

## CROSSING THE ATLANTIC

Few recipients are blessed with having lived in two great countries, from two distant continents. As it happens: I am one of them.

Crossing the great Atlantic was an agonizing nightmare, the degree of which can only be understood by those who suffered from the same weakness: *sea sickness*. Unlike normal people who were able to indulge themselves in the exquisite cuisine and impeccable hospitality of the trans-Atlantic trip, my sixteen-day voyage was mostly filled with resentment and discomfort.

The year was 1960. The ship was called the Olympia, an ocean-liner made of structural steel and decorative wood. While my experience aboard her decks should have been pleasurable, instead, it was tainted with regret, despair, and a feeling of helplessness. On the day of our departure, my whole universe changed, the knowledge of

having left everything and everyone behind suddenly became a haunting revelation.

On calm days, it felt as though the ship was motionless. The only evidence of our forward progress was the small gentle waves slipping against the ship's steel flanks. The Olympia would split a groove along the ocean surface like a blade of buffalo grass cutting the prairie wind, silently, without effort.

As the morning sunrise laid its brilliant rays on the ocean surface, and the crisp salty mist brushed against my face, the majesty of the moment transformed me. It revealed that hidden place within me where my inner peace existed, allowing a sense of serenity and tranquility to envelop me.

The morning hours offered those things without sound, in a peaceful quietness, in the presence of its vastness, under the watchful eyes of blue skies and deep blue waters.

The sunsets were even more breathtaking. Bright orange and deep red colors piercing through the sky became a wondrous phenomenon. I stood leisurely on her deck, observing the expressions of the poor immigrant souls as they leaned against her rails, overlooking

the endless sea. Even as an eleven-year-old, I could see their anxieties melting away. Their minds became wandering universes, searching, gradually being absorbed by the excitement and magic of the moment, while their imagination wildly fantasized the opportunities awaiting them in the promised land.

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The New World offered no more understanding than the merciless voyage. Ellis Island was a battlefield of rifling questions directed at foreign ears. We, the newly arrived immigrants knew nothing of the English language and therefore could not answer the questions directed at us.

My father and I arrived in the United States one year prior to the arrival of my mother and the rest of our family members. Cleveland became our new home, and the cultural differences revealed themselves quickly. My mind kept embracing my close-knit family and the vast number of relatives we had left behind. The Italian laid-back approach to rules and the freedoms of my youth were in stark contrast to America's rigid structures.

My first six months in America were challenging and chaotic. I didn't know how to speak English. With no friends and faced with a new language, schooling was difficult and unpleasant. The environment certainly didn't feel like home. My father and I were left to navigate the unfamiliar territory.

My freedom seemed to be lost. However, even with all the setbacks, I learned to speak English in less than six months.

Living with my Aunt Rose for a short time was a time of family bonding. Even though my aunt cared deeply for me, I nonetheless, dreaded being away from my real Italian home.

Unfortunately, while there, I felt like a prisoner. Every day, Aunt Rose would send me to my room to study. During my idle time, I would have to go outdoors to pick dandelion weeds from an enormously large yard.

An unpleasant incident occurred in the very first week. I was bused to school. The school bus dropped me off a few houses away from Aunt Rosy's house. As I got off the bus, I desperately needed to go to the bathroom. Logically, not wanting to pee in my pants, I whipped that baby out and as I was walking, I commenced peeing along

the roadway. Not only was West Pleasant Valley Road a busy street, but my Aunt Rose also witnessed the occurrence.

Arriving home, my aunt asked. “What were you doing while walking along the road?”

“I had to go to the bathroom.” I replied.

“In this country, we don’t do those kinds of things!” She scolded.

To me, an eleven-year-old kid coming from a small village in Italy, peeing along the road didn’t seem such a big deal, but clearly, America did not view it the same way.

In Italy, I had was no supervision. I was free to do whatever my little heart desired. With my large number of friends and cousins, we roamed the countryside, climbing olive trees and searching for nesting yellow canaries. We walked the same ancient dirt roads our Roman forefathers had walked. We were young Italians, and our Italian blood ran hot under our sleeves.

Conversely, America had nothing but rigid requirements. Even the playgrounds felt like cages. Steel swings and monkey bars built over concrete, surrounded by chain-link fences offered no escape for my independent spirit. I saw no beauty in their structure. For certain, I was not having any fun being in America. I suppose I simply hated

being where I was. I would plead with my dad: “Let's go home, let's just go home.” His constant reply would be: “We need to give it a chance.” He would ultimately end up being correct, but at the time, I certainly did not share his feelings. America was yet to become my new home.

Life lessons continued to present themselves with lightning speed and heart-breaking accuracy. Christmas was just around the corner, and my biggest revelation would be forthcoming.

Christmas in Italy was a religious celebration. The gifts were simple. Stockings were hung by the fireplace. Finding a chocolate candy bar, or perhaps an apple or an orange was a delightful treasure. That was the extent of gift giving. That was all I knew, that was all that I expected.

Surprisingly, things were not the same in this country. Arthur, Aunt Rose's son, and my new-found cousin, rushed to the Christmas tree as soon as we woke up Christmas morning, enthusiastically proclaiming that Santa had arrived.

Arthur, also eleven years old, was beaming with joy as he commenced opening the gift wrapped in a four by eight-foot piece of

plywood that served as the platform for his new electric train set. The Lionel Train Set came complete with railroad buildings, mountains, rubber trees and steel tracks that could be assembled in any configuration. In addition, he received an elaborate building set, a pair of western-style pistols with holsters, and other smaller toys. It was an overwhelming event to witness. Yet, in stark contrast, my gift was a package consisting of three pairs of Fruit-of-The-Loom underwear and a flannel shirt.

Looking back, I should have been grateful, and I was. It was not that I had any grand expectations that Christmas morning, but the glaring disparity between our presents was humbling for me, for I too was just an eleven-year-old boy. It was not so much that I expected to be treated equally, as it was my dislike of the feeling I had just experienced.

The incident was devastating beyond belief. It was the most humiliating experience of my young life. I thought about leaving the room, yet somehow, with maturity beyond my years, I maintained my composure and made great efforts to conceal my disappointment. It was an eye-opening revelation. But I learned, even at that early age, the realities of being treated *differently*.

The incident brought to light America's capitalistic system. The power of money affected me so deeply that I vowed to never again be bound to an economically low standard. The event ignited a burning desire and ambition to succeed within me that the flames have never been allowed to burn out, never allowed to die.

That night as we were preparing for bed, I cried out: "BASTA PAPA (*Enough Dad*) ANDIAMO (*Let's go.*)" My father, as usual simply turned towards me and gently replied:

"We need to give it time."

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*Antonio* was my father's name; the name originated from the ancient Latin classic *Antonius*. To me, my father's name signified power and influence.

My admiration for my father was great during most of my life. It became as complex as the diverse countries we had become a part of. Our confrontations were difficult during our early years. But all in all, I was his first-born son, and in the old Italian tradition, that was a position of significance.

Our father/son relationship was molded by old country traditions. I wanted to embrace the American way of life, while my father desperately clung to his old-world ways. He viewed any change to those traditions as a betrayal of our Italian customs, causing our relationship to be difficult for a few years. Old customs, deeply rooted, initiated unspoken feelings between us. Sadly, the cultural burdens were stubbornly unforgiving and deeply engrained in our way of life.

As an eleven-year-old, I admired my father's electrifying personality, his hardworking mannerism, his dark hair, streaked with strands of gray, together with his slender athletic physique. He was a man of many talents, enhanced by a driving desire to succeed.

In my mind, I saw my father as a mighty Roman warrior. I was extremely proud of him. I was also proud to be his son. During that one year of togetherness, we became a team, battling the new and different customs of the new world.

It took a great deal of courage for my father to leave behind all his worldly possessions. In Italy he was an accomplished landowner, something most people only dreamed of achieving. His home was free and clear. He owned his own vineyards, his own olive orchards, his

own fields for planting and harvesting. Most astounding: he was his own man; he had never punched a timeclock.

Yet, my father had chosen to leave everything behind and embark on a new adventure, an exploration that would hopefully bring prosperity and wealth to his family. During our trip, his optimism was overflowing, for America's streets were allegedly paved with gold.

One year later, shortly after the arrival of the rest of the family, which was a happy occasion, things began to change. The friendly mild-mannered father who had not yelled at me during our year together, suddenly turned into an agitated middle-aged man with five kids and a wife to feed and support.

The sudden and dramatic change in his temperament was due to the added stress of working two jobs and supporting a large family. That additional burden began to take its toll. Not only that, later I learned that upon Mom's arrival, Dad rented a two-bedroom house on the west side of Cleveland. The landlord had informed my father that the noise must be kept to a minimum, along with the warning that if we were too loud, he would evict us. It certainly didn't take long for the dynamics of our family to change

My father was under the impression that his children were not showing sufficient *respect* for him. And I suppose, using his old-world thinking as a unit of measurement, he was probably correct. There were simply too many instances where we were not complying with his orders and/or wishes. Having five teenagers wanting to experience America's freedom did not bode well with his way of thinking, which included the unfair double standard that Dad applied to his girls, versus his sons. The boys were free to do whatever they wished, while the girls were restricted to chaperoned events. At times my father was so frustrated that occasionally he would resort to locking my sister in his wine cellar to prevent her from going out.

It was a fundamental problem. My father's five children desired to immerse themselves in the American lifestyle. Thus, our desires greatly conflicted with my father's old-world traditions and views.

After a few years, my displeasure with the American way-of-life eroded rather significantly. At the age of fifteen I began working at the Chagrin Valley Nursery. My father and many of our Italian friends worked there on weekends. Our job was to dig trees and shrubbery for landscaping projects. My beginning pay was \$0.50 cents per hour.

I was diligent and frugal with my earnings. Obtaining a driver's license at the age of sixteen was my primary focus. When that date arrived, I politely asked my father to sign the paperwork. For some unknown reason, my father refused. I assumed he figured that I was advancing much too quickly into the American mainstream. I resorted to paying an older man to pose as my father and sign the paperwork.

License in hand, I needed a vehicle to drive. I once again asked Dad if he would sign for me. His answer was the same: he refused to sign. My very first vehicle was a stick-shift 1959 Plymouth, which I purchased by once again having an older man pose as my father.

I suppose this would be a good time to confess that I never resented my father's actions in refusing to sign for me. I was totally aware of his mode of thinking. Of course, later in life, with the passage of time, he changed. When his American born son, turned sixteen, my father, with grey-white hair telling tales of years gone by, bought him a brand-new Camaro.

The irony of the matter was that after I got my car, I became the family's chauffeur, but that was a position that I despised.

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I absolutely loved and adored my mother. Looking back, I feel a certain degree of guilt for all the problematic torture we children put her through. However, I hated accompanying her on her shopping trips.

Being with someone who constantly negotiated the price of everything when shopping at the West Side Market, while the prices were clearly posted, labeled us not as normal customers, but as immigrants. She haggled prices not only at the West Side Market, but also at the grocery store, the clothing stores, and everywhere else.

As a seventeen-year-old teenager, being embarrassed was not a strong enough word to describe my mortification. I felt the process of negotiating better prices brought me down to the level of an uneducated immigrant, a label I wanted nothing to do with.

On many occasions, to avoid being humiliated, I would simply walk away from Mom's side. Upon my eventual return, my mother would ask: "*Dove sei andato?*" (where did you go?) My response would always be: "*I had to go to the bathroom.*"

But my mother was no fool. She figured out a way to beat the odds, and the fixed prices. It seemed we would always find ourselves at the West Side Market half an hour or so before closing. That was when she would get the best bargains. After all, the farmers would

much rather sell their produce than take their goods back home. She would give me a big broad smile at her triumphs, and I admit, I would smile right back feeling a sense of pride for my mother.

In retrospect, I know I should have been more understanding. Negotiating prices was a way of life for my parents. That was the standard way of doing things in the old country, they were merely doing what came natural for them.

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My middle teenage years were troublesome for me and my father. I was a young lion full of ambition. Dad was set in his old-world ways, happy with his old lifestyles and the Italian traditions. It was those traditions that he had hoped would survive within the family.

Even though he had previously objected to my obtaining my driver's license and the purchasing of my vehicle, my father decided that he would like to learn to drive. He asked if I would give him some lessons.

Even though my 1959 Plymouth was a stick-shift, it would not have been impossible to teach my father to drive. However, at the time, I did not give him the moral support and encouragement that would have been so easy to give. I was seventeen years old. Perhaps I was

carrying a certain degree of resentment. At that young age, I wasn't the tolerant, understanding teacher I should have been. Instead of encouraging the general progression of learning, I overemphasized the difficulty. I would be critical of all his minor errors. Encouragement and praise did not exist in my vocabulary. It was no wonder that my father made the ultimate decision to give up on learning to drive. I regret my impatience with my father to this day.

Driving a standard car requires a degree of coordination with an overall knowledge in the working mechanics of the vehicle. My father, in his defense, had already overcome many obstacles and hardships. I'm quite certain that with the right encouragement, he would have mastered the skill of driving.

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With the progression of time, my father's theory of "*we need to give it time,*" proved to be entirely correct. My father and all his children became extremely successful. America became our new home, and we found her streets were indeed paved with gold.

