed the coke with iron ore to produce the steel. The coke ovens burned so hot that they belched red dust that settled on everything. The awful stuff covered all of the homes and cars in the area like rusty snow. When Dad came home from work, he was grimy with red dust.

The work was hard and dirty, but Dad always had a big smile on his face when he came home. When he smiled, his high cheekbones pushed his cheeks into his bright sparkling eyes. He had an oval face with a large nose. His round stomach expanded from eating all of the wonderful food that Mom cooked for him. When he flexed his huge arms, his muscles looked exactly like the cartoon character Popeye’s.
But he used those arms gently to hug his children.

*The Courtship of Mom and Dad*

Before Mom and Dad were married, Mom worked in the office at Our Lady of Pompei Church doing clerical work for the priests. Previously, Mom and her sister Mary worked at Johns Hopkins Hospital serving food to the nurses, who were fed sit-down meals. Mom and Aunt Mary arrived at the hospital by 5 a.m. to perform their chores. Because of this early arrival time, they were allowed to stay at a house across the street from the hospital. While working there, they were subject to the hospital’s strict policies, although they considered themselves lucky to have a job. They earned just $4.50 per week and were paid once every two weeks, bringing home only $9 every two weeks to give to their parents. Still, this little bit of money helped the family pay some bills. Then, when the war broke out, there were more jobs available for everyone, so Mom took a position at Our Lady of Pompei.

Meanwhile, Dad’s mother was an active parishoner who was always doing something special for the church. Grandmom Annarella spent as much time as possible at church to get away from the situation at her home, where she was in a very unhappy marriage. Being at church surrounded by other people from Italy comforted her. When she first saw Phyllis, she could not wait to tell Carmen that he had to come to church and meet a beautiful lady who worked there.

Social gatherings took place at the church hall on most weekends. These affairs helped the neighbors to have a little fun apart from their very busy weekdays. Everyone brought food and all of them had a great time eating and dancing. At these affairs, the priest always asked Mom to sing because she had a beautiful “operatic” voice. While she was singing, Dad saw her and her beauty overwhelmed him.

Dad wanted to ask Mom out, but this was difficult for him because Mom’s father was very strict. So Dad devised a plan with his mother and several of his siblings to go to Phyllis’ house and try to win the approval of her parents. The priests also went over to talk to my grandparents. They assured them that Carmen came from a
good family and that he was honest and hardworking. The priests and Grandmom Annarella left when finished talking to my mother’s parents, leaving Carmen, Phyllis, and Dad’s two sisters in the parlor listening to music on the Victrola. My grandfather sat in the middle of the parlor with his cane watching all of them to make sure they were not doing anything wrong. Because my grandfather was from a learned family, he was unsure about his daughter getting involved with a working class person. Grandmother Gelsomina whispered to him from the kitchen, “Pssst, pssst, come here.” Nevertheless, my grandfather pretended not to hear her and sat there watching their every move.

The next day, Dad called Mom at work to ask her if everything was okay. She started crying and said, “Oh, Carmen, my father thinks you are rowdy and won’t let me go out with you.”

Dad was determined, so he and the priests thought of a plan that would allow him to see Mom. The priests told my grandparents that they were taking Phyllis to the movies with them, and then they would pick up Carmen, too, and they all went to the movies together. The priests had so much confidence in Dad. They knew he would not do anything to hurt Mom, and this is how their courtship began.

**The Wedding**

My grandmother Annarella was the main person who helped Mom and Dad get together. She knew Mom was a wonderful person because she was at church every day and saw all of her good traits. Because of Grandmom’s persistence, Mom and Dad were allowed to date, and soon after they won the approval of my mother’s father wedding plans began. Mom’s dress was beautiful and she looked absolutely gorgeous in it. Her sister, Jenny, who was as bashful and shy as Mom, stood for Mom as the maid of honor, and Dad’s cousin Fred, who was a happy-go-lucky guy, was best man.

My parents married on September 26, 1937, at Our Lady of Pompei Church by Father Scialdone, who was the pastor at the time. All of Dad’s family and Mom’s family and all of their friends and neighbors attended their beautiful wedding. They rented a hall right down the street from the church where a band played and everyone danced
for hours into the evening. With a huge cake and plenty of food, it turned out to be one of the best weddings ever, mainly because of the love that my parents had for each other. When they looked into each other’s eyes, they shared a lasting look of love seen by everyone present at their wedding and every time they were together. In those days men looked for someone to spend their lives with and build a family, someone to live with forever.

After the wedding Dad took Mom to 3510 Claremont Street, the house in which they would reside for the rest of their lives. The house was near the church, Grandmom and Grandpop DiPietro’s house, and not too far from Grandmother and Grandfather DelGiudice’s home either. They wanted to surround themselves with their families every day.

Mom and Dad’s Simple Lifestyle

Mom served dinner every evening at five o’clock sharp when Dad arrived home from the steel mill. He came home covered in red dust and grime, so immediately took a bath. He called out, “Phil, come here, I need my back washed,” and into the bathroom Mom went because she did everything for him.

They loved each other so much. Dad always quoted some “proverbs.” Mom always tended to everything for him and us. She was the reason Dad worked so hard to keep his family fed and clothed. We never wanted for anything, and I never understood how Dad and Mom managed to accomplish so much with so little. Mom would always fix my hair in beautiful long curls. She would always take time out of her busy day to make her children look simply marvelous. With the little that Mom had to work with, she accomplished amazing feats.

After dinner, which we ate together every night, the children went out and played with friends while Mom and Dad talked to their neighbors. In the summer, Dad sat outside on the corner of the alley in his chair. He said he was catching the breeze coming up from the alley. He listened to the Orioles game on the portable radio he held in his hand. Before evening’s end, my parents’ two closest neighbors always brought their chairs over and sat talking with Mom and Dad.
until dark.

Mom’s friend Irene was short and beautiful with short black hair. She looked just like a movie star. When Ms. Irene walked down the street, all the men turned to look at her gorgeous figure. Her husband, Mr. Matthew, was short like Dad with thin brown hair. He worked hard with Dad at Beth Steel. Ms. Irene and Mr. Matthew had two children. Their son Matty was short and cute with brown hair and glasses. He played with my brother Johnny. Their daughter Elaine was a pretty little thing with huge curls in her hair that her mother fixed for her every day. Ms. Irene dressed her children well and was just as tidy as my mom. Her daughter Elaine and my sister Rosie played together, and they became close friends.

Lucy was a friend of mine who lived across the street. She and I played jacks for hours at a time. Lucy had brown hair and brown eyes and was short and thin. She smiled constantly and laughed a lot, mainly because she beat me at jacks all the time. Life was simple then because we amused ourselves with simple things.

Some summer nights would be so hot that Dad would bring all the mattresses downstairs and we would all sleep on the floor. We kept the doors and windows open and never worried that someone would break in. One morning, when Dad could not stand the heat anymore, he went to our favorite store, Epstein’s on Eastern Avenue, and came home with a huge fan. We wheeled the thing around from room to room because the fan was the only thing that would cool us off.

My parents frequented many stores on Eastern Avenue. One was Silver’s Shoe Store located at 3724 Eastern Avenue right near our favorite place—The Popcorn Store! Silver’s Shoe Store provided good shoes at discounted prices. Mr. Max Silver took care of his regular customers by finding us bargains because he knew that most of his customers had large families. If he took good care of them, they would buy shoes at his store for a long time.

The Popcorn Store was a small place, but they had a huge popcorn machine that popped the corn right in the store-front window. When people saw all of the popcorn jumping about right in front of them, they could not resist buying some. They also sold caramel popcorn that smelled irresistible and melted in your mouth. Often
when Mom finished shopping, she stopped at the store to buy some of these delicious morsels for us.

Shopping centers did not exist at this time. Everyone shopped on “The Avenue” because anything anyone ever needed for themselves or their home was available at stores along Eastern Avenue. All the store owners on “The Avenue” ate lunch at Pozanek’s Restaurant because they cooked their corned beef themselves and served kosher food because so many of the merchants were Jewish. At dinner time, Pozanek’s served regular food like steaks, crab cakes, and hamburgers. On Saturdays, when the wives of shop owners would go shopping, the men gathered at Pozanek’s for drinks while waiting. Later in the evening, the wives met their husbands at the restaurant for dinner. It was a familiar meeting place where everyone enjoyed good, reasonably priced food.

Phyllis and Carmen, wedding photo, September, 26, 1937.

Peachy, Johnny, and Vince DiPietro on the stoop in front of their Highlandtown home at 3510 Claremont Street, Baltimore, Maryland, 1948.
My grandmother Gelsomina DelGuidice, my mother’s mother, was a caring and loving individual. Mom looked exactly like her. She had very soft features that accented her beautiful face. Later in her life, she wore thick glasses because her eyes grew weak from all of the sewing she did to help make ends meet. Many times Mom told me how hard my grandmother had it when she first came to America.

They arrived from Italy in 1914. My grandmother Gelsomina’s family owned an extraordinary vineyard on top of a hill in Naples in the region of Atripalda in southern Italy. The vineyard overlooked the Tyrrhenian Sea’s beautiful clear water, which twinkled like a thousand diamonds. People from all over Italy journeyed to my grandmother’s home to buy grapes for winemaking. My grandmother told Mom that when she was in Italy her family was rich because they had such a great business selling grapes; however, they made the decision to go to America—the land of plenty. But not long after they arrived the Great Depression hit and it was not easy to find good paying jobs.

Grandfather DelGuidice’s Job

My grandfather Raphael was tall with a sharp nose on which his glasses rested. He dressed impeccably every day with a white shirt, suit, and tie, so everyone thought he was rich. Even though my grandfather was a lawyer in Italy, he could not practice law here in America because he could not acquire a license. He had the gift of gab, and neighbors flocked to Grandfather’s home for advice because he was so intelligent and knew the law. Neighbors called him Reguidice, which meant that he was a “king,” because he helped them with their problems.

He got a job working for The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company selling insurance. He rode the streetcar for long hours and col-
lected money that people owed him for their life insurance policies. He went from house to house collecting money from his clients. Sometimes it would only be a dollar or a few cents, but back in the 1930s, a dollar was a lot of money. He told my grandmother that some of the people thought he was using the money for his own purposes. It was only when one of his clients died, and Grandfather brought the family their insurance money, that people started to believe and trust him. Grandfather worked hard because he wanted his children to have a good education, but college was impossible to afford during The Depression and all of his earnings paid for the family’s expenses.

With all the Italian immigrants flooding New York City, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company assigned my grandfather to New York because he spoke Italian. Raphael thought it would be a better opportunity to provide for his family, so they packed up and the insurance company moved them. While Grandfather was in New York, he became the orator in the Sons of Italy where he was highly respected. One time there was a sick child near death who needed to be baptized immediately, so my grandfather was asked to stand for the child during the baptism. The parents, who were also Italian, lived in New Jersey and belonged to the Sons of Italy, which is why he was asked to stand for their child. Guess what the child’s name was? Francis Sinatra! Many years have passed, and I have no way of verifying this, but Mom told me this story and so did my uncle Joe, and they both insisted it was true. All of the people who were involved have passed away, so I will never find out if it was really the famous Francis Albert Sinatra.

While in New York, they lived in an apartment that was like a “commune.” They shared a bathroom with all of the other people who lived on their floor. The bathroom was all the way down the hall, and they had to wait their turn with everyone else to use it. The apartment was not a clean place, but my grandmother worked hard to keep it immaculate because she was a very tidy person.

While they lived there, a huge horse died and was left in the street for such a long time that it decomposed and was covered with maggots. The smell was unbearable and they had to walk past this horrible sight every day to get to their apartment. My grandmother could
not wait until they went back to Baltimore. She was pregnant with Uncle Romelo and she wanted to go home to have the baby.

My grandparents had rented their house to their neighbor’s relatives. But when they came back to Baltimore, the tenants did not want to move out of the house. The renters also did not make payments on the house, so my grandparents almost lost their home. They had to leave their furniture in the moving van for two days under a bridge and move in with friends while they waited for the tenants to move out. My grandfather straightened out matters with the building and loan company. It was a good thing that he was a well-educated person; he could talk his way out of anything because he had the gift of gab. He did not want to lose the house because they had lived there for such a long time.

After they came back to Baltimore, Grandmother Gelsomina got a job sewing buttonholes on coats to help pay expenses. In the meantime, Grandfather’s diabetes got progressively worse. The doctors at Johns Hopkins Hospital, where he went for his treatments, wanted to amputate his leg, but my grandmother would not have it. As the disease progressed, it took its toll on his body and finally took his life in 1940. After he died, my grandmother worked long, hard hours sewing buttonholes to make ends meet. The work ruined her eyesight and she was left wearing extremely thick glasses.

In the meantime, the war began in Europe, and everyone worried about family back in Itlay. The beautiful village of Naples where my grandparents grew up was destroyed and rendered families poor. Grandmother Gelsomina worked hard to send her family clothes and other items to help out, even though my grandmother was living in poverty herself. Times were hard for everyone then, and all of the children pitched in by getting jobs to help pay the bills.

**The Birth of Brother Johnny**

When Mom went into the hospital to deliver my brother, Johnny, Vince and I were sent over to Grandmother DelGiudice’s house to stay with her. I was only two years old then. Needless to say, being of Italian descent and being the grandmother she was, she tried to fatten Vince and me up. We had such a great time there with
her; she was always doing something for us. One day while we were playing in the basement of Grandmother’s house, she actually found us in the middle of the coal bin. We were black from head to toe, but Grandmother did not scold us. She just took us upstairs, gave us baths, and fed us some more. Every time we did something she rewarded us with food, the true Italian way, so when we came back home, we had both gained weight.

At home we found our little brother Johnny waiting for us. He had a round face and his hair was light brown and a little roly-poly body. Mom would forever take good care of all of us, but somehow Johnny was always closest to her.

Sometime after this, a great sadness came over Mom. My grandmother Gelsomina, who was such a pious woman, went to Mass every morning to pray for my uncles. They had joined the Navy to help my grandparents with their money situation, but Grandmother was extremely worried for their safety. So she went to church every day to pray for their well-being and their safe return home. She must have prayed extremely hard because my two uncles both arrived home unharmed. Only their hearts were broken because Gelsomina died before they could get home.

The winter of 1944 into ’45 was bad with a lot of snow and ice everywhere. Early on the morning of January 30, Grandmother Gelsomina left the house for Mass like always. Since the sidewalks were icy, Grandmother stepped out into the street where she was hit by a car and killed. If the driver had stopped to help her, she might have lived. The accident happened under a bridge, so maybe the driver did not see her since it was still dark that morning and she was dressed in black, which she wore everyday since my grandfather passed away. We do not know how long she laid there before someone came to help her, but by the time Mom and the rest of her family found out about it, Grandmother had died. Everyone knew what a hard life my grandmother had; it just did not seem right for her to be killed this way.

Police caught the driver of the car, but nothing happened to him because back then a hit-and-run was not considered a serious offense. The case went to court, but the man was not charged with anything and was dismissed. All of my aunts and uncles were upset
by the way she had died, and that the man did not get any kind of punishment. All of her children were distraught and they missed her terribly. Mom practically stopped eating; she became so thin after her mother’s passing.

Mother’s Siblings

Mom had two sisters and two brothers, and they were all close. Aunt Jenny was the one who kept in contact with Mom every day. Jenny was shy, short, and thin with curly hair and grey eyes. She was also exceptionally religious because my grandmother raised all of her children as strict Catholics. Aunt Jenny displayed religious pictures all around her home, where every other Sunday we visited her and Uncle Ernest. They had three children—Charles, Ezio, and Ernie. Uncle Ernest was tall and thin with a heavy Italian accent. He had blonde curly hair, which he passed on to his three boys. He was a chef by trade, but he knew that the only way his three boys would get ahead was through a good education, and he saw to it that they all went to good schools. Their huge house off Belair Road had a large backyard where we children played while the adults chatted during these Sunday picnics.

Mom’s other sister was Aunt Mary, who was also religious because of her strict upbringing. She had long black hair, and was a little taller than Mom with warm, smiling eyes. Her great government job allowed her to take time off to travel. She was the daredevil type; nothing seemed to bother her. She came and went as she pleased because she never married and did not have any children. She hoped to visit all the holy places in the world, and during one trip to the Holy Land severe fighting broke out in Israel. Mom was so afraid that something would happen to her, but such things never fazed Aunt Mary. Aunt Mary lived in an apartment downtown close to the Basilica of the Assumption, the first roman Catholic Cathedral in America. “Holy grounds” she considered it. She kept Mom and me informed about all the events happening in the city. Aunt Mary was another strong person who constantly involved herself in my life and looked out for my well-being.

Mom had two brothers: Uncle Joe (his Italian name was Sabina)
and Uncle Romelo, the baby of the family. Uncle Joe joined the Navy because there were no jobs and he needed to help his parents pay bills. After Uncle Joe was discharged from the Navy, his friend Guy took him to meet a gracious woman named Dorothy. When the war started on December 7, 1941, Uncle Joe was set to be drafted into the Army, but he rejoined the Navy. After Uncle Joe met Dorothy, he knew that he wanted to spend more time with her. This was the beginning of their long courtship. Aunt Dorothy and Uncle Joe loved each other and wrote to each other the whole time he was stationed in England. Uncle Joe could hardly wait to come home and be with the love of his life. They had that special love because when they looked into each other eyes you just knew they were truly in love. They planned their beautiful wedding, and Uncle Romelo was supposed to be the best man, but he could not come home in time. So Aunt Dorothy’s brother, Anthony Palmerino, stood as their best man and her sister, Marie Palmerino, was the maid of honor. They got married on July 1, 1945, and had a long and happy life together. He rose every morning at 4:30 and ran for an hour, come home, made coffee, and took it to Aunt Dorothy to wake her up. They were the picture of a happy couple.

Uncle Romelo was Mom’s baby brother. He was tall and thin with lots of thick curly brown hair and smiling eyes that would light up the whole room. When he laughed, everyone laughed with him. His brother and all of his sisters would watch out for him. Mom was the oldest child, and she was the one who had to take care of him. My grandparents were busy trying to provide for their family. Mom told us that one time she took Uncle Romelo to watch the fireworks on the 4th of July in Patterson Park. It was not far from her home, and by the time they were ready to leave Patterson Park it was dark. She walked around the park with her little brother for three hours, and she could not find her way home. When Mom found a phone booth and called her parents to tell them what happened, they told her to ask a police officer to help her find her way home. The police officers acted as though Mom was putting them out for asking them for help, but eventually they took her home.

When Uncle Romelo grew up, he was absolutely handsome. He joined the Navy because jobs were scarce and he had to help his par-
ents with expenses. He was stationed on the ship called the *U.S.S. Saturn*. It was a supply ship that brought supplies to boats stationed in the middle of the ocean. One time while the ship was docked in Bayonne, New Jersey, all the sailors went to an Italian restaurant called the Key Hole in Union City. The place belonged to a man named Guy De Martino. In the restaurant was a large bar, and at the end of the bar was this beautiful, short, dark haired young lady named Mary, who worked there as a cashier for her uncle. When Uncle Romelo entered the restaurant, he noticed Mary right away because of her outstanding good looks. One of Mary’s girl friends, Kitty, who also worked there, told Mary that the cute sailor wanted to meet her. Mary’s friend arranged for the meeting, and this is how their courtship began. They waited until Uncle Romelo got out of the service before they got married on September 9, 1947, at Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church in Fairview, New Jersey.

Uncle Joe DelGiudice, his brother, was the best man, and Aunt Mary’s sister, Rita D’Anna, was the maid of honor. Mom, Aunt Jenny, and Aunt Dorothy all went up to New Jersey for the wedding. Dad could not go to the wedding because he had to work. When my aunt and uncle first got married, they came down to Baltimore almost every weekend to visit with Uncle Romelo’s family. He wanted to stay close to his family forever.

**The Tonsil Operations**

Dr. De Marco was a special friend of my DelGiudice grandparents. He looked exactly like my grandfather, and as a member of the Sons of Italy, he did not charge my parents a high fee. Mom took us there all the time when we were sick, and sometimes he would make house calls. One time he told Mom that Vince and I had to have our tonsils removed because we were forever getting colds. The doctor told Mom if he took our tonsils out, it would eliminate all of our sickness. Dr. De Marco performed the tonsillectomies on Vince and me right on the kitchen table. He came into the house with his assistants carrying ether and medicines. I only remember how bright the kitchen looked. Mom covered everything with clean white sheets. The French doors leading to the dining room and the door to
the bathroom were closed. Pots of water boiled on the stove in case Dr. De Marco needed sterile water.

One at a time, we went on top of the kitchen table to have our tonsils removed. Though I was very small, the thing I remember most was how white and bright the room was with all the sheets and the huge lights that Dr. De Marco brought. I am certain Dr. De Marco performed the surgery as a favor to my parents since they did not have a lot of money.

When we look back on that day, Vince and I think it was almost a miracle that we survived and that the house did not blow up. There were flames under the boiling pots of water and there was ether—there might as well have been a bomb in our house! Plus we could have gotten some kind of a serious infection. A Highlandtown kitchen is not as sanitary as an operating room no matter how many white sheets and bright lights and pots of boiling water there are.

Nevertheless, here we are, alive and well today.

Jenny Borchini and Phyllis DiPietro at Joe and Dorothy DelGuidice’s home in Woodlawn after Gelsomina DelGuidice died, April 1945.
My Grandparents DiPietro were married in 1901 in Italy and came to America in 1905. They lived in a village to the east of Rome called Coroppoli Teramo in the Abruzzi Province of Italy. My grandfather Gaetano was in love with Grandmom Annarella's sister and wanted to marry her, but according to Italian custom, the oldest daughter had to get married first. So Grandpop married my grandmother, but their marriage was not a happy one. They were civil to one another, but there was no love between them. They never looked into each other's eyes like my mother and father did.

Grandpop worked very hard farming, but the job did not pay much. He was poor and had a wife and three children to support. People kept telling Grandpop how great it was in America. Grandpop's sister, Adelaide, and his brother, Fiorinde, were already living in America, and they finally persuaded Grandpop to come to America.

When my grandfather decided to leave Italy, my grandmother realized she was not going to see her family again. This was very upsetting to her, especially as a young mother. One of their sons, Pasquale, was young and wanted to stay in Italy with his friends; in fact, while they were boarding the ship Pasquale ran away. Grandmom was hysterical, but Grandpop said that they had to go on to America because everything was arranged.

The trip to America was not pleasant for her. Grandmom was pregnant with Dad; Carmen was going to be his name, and with all of these issues on her mind, she did not have a great experience on the boat. Her first-born son had just ran off and was still in Italy, while everyone else was on their way to America. Grandmom already had two other children, Dominic and Mary, and was pregnant with her fourth child, so she had her hands full on the boat. Dominic was very little then, and a nice Italian boy named Bernardino Di Pasquale helped to take care of Dominic for Grandmom because she was so ill, her stomach was upset during the whole trip to America.
Although immigrants were not allowed on the top decks, the people who worked on the ship felt so sorry for my grandmother that they let her come up on-deck so that she could have some fresh air.

When they first landed in America, Grandpop and Grandmom DiPietro resided in Dunbar, Pennsylvania. My Grandfather’s brother, Fiorindo, and sister, Adelaide, lived in Baltimore, and they persuaded him to move. The family moved to Baltimore and resided at 3812 Claremont Street, where they lived for the rest of their lives.

**Visiting Dad’s Parents**

On Sundays, we would go to visit my grandmother Annarella and grandfather Gaetano. They only lived right down the street from our home, but we would still all pile in the car and Dad would drive us down to Grandmom’s house. My grandfather would be sitting outside with his cane in his hand, right on the corner as if he owned it. Everybody said he looked exactly like President Truman, with his glasses, his size, and his mannerisms. People kidded him about this as they passed him by, but he loved all the attention.

Dad and Mom both came from large families. Dad’s brothers and sisters would also visit my grandmother’s house on Sunday. It was a meeting place where everyone gathered to have fun; you could say we had a family reunion every Sunday. Because my father was bow-legged, his siblings gave him the nickname “Boh.” That’s how much fun and good humor they had with each other.

**My Dad’s Siblings**

Aunt Lena was one of my grandparents’ youngest children. She was lovely, and thin with long black hair. She was forever bringing the family together for one thing or another. She loved these gatherings with her brothers and sisters. Her husband, Uncle Fritz, was tall and extremely handsome, a stately fireman.

He was the most congenial of all the brothers-in-laws. All of us children loved him because of his fantastic personality; he was constantly making us laugh. Aunt Lena wanted all of her siblings with her at all times because she was at her best when they were all to-
together. She got her strength from them.

Uncle Mimi lived at Grandmom's, too. Everyone called him the “Mayor of Highlandtown” because he looked out for the community’s well being and all of the people who lived there. He was short and stocky and looked exactly like my Dad with a little less hair. Actually, all the brothers and sisters looked alike because they all had my grandmother’s full face and large hands.

Uncle Sammy, who has epilepsy, also lived there. Because not much was known about the disease back then, Uncle Sammy was not allowed to attend school, so he was slow and child-like all of his life. Everyone would play with Uncle Sammy because he was like a big kid, and all of us kids would aggravate him so much. He had chewing gum with him at all times, and we bugged him until he would give some to us. He was also short and stocky, and he wore his pants with big suspenders to hold them up.

The adults all gathered together talking in Italian, so we children were not able to understand anything they were saying. My sister said the grownups would be talking about sex, which is why they would talk in Italian.

My cousin Clara's grandparents lived next door to my grandparents. Her grandmother, Adelaide, was my grandfather’s sister. Her family would visit their grandparents on Sunday, and we all played with one another, and became friends as well as cousins. We always stayed amongst ourselves, because we knew better than to interrupt the grown ups. “Children are supposed to be seen and not heard,” my father said. It was one of Dad’s favorite expressions, along with “respect your elders.” He repeated these two sayings to us day in and day out.

My grandmother was such a jolly person, with a smile on her face at all times. She had a round face and huge hands. She wore a black dress, and underneath the dress was a big white petticoat with a huge pocket. She would reach inside of her pocket and give her grandchildren something, but it was hush, hush so no one else would know. She had a big smile, a hug, and a shiny silver dollar for each and every one of us.

Dad's oldest brother was Uncle Pat. He was always laughing and was short and a little on the heavy side with a huge crop of hair. He
was married to Aunt Annie, who was slightly taller than Uncle Pat. She was also on the heavy side with brown hair, and she wore glasses. They had three boys: Tommy, Louis, and Freddie. They would bring them to Grandmom’s and Grandpop’s on Sunday and we had a close relationship with the boys. Uncle Pat and Aunt Annie owned a bar located in Essex not far from Highlandtown, and we would also visit them sometimes on Sunday, because my aunt and uncle could not get away from their business.

Aunt Mary was tall and thin with short brown hair and was Dad’s other sister. She was married to Uncle Alex, who was a thin, medium built man with brown hair and glasses. They had five children—David, Edward, Gloria, Julie, and Mary Rose—who also came to our grandparents’ on Sundays. Aunt Mary and Uncle Alex lived around the corner from Grandmom.

Uncle Joe was Dad’s other brother and was married to Aunt Tina. They had two children—Carl and Kathleen—who also came to Grandmom’s and Grandpop’s on Sunday. We would all play together. Uncle Joe and his family only lived down the street from us, and we would also go to the same schools together with their children.

Uncle Charlie was another brother of Dad’s and he was married to Aunt Esther. They had three children: Ronald, Glenda, and Elaine. We would play with all of our cousins while we were at our grandparents’ house. While the grown ups were together, we had our own get together.

Dad’s Lost Paycheck

I can remember Dad telling us the story of the time he lost his pay envelope in 1926 when he was nineteen. When Dad worked at the Point, the workers were paid in cash. He left work just as he usually did and got on the streetcar to come home, and that was when he discovered he had lost his pay envelope. He was beside himself because he knew he was in a lot of trouble if he lost his pay. He got off the streetcar and backtracked everywhere he had been before looking for the envelope. By the time he gave up it was late. All of his brothers, cousins, and friends—who all worked at the Point because it was the only good-paying job in town—had gone home. He was
all alone and he did not know anyone who would lend him money to take the streetcar home. Dad wound up walking all the way home from Sparrows Point to Highlandtown, which is about a ten-mile walk.

When Dad arrived home, he was met by his worried mother. Dad was a reliable person who was on time for dinner every night. Dad would tell us if you were late for dinner, you did not get fed. His parents had seven children, and it was hard feeding all of them. After he told his mother what had happened, she picked up her skirt, and gave him some money. She said, “Carmen, here is some money for you, and be quiet and don’t say a thing to your father, and I won’t tell him what happened to you.”

My grandmother knew if he told his father, he would not believe him and he would have probably gotten a beating. In those days, they would say, “Spare the rod and spoil the child.” This was another one of my Dad’s favorite expressions. Grandmom was Dad’s savior, and he never said “no” to her. Whenever she asked him to do anything, he was constantly there for her. Dad was really touched by the kindness she showed him. Even as a grown man, he went to her home to repair whatever was broken. He was always one of her favorites.

**Grandfather DiPietro’s Job**

Grandfather DiPietro owned a bakery in Highlandtown. The bakery was right in the basement of the house. They delivered bread to the neighbors by horse and carriage for two cents a loaf. He sold bread to the whole neighborhood and everyone came to him to buy dough to make their own bread and pizza. He had a great business. He was partners with his brother and sister, and they made enough money from the business to bring the rest of their family over from Italy. Then, they all worked together at the bakery. Both of the brothers and their sister developed pneumonia and were hospitalized. They lost a lot of their business and it was hard to retrieve the customers that they lost. Then my grandfather’s brother Fiorindo decided to move to Essex and left the business to my grandfather and his sister, Adelaide. Grandfather then sold the business and went to work for the railroad, making $8 a week.
Years later, while waitressing at Sabatino’s in Little Italy, I met a man who owned a bakery located in Highlandtown near my grandparents’ house. When Mr. Tsakalos found out who my grandfather was, he told me that my grandfather sold him his business. Grandpop Gaetano even took him around and introduced him to all his customers. So my grandfather helped Harry Tsakalos start his business with his father-in-law Steve Paterakis—the famous H&S Bakery.

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