

a lady. She remembered a beautiful large hat and an elegant hat pin, to go with a fashionable new suit and lacy ruffled blouse. She had never worn a hat in Italy, rarely shoes! She had difficulty balancing the hat on her head; then she would regale us with laughter as she walked from one end of the kitchen to the other showing us her balancing act.

My mother and father met in a rather strange and romantic way. My father had been in Canada now for ten years. He had never returned to Italy. At twenty-three his drive and ambition had made him a foreman on the railroad. Working for him were many young men who came from his home town. One of them was my Mother's brother, Rocco. He had a picture of his family which he proudly showed to everyone, which included a picture of his sister. My father would tell us the story of how he fell in love with the picture of my mother and vowed to marry her. When he left at fourteen years of age, Mother was a child of nine. He cajoled my mother's brother to send her a picture of himself and immediately wrote to the family to ask her hand in marriage. My mother did not fall in love with his picture but she was a wily, calculating soul: she argued to herself that, if he had been daring enough to go to Canada at thirteen and was now a foreman keeping his Mother and brother and sister in comfort, he would do well by her. They were married on November 21, 1904 in the worst downpour and deluge the town had ever had. A bad omen, the whole village thought. Poor Aquilina marrying an unknown, an expatriate who had lived in Canada for eleven years and never came home. It turned out to be one of those rare marriages of love, devotion and understanding.

As a child, I hated being "Italian." I resented the "dirty-dago-wap syndrome" of the twenties and early thirties. I wanted to be like everyone else. I wanted to belong, but no one, it seemed, would let me. I was reminded day-after-day that I was different. I was Italian. When I asked my father why I was called "wap," he would answer, "Don't worry about it. Just know more than they know, have more and they will respect you." "Achieve" became the answer to my dilemma. I set about it with a vengeance. It became an all-consuming compulsion. I had other frustrations, too — I loved to play baseball, but the boys on the street refused to have me on their team. I was a girl and, even though I could swing a mean bat, baseball was out of bounds! My father, to soothe my bruised feelings, would often say, "There's nothing a boy can do that a girl can't do better.

Beat them in school and show them." It soothed my bruised pride and my ego. I set out to do just that.

I was a real tomboy as a child. I hated dolls and broke the china heads off any that were given to me. I could take on and beat up any two boys together — especially if they taunted me with, "You're a dirty dago." That was war. My sister, always prim and proper, would run to the security of home. I would turn and defiantly take on all and sundry — many heads I cracked! Unfortunately for me, the mothers of the boys and girls I had trounced would go to my mother and complain about that little rough and tough Laura. My mother would apologize in her broken English and haul me in; her threats and admonitions in Italian were masterpieces. She ranted and raved and scolded and brought down all the angels and saints to witness her disgrace — to no avail, I kept beating them all. My father heard all the details when he came home from his many trips. He would chuckle, pretend to be cross, then when Mother wasn't looking, he'd wink and say, "Next time, take on three." Support like that was invaluable. It was superb ego building. How often had I heard my father say, "If only you had been a boy, you would have conquered the world." Did I want to conquer the world? Hardly! But I did rebel at the fact that because I was born female, my horizons were limited. Because I was the offspring of immigrants, I would always have the ethnic albatross to carry. Perhaps my aggressiveness stemmed from these two facts, or perhaps from my parents' makeup. They were two very strong characters, both exceedingly ambitious for their children but in different ways, born of the soil, raised in adversity, literally pulling themselves up from poverty to riches. They were determined that their children would have all the benefits that money and education could buy.

The soil of Calabria is in my soul, the blood of peasants runs through my veins. My feminism was nurtured long, long ago, in the rolling hills of Calabria, in a little town called Figline, by a blacksmith's daughter by the name of "Aquilina" and by a father, little schooled but two generations ahead of his time, who made me believe that "there is nothing a man can do, that a woman can't do better." Both of them in different ways influenced me enormously.

To them I owe my *testa-dura-Calabrese!*

How To Kill Your Father

He breaks a promise on the road to
Firenze.

You will not speak to him all through
the drive in the Tuscan hills,
the rented Alfa Romeo bitches
but the poplar's got your tongue,
long and green and aloof.

You abandon the car and walk
into a Roman afternoon,
you know how to kill your father,
he knows how to kill you.

The wind is waving little white
handkerchiefs wilting in the heat,
they are for tears and for truce
but your eyes are still red for quarrel.

Your head is being kneaded
like dough in the noon
baker's hand. Your flesh
sizzles on the skewers
of your bones. Then evening
comes like a nervous sweat,
as anger condenses,
dew in cool grass.

You are alone on the highway to the
sun.

Your north american education
has taught you how to kill a father,
but you are walking down an Italian
way, so you will surrender
and visit him in the hospital
where you will be accused
of wishing his death
in wanting a life
for yourself.

A scorpion's sting darkening
your heart buries July in Italy.

Mary di Michele

...from *Bread and Chocolate*
(Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1980).