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When in Rome

Written by Nicky Pellegrino

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When in Rome

Nicky Pellegrino



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Our Lady Of Grace

On every door there is a photograph. They show us as we used to be – not weathered or worn; not bent by age and nearly finished with life. On some doors there are photographs of smiling brides linking arms with long-gone husbands. On others, women holding babies or young girls in white Communion gowns. We were beautiful, strong and healthy. We were young.

Here in the Our Lady of Grace Rest Home we live behind those doors. There is a photograph pinned to mine just like all the rest. They took it from the old frame now tucked away with the other remnants of my life in the bottom drawer of the wardrobe. Few of the staff ever pauses to look and none have asked me about it. They must assume the man beside me is my husband but, of course, he never was. It would have been impossible.

He is smiling and so handsome it could break your heart. His dark hair has been parted at the side and marshalled into a neat quiff, his shoulders seem broad thanks to sly padding in his smart suit jacket. To me he looks tired but then I know the story behind the photograph; I remember everything about the time it was taken far more clearly than I recall what happened last week or even yesterday.

I never tell anyone his name. The older ones, if they had heard of him, might not believe it and the young ones wouldn't care. Perhaps sooner or later he'll be recognised, for he hasn't been forgotten, I'm sure of that. But really, who would put us together? Who would imagine that once my

life tangled with his and changed entirely?

Some day I may share my story if I find a person with time to listen. But I won't blurt it out in the middle of a brisk bed bath or try to talk as my pillows are plumped and my coverlet straightened and they ask, 'How are you feeling today Signora?' They never bother to wait for a reply.

My story doesn't begin with him, anyway. It starts with a woman leaning out of the window of an ivy-covered building in Trastevere and calling down into the narrow street below: 'Serafina ... Serafina ... Sera-fee-en-aaaa.'

Golden Days

‘Serafina ... Serafina ... Sera-fee-en-aaaa.’ My mother’s voice could be heard through closed doors; it reached down flights of stairs and, when she leaned out of the window of our building in Trastevere, echoed all the way down to the narrow street below.

It was me she called most often since I was the eldest of her three girls. When laundry needed taking to the *lavanderia* or food fetched from the market or ribbons tied in my sisters’ hair, mine was the name she shouted. ‘Serafeena.’

My mother was still beautiful then. Even wearing a faded housedress with her dark hair pulled back from her face and caught in a clump at the nape of her neck, she looked impressive. She had full lips painted the colour of coral and eyes shaped like a cat’s, which she would line carefully with black every evening before reaching for the shiny white handbag with the gold clasp and going out for the night.

Her clothes were beautifully tailored – dresses with wasp waists and full skirts, little gypsy tops that showed off her shoulders. Most things she had made on the sewing machine she kept in our bedroom. My mother might have been a seamstress except she had found another way to make money, a way that she preferred.

In the evenings it was her habit to leave my sisters and me with the dirty dinner dishes and enjoy a leisurely *aperitivo* with friends in the nearest bar before they all went to work. We were used to being left alone. Mamma expected us to tidy up then go to bed early but of course we disobeyed her.

Some nights we pulled out the magazines she had brought home and stared at pictures of movie stars: Rita Hayworth, Ava Gardner and our own Gina Lollobrigida. What might it be like to be so famous and so beautiful?

Mamma didn't mind us looking through her magazines but she might have been cross if she had seen me pull her precious records from their sleeves, put them on the turntable and carefully lower the needle. She had so much music: American jazz, Neapolitan love songs, even some opera. But my favourite singer, the one whose voice cut a slice from my heart and left me shivering with pleasure, was Mario Lanza.

'He isn't even a real Italian,' my sister Carmela always sneered. 'And look at him in this picture – he's chubby.'

'But listen to him sing,' I argued. 'Is anything more beautiful?'

'If you play that record too many times you'll wear it out and then Mamma will know what you've been up to,' Carmela told me. She was fourteen, the age I had been when I was taken out of school so I could help look after her and my littlest sister Rosalina.

Carmela herself had a beautiful voice. Even singing along to Mamma's records it sounded fantastic. Often in the warmer months, after collecting her and Rosalina from school, I would walk them up to Piazza Navona where Carmela would sing for the tourists.

She had a favourite place to stand, right beside one of the fountains. As soon as she opened her mouth people gathered and began to drop coins into the straw hat we put on the ground. Sometimes Rosalina and I harmonised, for we could sing a little too. But it was Carmela who had the real talent. We dreamed that one day she'd be discovered and then we'd all be rich.

Once the crown of the hat was covered with lire we'd stop to count it up. If there was enough money we would treat ourselves to ice creams or Coca-Cola then go to see a movie.

Musicals were what we preferred, often watching the same ones over and over. I'd seen *Serenade* so many times I think I knew it off by heart. And it was the same with *The Toast of New Orleans* and *Because You're Mine* – all the Mario Lanza films.

'You're in love with him, aren't you?' Carmela accused.

'So what if I am?' I replied.

I couldn't see anything wrong with being in love with a movie star. Mario Lanza was better than any real man I had met. His eyes sparkled, his smile was kind. To sit in a darkened auditorium staring at him on the screen was comforting. And when he sang 'Be My Love' it felt genuine and perfect, the way romance was meant to be. He was so different to the Roman boys who stared as I walked by, chasing me with catcalls and whistles. Or the too-friendly older men who must have known I was my mother's daughter.

I suppose I was a pretty girl. I had my mother's lips and liked to think my grey-green eyes came from my father, although I had never seen a picture of him. My hair was sleek and dark, swept back in a high ponytail. I wore wide skirts, well-pressed blouses buttoned to the neck, a narrow belt around my waist. And I was taller than other girls, however much I rounded my shoulders to bring myself down to their level. No wonder people stared.

Mamma was proud of my looks. She used to paint my face with make-up and exclaim at how much older it made me seem. She covered my eyelids with shimmery gold and stained my lips pink. I always scrubbed off every scrap of it as soon as she would let me.

I wonder if Mamma ever guessed what Carmela, Rosalina and I did with our summer afternoons. She may have chosen not to notice. Most days she slept late and then took a long bath, plucked her eyebrows, painted her nails. Even if she had known that my sisters missed school altogether at times, she might not have cared. So long as we could count well

enough to tell if we were being short-changed at the market in Testaccio, Mamma was happy.

The only thing she insisted was that we all study a little English. She'd learned to speak some herself for the Americans during the war and made us practise a new phrase every day. Already it had come in useful. The tourists listening to Carmela in the Piazza Navona seemed to like it if we greeted them in their own language, wishing them a happy holiday. Often they would laugh and hand over a few more coins.

'I was born singing,' Carmela would call out to them. 'Stay and listen to more of my songs. I know lots of American ones as well as Italian.'

And then she might sing 'Be My Love' because she knew it was my favourite, effortlessly hitting the notes, her voice like sweet peaches and warm honey.

'The minute I look old enough I'll find a job as a nightclub singer,' Carmela promised as we sat beside the fountain eating our ice creams. 'Some day my voice will make me famous. And then I'll buy a big palazzo near the sea and we'll all live there together when I'm not making records and movies.'

'I don't want to live in a palazzo by the sea,' Rosalina complained, licking the drips of pistachio running from her cone. 'I want to stay here in Rome and sell *gelato* in Piazza Navona.'

'You'd eat more of it than you sold,' I told her, laughing. 'Your stall would never have any *gelato* left.'

'Yes it would,' she insisted. 'And I'd be richer than Carmela because I'd have all the best flavours. Then I'd get a big apartment in Trastevere and we'd have our own beds instead of having to share.'

Every night the three of us went to sleep squashed into the same double bed. When Mamma came home, often very late, Rosalina was lifted out and placed on a mattress on the floor because she was the smallest and slept most soundly. Waking to find herself there in the morning she always grizzled and

tried to push herself back beneath the covers with us.

Our apartment was so very tiny, just two poky rooms in a crumbling building; one where we all slept and the other a sitting room with a gas burner where I cooked dinner each night. The space was damp, dark and cluttered with our belongings. We didn't even have a bathroom – only a shared room at the end of the hall where we washed and used the toilet. Perhaps we might have found something nicer if we had been prepared to move to another part of the city but Mamma always refused.

'We are *Trasteverini* ... we live in the heart of Rome,' she told us. 'Why would we want to be anywhere else?'

She loved the maze of narrow streets, the tall terracotta buildings with arched doorways and plants scrambling over walls, the overhanging laundry, the old signora sitting outside her front door shelling peas and soaking up the morning sun, the men who set folding tables on the cobblestones and argued over card games for half the afternoon, the gaudy street-corner shrines. Mamma liked the life of Trastevere.

Every Sunday she took us to morning Mass in the ancient church in Piazza di Santa Maria. Always we slipped in a little late and took our places in the back pews, staring down the rows of columns towards the shining mosaics above the altar. Mamma wore a scarf to hide hair as bright as burnished copper and fastened her dress modestly at the throat. She bowed her head and closed her eyes while she prayed. Well before the service was over she gathered us up, and with a finger held to lips, herded us back outside. Many years later I understood why. There were men in Santa Maria that may have felt awkward to see my mother there and wives who might have guessed why.

As soon as we were out in the piazza, she would pull the scarf from her hair. 'Which café shall we go to, girls?' she'd call, already gayer and more like her usual self. 'Serafina, isn't it your turn to choose? Where would you prefer?'

Our Sunday treat was being allowed to sit with Mamma, shaded by sun umbrellas or in a booth beside a bar, and order whatever we wanted from the menu. We took turns to pick which café we would visit. Rosalina loved the one in Piazza di Santa Maria because usually there were children she could play with beside the fountain, Carmela liked to try a different place every time and my very favourite, as all my family knew, was hidden away down a narrow alley and felt as though it hadn't changed in centuries.

Mamma spoiled us on Sundays, treating us to deep dishes of *gelato* and too many cakes while she sipped at her espresso and smoked a cigarette. Often she might buy a copy of *Confidenze* magazine from the kiosk in the piazza and, as she leafed through, she would criticise the stars whose pictures we all pored over. 'See this Sophia Loren ... such a shame about her nose ... so sharp and her nostrils are too large. Pity, eh? And Gina Lollobrigida, lovely but look at her hair, it's always a mess.' She smoothed her own hair as she said it. 'You'd think with all her money she could do something with it.'

'You should be a movie star, Mamma,' Rosalina told her through a mouthful of cream-filled *cornetto*. 'You are much more beautiful than the signora in the magazine.'

Mamma laughed and pinched my little sister's cheek affectionately. 'Would you like it if I was famous, *cara*?'

'Could I be famous, too? And Carmela and Serafina?' my sister asked.

'I suppose so ... why not?'

'Then yes, I would like it,' Rosalina decided.

It was Carmela who found the gossip item tucked away inside Mamma's magazine. 'Oh, look, there's something here about Mario Lanza.' She frowned as she tried to make out the words. 'I think it says he's coming to Rome.'

'Let me see.' Like Carmela I was a slow reader and made hard work of it. Tracing each line with my finger, I mouthed

the words slowly. ‘Mario Lanza is rumoured to be filming a movie in Italy called *Arrivederci Roma*. He will be arriving here from his home in America along with his wife Betty and his four children ... Oh and look, there is a picture of them at the bottom of the page. Don’t they all look beautiful?’

My mother stared at the magazine for such a long time. I wondered if she was putting herself in the photograph beside Mario, imagining herself in the stylish coat with draped sleeves that his wife wore, hand in hand with perfect children in matching outfits.

I waited, expecting her to find some criticism to make, but for once it seemed she couldn’t.

‘Do you think we will get to meet him, Mamma? Ask for his autograph?’ Carmela always pretended not to care about Mario Lanza but even she seemed excited. ‘Maybe if he’s staying here in Rome we’ll hear him sing?’

Mamma shrugged and muttered, ‘Perhaps ... We’ll see’, which meant she thought it was unlikely.

Once we had eaten our fill of sweet things, we left the café and followed the winding lanes of Trastevere back to our own street. Mamma liked to rest on Sunday afternoons, slathering her face with cold cream to soften her skin and rolling curlers in her hair before lying down for a nap. ‘Give me some peace, girls,’ she’d mutter. ‘It’s such a lovely afternoon, why don’t you take a walk somewhere? Just be sure you’re back in time to cook your sisters some pasta, Serafina.’

I never appreciated how much freedom we had, walking from one side of Rome to the other, going wherever we pleased. When we were thirsty Carmela would take the hat from her head, put it on the ground and begin to sing. Soon enough it was filled with enough money for us to find a bar and buy bottles of ice-cold *aranciata*. If we were among the thick crowds of tourists near the Colosseum or the Pantheon and Carmela was in good voice then the hat filled so much faster and we could afford slices of pizza or *tramezzini*, the

triangles of soft white bread filled with savoury things. We might even take a tram ride home.

Usually as we neared our apartment we would hear Mamma's voice well before we saw her, lighted cigarette in hand, leaning out over the narrow terrace where we grew our herbs and tomatoes, calling out my name.

'Serafina ... Serafina ... Serafeenaaaaa.'