

*Garden
of Hope*

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“Come on, come on, answer the phone,” I impatiently commanded my brother. “Just pick up the stinking phone!” My frustration level, not to mention anger, was becoming more difficult to control with every failed attempt to connect with my older brother.

Suddenly, like a cat stalking its prey, my husband appeared out of nowhere; verbally pouncing on me. *Caught in the act!*

“Trina!” he reprimanded me, “exactly how many times have you dialed Joey’s number today, huh?”

I found myself responding to him with my Cheshire cat grin and a weak shrug of my shoulders.

“Sweetheart, did it ever occur to you they may be out of town?” Sal asked, now a bit mellower.

Bah, now he’s attempting to placate me; that’s so annoying, I thought to myself.

“Sal, I just don’t understand why he won’t respond to me on Christmas of all days. I never would have predicted he’d grow to be such a knucklehead!” Sarcastically, I complied, “Okay, okay, watch me. See ... I’m putting down the phone. Are you satisfied? And ... furthermore ... I promise not pick it up again. Well, at least not today,” I sweetly smiled.

“That’s my girl,” Sal chuckled.

Slinking away, my grey matter was running a marathon. So, *that's that? Big brother Joey doesn't give two hoots about me?* Settling into my favorite fireside chair, I wrestled with the reality of that concept. No, I could not, would not, swallow that bitter pill. I refused to wrap my brain around the ugly fact that we had grown apart.

But then, it's not just me; he's shunning our entire family.

Gazing out my frosty windows, I was immediately mesmerized by my frequent visitor, a beautiful male cardinal. There he sat: vibrant red feathers, black mask, and distinctive head crest lending a certain mystique to this my favorite of all birds. He was proudly perched on a low, snow covered branch, oblivious to the fresh swirling snow.

Oh to be similarly impervious to issues swirling around me! Never going to happen; that is just not who I am.

After a few calming moments, I promised myself it was time to enjoy this special day and put aside the whole “Joey business.”

My daydreaming was rudely interrupted by the sounds of Sal opening and closing doors. He was already loading gifts into the car, which was my cue to get ready. *What to wear? What to wear?*



Catching my dresser mirror reflection jolted me out of my pity party. My childlike image hopping around my bedroom, one shoe on and one shoe off, sparked a giggle. That same reflected image was so familiar and reminiscent of my childhood days. Even back then, an elusive shoe or sock pitted me against my enemy, the ever ticking clock. Hopping around my bedroom, feverishly racing against either my church or school clock, was an all too common occurrence. Some habits die hard.

Silently upbraiding myself, I questioned for the gazillionth time why the heck I continue to be late. I'm a grown woman—a professional grown woman for goodness sake.

The answer is simple: Trina, you're late because you can never find your other shoe, and it is definitely not cool to run out the door shoeless. Humph!

The missing shoe can often be found keeping company with the dust bunnies under a bed. Then again, it could be growing mold somewhere in the depths of the laundry basket ... last week's laundry.

Okay, New Year's Resolution #1: get organized!

The sobering truth is I'd never be late if my shoes were organized in an orderly system like Angie's. Visualizing her closet, I estimate seventy-five pair of shoes, lined up uniformly like little soldiers just waiting for orders from her dainty feet.

Ah well, guess my sister got the *neat gene*.

A while later, my husband pleaded from the front foyer, "Trina, are you ever going to be ready?"

"Okay, okay, I'm ready," I shouted as I hurried down the steps. "See, both shoes on, makeup on." I am so ready for our Christmas Day celebration with my family and friends. "Sal, how do I look?"

"Trina, you look like a Christmas angel, and I will admit you're worth the wait," he said as he good naturedly nuzzled my neck.

"Thank you. You always know the right thing to say ... well most of the time," I offered with a smile.

"You'd better trade those pretty shoes for your boots; it's really coming down out there."



At forty-three, Sal is still the handsome, loving guy I married fresh out of college. He's as steady as a rock, and I cherish every precious minute we've shared together. Admittedly, it hasn't been a bed of roses for us. Yes, we have a committed love, but even that love has been sorely tested when so many new lives began with such excitement and hope. Yet each one ended with my heartbreak and empty arms. From the day he tenderly placed that ring on my finger, we dreamed and planned for a house full of children.

It seems that just wasn't to be. But we have each other and we have Buddy, our vivacious golden retriever. He is the best companion and truest four-legged friend a girl could have.

"By the way, did you let Buddy out?" I asked.

“Yup, he’s ready for a cozy day on the heating vent,” Sal smiled that easy smile, as we scooted out the door and into the blowing snow.



The familiar drive to my mama and daddy’s home is somehow therapeutic for me, maybe even soothing. The snow and wind are wildly gusting around us, and I cannot help but compare it to a giant pillow fight, stuffing everywhere. What’s new, after all it is Christmas Day in New England? So far this year, the snowfall has been extremely heavy; more than a few times I pretend we’re living in a snow globe. *Beautiful!*

The never-ending display of festive lights and decorated homes is nothing short of dazzling; no other place on earth could ever satisfy me. Every street Sal turned into boasted another beautifully quaint Norman Rockwell scene.

Living in New England is not for the faint of heart, but its beauty grows more breathtaking with each changing season. I have never minded the blizzards or the nor’easters that blow in causing so many folks to grumble. It’s not like moaning or groaning will change it. *Just enjoy its beauty and stay off the roads and out of the path of those monster plows.*

As children, Angie, Joey, and I would be glued to the local radio stations on any given snowy morning, waiting to hear the no-school announcement. Within seconds of hearing our school name, we’d spontaneously break into a happy dance. Mama laughed and laughed, watching us scramble to get into our snow suits. We had important business to tend to on those very snowy days. After all, there were snow angels to be made and snowmen to be artistically created. Once outside, no power on earth could drag us back inside, save Mama’s promise of hot cocoa and cinnamon toast or freshly baked cookies.

Gazing through snow crystals on the car window, my mind transported me back to the time Joey and I made a humongous snowman, and that snowman desperately needed clothing. Poor

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Angie, being the youngest, always got a raw deal because she was so easily manipulated into doing our dirty deeds. At our sober urging, we convinced her to secretly confiscate Daddy's scarf, jacket, and hat. *How could we possibly know she would steal his Sunday best overcoat, new scarf, and hat?*

Remembering brings a smile to my face, but we paid dearly for that one.

What winter time fun we had, breathlessly giggling as we chased and pelted one another with snow balls. Life was so carefree then. Never did we Agosti children guess how the complexities of our lives would evolve.



Shortly after Sal and I married, we found a modest split-level in the suburbs. I loved my hometown, Lawrence, Massachusetts, yet those newer houses in the suburbs held such appeal. Many other younger families flooded the suburbs during those years as well; the area was growing.

I am still proud to have been reared in Lawrence especially knowing its rich history. In the early 1900s Lawrence and sister city Lowell were known around the world for their sprawling textile mills that were built along the banks of the Merrimac River. In those days, immigrants poured into the city seeking work and the American dream. It was truly a melting pot of ethnicity. The Irish, Polish, German, as well as my Italian ancestors were just a few who came and worked in filthy, dangerous conditions hoping against hope to feed their families and succeed in this new country.

As a youngster and voracious reader, I learned about those poor, yet determined mill town inhabitants. I often reminded myself then and now, we are blessed and in reality have no inkling how hard our ancestors worked; back breaking labor and dangerous work took many lives prematurely.

One particular story of a young girl who worked in one of those mills will stay in my memory until my final days. For weeks after hearing her plight, I had nightmares. Apparently her long hair was

somehow caught and pulled into one of those monster weaving machines, in essence scalping her. I still shiver thinking about her; she was just a child.

Even tragedy couldn't best these brave immigrants. Their pioneering spirit laid the foundation that became the platform for so many others to build upon, including many of my own loved ones. I'm proud to be of their heritage.

Immigrant City, as it was called, could not have flourished if not for those courageous immigrants. They were the key to its success!



Neither Sal nor I ever had the desire to geographically separate ourselves from family, so fortunately our drive is relatively short. I cannot hide my smile as we pull into my parents' driveway. Daddy has not changed a single Christmas decoration in over ten years and since he handles each piece with loving care, I anticipate seeing them for another ten years. Even after all my teasing to add something fresh and new, I have to agree with his style. It is simple and tastefully decorated, and Daddy continues to make this home warm and inviting.



"Sal and Trina are here!" my sister excitedly yelled to the whole family as we made our grand entrance through the mud room. Today, however, it could more accurately be described as a snow cave; boots, hats, and coats were piled high against the windows, blocking any natural light. Stepping into Mama's kitchen is like stepping into the pages of my treasured old story books. Christmas music is softly playing in the background, and the tantalizing aroma of simmering spaghetti sauce tickles my salivary glands. Most importantly, the family I love is gathered in this place called home, almost all of them.

Our parents' home has always been an oasis for their children and anyone else I might add. At Christmastime, however, they

go over and above, never failing to create special and enduring memories for each one of us.

Everyone descended upon us offering to help carry those mysterious Christmas packages and my specialty—antipasto. My contribution to our family feasts is almost always antipasto. Lawrence has no shortage of Italian markets, and I need no coaxing to roam the old world shops. My self-imposed mission is to gather up the best quality provolone cheese, Genoa salami, capicola ham, roasted red peppers, and a selection of every imaginable cured olive I can find. A mouth-watering antipasto is the happy result of my in-town excursions. Experience has taught me well. I must guard this mouthwatering masterpiece as one would an endangered species, at least until dinner, or this gang will pick it down to the romaine lettuce long before it's placed on Mama's pretty Christmas table.

Hugging, kissing, laughing, and teasing are the everyday norm with this crew, but this magical season brings extra joy and levity to the Agosti household, if that is even possible.

"Oh Mama, you made braciolo and raviolis!" I exclaimed hugging my dear Mama. "You know I could have carved out a chunk of time to help you," I firmly stated as she dismissively brushed me off. We're all keenly aware that she enjoys the prep as much as the serving and the eating of these delicacies for which she's well known. She would never dream of parting from Christmas Day tradition by preparing anything other than her delicious cheese raviolis. Christmas Eve may boast the tradition of serving seven fishes, but these wonderful pillows are strictly reserved for Christmas Day. She learned the art of pasta making at her mother's side and as an adult, has lovingly perfected that skill.

My niece, Mia, wrapped me in a hug and whispered, "She made cannolis that are to die for."

Who makes cannolis when there are so many wonderful Italian bakeries in the neighborhood? Mama! And none of us would be foolish enough to dissuade her from using her skills to create these scrumptious delights.

New Year's Resolution #2: lose ten pounds.

But I would not think about calories today, not with this amazing selection of once a year succulent dishes.

A sweet, joyful spirit permeated our gathering as we girls set the table and pattered in the kitchen. It didn't take us long to settle into our normal groove, inquiring about jobs and family life. Well, that is to say, when *they* talk about jobs. I never get much beyond a vague overview of one or two of my cases. Rehashing what I purpose to leave behind every day at five o'clock is just too emotionally painful.

Since childhood my career path was crystal clear to me. I was unwavering, never wanting to be anything but a social worker. While my work usually gave me immense gratification, there were countless cases that clawed at my insides. Witnessing abuse or neglect of small children, when Sal and I ached for one of our own, was almost unbearable. Sadly, my biological clock reminds me that at forty-three, it's just not in my cards. Four miscarriages accompanied by buckets of tears have closed that chapter of my life. Now, I pray for grace and strength with every difficult case that comes across my desk.

More and more frequently however, I am suppressing an urge to scream at the top of my lungs, there are so many parents out there who have proven themselves unfit. Marching across my mind's eye is an endless parade of endangered babies and toddlers. The stories of those children will generate mounds and mounds of paperwork; files too numerous to count will require many home visits. Yet, the sad reality is that many eventually were or will be returned to those unstable homes. And so, I share little of my job.

As usual, my sister steps into the spotlight, everyone listening with rapt attention. "Some days I'm oh so tempted to do bodily harm to those little rug rats," Angie joked. But truly she is the best of the best teachers and is adored by her students. Who wouldn't love her? She's beautiful, has an amazing sense of humor, and simply loves life and everyone in it.

Angie is only two years younger than I, so I have enjoyed a front row seat, watching her as she's floated through life. We look a lot alike, olive skin and dark, thick hair, although she is shorter and still quite athletically built. Our temperaments, however, are polar

opposites. She is the eternal optimist, never seeming to have one problem or care in her world. I liken her world to a well-constructed cocoon, protecting her from everything harmful or ugly. I truly have never met anyone so kind, thoughtful, or just plain happy.

I, on the other hand, worry and brood over any and every tiny little thing. It's been said by my family that I will create a worry event if there is no authentic worry event with which to struggle.

Humph, with friends like that ...

I don't have an excessive display of grey hair yet, but I'm convinced what I do have, I have worried into existence.

Angie continued to ramble on ...

She should have been in the theatre.

She reenacted her most recent parent-teacher conference and mimicked an unidentified parent's response to their child's progress. Laughing, she described one mother sporting the familiar "deer in the headlights glazed-over look" when she was offered a few simple suggestions for improvements that could easily be accomplished at home.

Indignantly, mommy responded, "Why would you say that? My child needs no improvement in that area," Angie chortled, "Yup. I have nothing but perfect students! Not one has the slightest need for improvement whatsoever! Just like with me, right Mama!" she laughed turning her attention to our mom, whose nod was almost imperceptible.

Mia, Angie's sixteen-year-old daughter, then took the spotlight, ranting on and on in unending chatter about her ex-boyfriend. "Jerk!" she firmly ended. Sal and I smiled, but couldn't begin to imagine what that poor boy did to earn that title. We have a well-guarded secret theory about our niece. Simply put, that girl loves the hunt; once caught she drops the boy like a cat drops a dead mouse. The unspoken message being, fun is over—I'm moving on. Her cheeks flushed as she described, ad nauseam, a new possibility. I don't know this boy's name, but I have a distinct feeling he is her new mouse.



An often replayed scene caught my attention; I smiled at the guys holding their drinks while roasting their backsides by the fireplace. Sal and Angie's husband, Jake, refrain from anything remotely resembling personal dialogue. No touchy-feely stuff for these macho men. For them the sacred and I might add only topics, are limited to the Red Sox, the Celtics, and the Patriots.

Is there anything else on God's green earth (or white today) to talk about?

They have become the best of buddies over the years and would do anything to help each other out, unless it interferes with a sacred game.

My Sal has been an accountant since college graduation and somehow still loves the numbers game. Jake, a high school history teacher, is motivated a whole lot more by the after school coaching than the classroom. "Hey, I'm still trying to get tickets for the Celtics game next month. You still in?" Jake excitedly blurted out.

"Are ya kidding? Of course. Just give me a yell," Sal responded. They are two happy campers, grinning at each other like dunderheads.

Kevin, Angie's Boston College-bound eighteen-year-old son, wandered into the living room, munching on a stalk of fennel (Italian celery). *Stolen from my antipasto platter no doubt.*

This kid is also a sports fanatic but for today, he seemed content to simply listen. Kevin is smart as a whip and has always impressed me as a rather deep thinker given his youth. On occasion, his inability to solve the world's problems causes him to become somewhat sullen. He's so the opposite of Angie. He has grown to be quite a handsome young man, and I seriously doubt he has any shortage of female admirers. For a brief period of time, Sal and I had our doubts that Kevin would find his own way. He had a very brief brush with the local police, but thank God it was only kid stuff, and he quickly got his act together. He obviously caught hold of a vision for his future—a vision that did not include striped pajamas! His determination to earn a degree is admirable, and he certainly has what it takes to succeed, although he's yet to decide on a major.

Jake continues to reassure his son he has plenty of time to make that decision. No pressure.

“Hey, I’m starving here,” Kevin tried to interject into the buzz of conversation, thinking dinner had been forgotten. Smiling, we all responded in unison, “What’s new?”

“Hang in there,” I reassured Kevin, “dinner is almost ready, so don’t order out for pizza just yet.”

“Funny, Aunt Trina. Very funny!”



The proverbial elephant in the room unexpectedly reared its ugly head. My husband innocently and all too loudly asked, “So, what was Joey’s reason for not joining our Christmas dinner this year?”

Oh no! I didn’t want to hear that!

Everyone momentarily froze, and I sensed the immediate change that just occurred; the thermometer plummeted. Mama’s head quickly went down as she busied herself with folding napkins. Daddy made a fifty-yard dash toward the mud room, God only knows for what reason. No one attempted to answer Sal’s question as it fell like an anvil in the middle of the kitchen.

“Sorry,” Sal sheepishly whispered, “I did it again! I wasn’t thinking.” We have no clue why Joey has chosen to avoid the family gatherings he once relished. Heck, he just plain avoids the entire family, despite our individual efforts to approach the subject. There is a gaping hole in our family, and I would forfeit a million bucks (if I had it) to know why my only brother has turned his back on our family.

Everyone, including the youngsters, remained silent; the atmosphere had certainly soured.

I refuse to let my absent brother hijack our Christmas celebration.

In an effort coax the Christmas spirit back into our gathering, I awkwardly changed the subject, asking, “So Mama, how was the Christmas Eve service at your church?” Haltingly, she answered that it was quite lovely.

Okay, she's talking so we're back on track, I think.

Jumping in with both feet, I added, "Our service was just wonderful, and I am thankful our leadership decided not to go ahead with a live nativity," I stated. "We had enough trouble with the live kids in the play let alone any contrarian donkeys!" Mama gave an obligatory grin.

A few minutes passed, and I looked up to see Daddy reentering the dining room. *Serious face, but at least he is back with the family. All is well for now. Crisis averted!*



"Hey Daddy, I was talking to Donna the other day, and she said she saw you at the post office last Monday," I casually mentioned, attempting to keep things light.

"Huh, Donna who?" he stammered.

"What do you mean Donna who? Did you two talk?" I inquired.

"I don't remember talking to her, but yes I think I saw her."

I sent a curious glance to my sister.

Yup, that was odd if not rather elusive. Either he saw her or he didn't see her.

Daddy has known Donna for more years than I can count; she has spent as much time at our house as her own home. She's been my best, best friend since grade school. Suddenly, Daddy bolted in the direction of the cellar, calling over his shoulder, "I'll get some nice wine for dinner."

I was perplexed and even a bit concerned at his response as well as his evasive move away from the family gathering. But I decided to let it drop, for the time being.



For the most part, Daddy is a passive guy, but on a few rare occasions I have witnessed his hot Sicilian temper. Joey used to joke, "When you see the steam coming out of his ears ... run for cover." But in reality, those explosions were uncommon in our home. He

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is the typical Italian husband and father; he loves his family without question and is respected as the head of the household. His authority was never questioned, always honored.

Over the years, our dad endured lots of good-natured teasing. He was labeled the “odd man out” of the family. The reason being, every single one of us has olive complexion, dark hair, and dark eyes. Joey’s eyes are almost black as coal.

Oh, but not Daddy! He has the most arresting eyes. Once you look into those emerald green eyes, I guarantee you will never forget them. They are green, green, green and so beautifully distinctive that it’s possible to get lost in them with just a casual glance.

To this day, Mama finds great satisfaction in tormenting him by divulging to us stories of their youth. Apparently, much to his embarrassment, love-sick girls followed him everywhere attempting to capture his attention. She said he was continually being stalked by dreamy-eyed girls and harassed with statements like, “It’s not fair that a man should possess such beautiful eyes and eyelashes when most girls would kill for those green eyes.”

Time after time he endured her cajoling, always seeming uncomfortable and then finally ending it with, “Ah, you can tease all you want, but this man only has eyes for your mama.”



While waiting for Christmas dinner to be served, I found myself studying Mama as she moved about her kitchen. She is still a beautiful, graceful woman, and no one would disagree that she possesses a much envied gentle and quiet spirit.

She never maintained a career outside the home after marriage, but her hands were never idle. As a teenager, I was completely and utterly spellbound watching her sew our beautiful prom gowns. What a gift she had for creating stunning and stylish dresses for Angie and me. My friends, especially Donna, were actually jealous of my wardrobe. Sadly, like many children I didn’t see the value right before my eyes. I took the love each stitch represented for granted.

My mother, tall for a Sicilian, was just beginning to show her sixty-six years. Her striking features, a silky smooth face and just a little silver streaking through her dark, thick hair, displayed outwardly an elegance and grace she possessed inwardly.

This woman, Maria Fantino became the bride of Vincent Agosti in 1952. She was twenty-one at the time, fairly old for her old world tradition. She had only one sibling, Connie, who was four years younger and constantly craved my mother's time and attention. As a social worker, I would describe Connie as ... just plain needy and a bit self-absorbed. She was only thirty years old when she lost a long battle with pneumonia. My mother often mentions how she yearns for her only sister's company. Despite the fact that I truly loved my aunt, her passing brought me great relief for which I am secretly giggled with guilt to this very day.

I resented how Aunt Connie sucked the life out of Mama. Not surprisingly, my mother never once complained to her family or anyone else for that matter. It was as natural as breathing to unselfishly yield to Aunt Connie's demands. It's just what she did, no reservations.

Daddy reluctantly agreed to postpone their wedding for eighteen months; once again Mama accepted the responsibility of caring for her ailing sister. Connie, though beautiful, was frail and sickly; a myriad of childhood diseases compromised her immune system. Mama recounts with gratitude that her sister regained some physical strength, enough that wedding plans could resume, and Aunt Connie was able to stand with Mama as maid of honor.

She rarely dated and never married, but she did become assimilated into our family unit. Regardless of the fact that Mama now had three demanding children, undercurrents of competition could not be ignored. She wanted Mama all for herself. Despite her self-centered personality, Aunt Connie was good to her nieces and nephew, showering us with goodies and trinkets our parents couldn't afford.



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Despite all of that, sweet memories of Mama and Aunt Connie strolling arm in arm through downtown Lawrence suddenly washed over me, and it warmed me. As a child, walking on Essex Street was an adventure, and neither Angie nor I ever turned down the opportunity to accompany them. A wonderful family five and dime store, as they were called, prized itself as one of the few remaining soda fountains. Of course Angie and I nagged until they consented to suspend their shopping for the day to treat us at that ice cream counter. Without fail, I ordered a strawberry ice cream soda and if I closed my eyes right now, I could still taste those luscious strawberries floating in their icy cold liquid. Angie was just as predictable, but her weakness was hot fudge sundaes, a particular preference that remains to this day. One of our long-standing traditions was being treated at the soda fountain on the last day of school (if we were promoted to the next grade, which we always were). Joey dug in his heels, refusing to go with us since the allure of the baseball field was much stronger.



My wanderings down memory lane continued as my thoughts turned to summer days spent at the common, a New England term for the local park. The common held an irresistible magnetic pull for every kid in town as we daily gathered for endless fun. The bandstand, which proudly graced the center of the park, was brightly painted in primary colors. High school band concerts, summer youth camps, and numerous other community events found their niche there. Fourth of July celebrations, which also took place in the common, were eagerly anticipated and talked about for weeks in advance. All these years later, I'm still unsure how parents managed to retrieve their children during those chaotic picnics. Kids could be seen running with wild abandon all over the park as though orphaned. As we grew to be teenagers, yes, we paired off, sneaking away toward the overgrown bushes for stolen kisses.

As I think back, it was not uncommon for younger children to continue riding their bikes until dusk and occasionally after dark.

Parents' level of trust had not yet been violated by horrific headlines. We played until we dropped from hunger or exhaustion, whichever came first. Every kid on the block heard the familiar mantra from their parents again and again, "You'd better get home when the street lights come on." Then and only then did we surrender to the end of that particular summer day. The next morning promised its own mystery and adventure; we awoke ready and willing to grab hold of that new day and squeeze out every fun filled minute.

The city of Lawrence was so different in the days of my youth, "before dinosaurs roamed the earth" as my nephews so often joked. The truth of the matter is, for the most part, it was safe to walk all over town, day and night, without encountering any problems. It saddens me to think of such innocence lost over these past decades. People seemed ... nicer and definitely demonstrated concern for their neighbors' welfare. Over the past few years the crime rate has steadily soared.

My home town has changed, and I don't think it's for the better.



Angie's shrill voice snapped me out of my private meandering down memory lane, yelling "Dinner is served!"

"All right!" Kevin shouted back at her with gusto.

You would think from the way we rushed to our seats that gold was being thrown down from a balcony. But it's always been that way—the Agosti signature. This family loves to make and eat food, but it's so much more than that. We genuinely enjoy getting together around the table simply to share our lives with one another.

Someone, probably Leah, Angie's youngest daughter, had made adorable place cards with snowmen and snowflakes drawn on each corner. There is no denying she has an artistic bent and never fails to show off her latest creation.

Daddy happily whistled while pouring wine for the adults. Mia clumsily poured soda for the younger set. My antipasto had already been showcased in the center of the dining table. Several delectable pieces had gone missing, but miracle of miracles, it is mostly intact.

Chairs scraped the floor and a melodic hum filled the room as we blended together on another beautiful Christmas Day.



At eleven years old, Leah is Angie and Jake's most precocious child. She could not stop giggling as she jabbed and tormented Mia. Although she is absolutely adorable, her perpetual motion can be really hard to take at times. Judging from Mia's demeanor, I'd say she's had just about enough of her younger sister.

"Cut it out Leah," Mia shrieked. "You're being a pain again!"

"Settle down girls," Mama firmly commanded, "it is time for the blessing."

All eyes turned toward Daddy and as though perfectly choreographed, heads bowed while he gave thanks. He praised our Lord for the gift of His Son, Jesus and for another Christmas together.

Everyone agreed with the prayer and the sense of missing Joey's brood with a slightly melancholy, amen. *I just wish Joey and his family were here to be part of the joy.*



My brother and his family faded into the rear view and as we raised our heads from prayer, it was a near free-for-all! First, the antipasto was passed along with my special vinaigrette, which is my secret recipe. Angie joked that I would only reveal it if and only if I was to be slowly and methodically tortured.

She's probably right.

Next, warm, yeasty bread from my favorite Italian bakery gets passed along. *Yum, I could park right here and feel like I'd died and gone to heaven, it is so luscious! Is there anything better than warm Italian bread with Italian dipping oil?*

I have descended from a lineage of serious eaters, and we all know how to pace ourselves. After the familiar symphony of "umms" is heard from around the table, the braciole and raviolis move into the spotlight. They look perfect enough to have jumped

from the cover of an Italian cookbook. Suddenly, the dining room goes just about silent as we simultaneously begin to eat, or maybe devour would be a more accurate description.

A few minutes into the raviolis, my husband, brother-in-law, and nephew in practiced unison, stood to attention and rendered a dramatic salute to Mama for her culinary accomplishments. She laughed bashfully and brushed them away with a hand gesture as though doing a backward wave. Laughter filled that dining room once again, as it has on so many Christmases past.

I hesitate to insinuate the Agosti family lacks table manners, but at meals like this one, it is every man for himself. Another appropriate saying would be, those who hesitate are lost (and won't get a full plate). We ate until our hearts and tummies were content.



Our family gatherings usually generate light-hearted conversation, but occasionally it can become politically charged, and today is no exception. The emotional temperatures rise around the dining room table as we become animated, if not somewhat opinionated. Yet, it all ends as it began. No one has been convinced of the others' point of view, and so we cease and desist.

When finished, we gals cleared away the dishes and happily headed for the kitchen to make room for the next onslaught of goodies. Bowls filled with fruit, nuts, and torrone candy were placed on the dining room table to "hold" us until dessert. Torrone has always been one of my weaknesses, and I somehow always find room for several pieces of the rich nougat candy!

"Mama, I invited Donna and her family to stop by later for dessert," I casually announced. No surprise there since Donna's crew and my family have been sharing Christmas for years.

"It will be good to see her," Angie responded. "I think it was early autumn since we last visited. Do her kids still demolish a twenty-by-twenty path wherever they go?"

"Slight exaggeration Ange, but I agree they can be rather rambunctious, especially Suzanne."

Chapter 1

“Ya think?” Angie joked back then whispered, “Maybe we can clarify the mystery encounter, or whatever that was.”

It didn't take very long before the kitchen was cleaned up and back into some semblance of order. I snickered to myself, noticing that more than one of us was fumbling to loosen their belt, as we collectively slipped into our familiar food coma. Too much of a good thing prevented us from shoveling in dessert just yet.



Until then, we headed to various parts of the old homestead for a brief reprieve. This old Cape Cod-style home affords lots of nooks and crannies in which to nestle. I loved growing up in this house. It is just as charming and cozy as a home can be, especially when a roaring fire is lulling us into la la land.

I claimed my favorite spot, the window seat, and wasted no time curling up, purring like a kitten. I mentally began reminiscing over just a few of the many wonderful memories created in this place. I recalled more than one attempt to slide down the full length of the banister, which didn't end well for me or Joey; the local hospital's emergency room workers were soon on a first name basis with my mother.

I will never forget the variety of hidden treasures all three of us kids secretly stashed in the bookcases under the dormers in Joey's bedroom. Most were fine, harmless in fact. But, not one member of this family will ever forget that foul, and I mean foul, odor that couldn't help but give away one of Joey's treasures. Fresh frogs legs are indeed wonderful in a fancy French restaurant, but dead ones ... oh no ... not good ... not good at all. I felt somewhat vindicated when I caught Mama and Daddy attempting to hide their snickering behind pseudo-stern faces, all the while making Joey and me scrub the entire bookcase with some strong-smelling disinfectant. Even today, if I catch a whiff of that same detergent, I instantly imagine myself crouched before that bookcase, scrubbing my little hands to the bone.

Then there was the year when Mom and Dad apparently hit a financial rough spot, which prompted them to put our beloved

house on the market. We, of course had no clue they were in such dire straits; they kept those things to themselves. Our only focus, selfish as it was, was that our world would implode if forced to leave behind our friends and neighborhood.

Oh what little imps we were and what evil plans we devised! Whenever we'd become aware of an upcoming tour by a prospective buyer we'd put our devilish scheme into action. Unsuspecting prospective buyers were greeted by a snake or some kind of rodent in our basement or crawl space. Joey kept a stash of wiggly creatures hidden behind the garage, feeding and tending to them until just the right moment.

Needless to say, we got through that rough spot, never having to pack a box or suitcase. We never 'fessed up to it, but to this day I wonder if Mama or Daddy knew what wicked pranks we pulled. Thankfully, the house did not stay on the market for long, and our family survived our temporary crisis.

Yes ... it's been a wonderful homestead, filled with laughter and love.



The harmony of soft snoring was abruptly interrupted by Mama's gentle voice, "What do you all think about exchanging gifts before the LeBlancs get here?" We sleepily agreed and fought to clear the cob webs and shake loose from our individual food comas.

"Yeah, yeah," Leah shouted, jumping up and down, exhibiting more energy than any one person should be allowed to possess.

And so, we robotically assumed our gift-opening positions. Over the years each person had fallen into claiming their favorite place to sit where they witnessed our exchange of gifts. It reminds me of Sunday morning church service and the imaginary reserved signs on each chair. God forbid a newcomer doesn't recognize the warning, invisible as it may be, and has the audacity to claim one of those reserved chairs.

Ecstatically giggling, Leah began handing out each treasure to the appropriate recipient. Her excitement was palpable. Another

one of our unwritten traditions dictates we open one gift at a time, youngest to oldest, slow and painful as it may be. More than once, this tradition nearly bit the dust, yet somehow it has survived another year. I guess it's because deep down, every person is anxious to see the expression on their recipient's face. Seeing the smiles and hearing, "It's just what I wanted" makes it worth the wait.

Some gifts are that special something that took forever to find. Other gifts lack imagination, such as ties or cash, but all are given with love and received with appreciation.



After bagging all the discarded wrappings and setting the living room back in order, I wandered to the front window to watch the swirling snow. The snow was still falling heavily, and I began to wonder if Donna and her family would venture out on the roads.

Ah! She was raised in New England. A little snow is just another bump in her day. If anyone has the pioneer spirit, it's Donna.

"Hey, which of you strong, hardy men would like to shovel the sidewalk before company arrives?" I inquired, clearly appealing to their manliness. "You can work off the raviolis while making room for desserts at the same time."

"Honey, you sure have a way with words," Sal laughed.

"Yeah, the power of persuasion is more like it," Jake said. But then Jake and Kevin stood and began a slow shuffle toward the front door.

"You guys are *all right* in my book, and I am only too happy to sweep the front steps," I loudly teased. "I could use some fresh air not to mention some exercise."

Kevin gave me that sarcastic grin of his and said, "You'll need a lot more than a broom, Aunt Trina. Have you looked outside lately?"

"Okay then, hand me one of those shovels when you guys are done. I'd be happy to shovel the steps."



While the boys were in the process of clearing the driveway (and the steps, I might add) in marched Donna and her family looking like Eskimos, living proof that the LeBlanc family are no wimps.

“What did you bring, what did you bring?” Leah excitedly shouted as she yanked the bakery shop dessert boxes from Donna. Another round of hugging, laughing, and teasing erupted before we all settled back into the dining room. I watched Donna pinching Leah and whispering that she brought tiramisu and lemon tarts.

“What’s a teeny masue?” she whispered back.

“No honey, it’s tiramisu. Just wait and see, you’ll love it,” Donna replied. By now the whispering had grown so loud everyone easily overheard, triggering another volley of laughter.

Donna’s husband, Pete, settled in with the guys, and of course Suzanne and Frankie were looking for something to do other than be with the boring grownups. Donna and her husband waited to start a family, but now Donna often laments that her more “mature” energy levels are just not keeping pace with her children. Yup, it was easy to see they were still energetic and overly rambunctious, but it’s a short visit so our family would gut it out as usual. As a couple, however, they are totally oblivious that they are responsible for two very busy children. They sort of abandon those parental responsibilities, leaving the rug rats to whoever is unlucky enough to occupy the same room.



Donna and I tried to catch up with the happenings in each other’s lives as we sat together in the middle of a whirlwind of perpetual activity. I inquired how their house construction and remodeling was going, but the cross-current of conversation made it almost impossible to follow any train of thought.

“I give up!” I said, throwing my hands up in surrender. These crazy people left us no choice but to abandon our conversation until later. “Is anyone ready for coffee?” I yelled in frustration, to the oblivious gang.

“Finally!” Kevin yelled. “I’m ready to scarf down those desserts sitting out there.”

“What’s new?” We all responded, yet again in unison. Normally, he takes our jabs good naturedly but surprisingly this time, we were met with a scowl.

As each of us filled our plates with generous samples of every dessert, which has also become tradition, Donna addressed my dad, “Hey Mr. Agosti, it was nice to see you the other day. I could not believe how busy that post office was, could you?” Angie and I shot glances at my dad waiting for his response. None!

“Daddy, did you hear Donna?” I gently chided. “She asked you a question.”

“Yes, yes it was busy, but I just had to mail something; I wasn’t there very long. Can I get anyone a glass of amaretto? It’s nice with dessert,” he said, then quickly scurried to the kitchen. He successfully changed the subject, yet again.

What was that interaction all about? I looked up to my sister in time to catch her raise that expressive eyebrow. We have always communicated in that way, with just that certain look. For the time being neither of us pressed. Everyone’s attention was captured by the variety of decadent desserts and mellow conversation.

Now’s not the time or the place.



The kids were glued to the television, laughing hysterically as *A Christmas Story* once again numbed their brains. *How many times can anyone watch poor little Ralphie lusting for that 200 shot, range model air rifle? “You’ll shoot your eye out! You’ll shoot your eye out!” Enough already! At least they’re not trashing the living room.*

My best friend was wise enough to talk around the obvious missing sibling. Donna is like a sister to me and has helped me survive every crisis in my life, from sibling rivalry to multiple miscarriages. With her youthful freckled face and never ending positive attitude, she repeatedly encourages me to be patient with Joey, knowing him as well as her own family. All throughout our

early teen years, Donna had a wild crush on Joey. He, however, seemed oblivious to her flirting. But for now, this day, we were all talked out on that subject.



After scraping and shoveling out their cars, Donna and her family headed home, leaving the rest of us to begin the process of retrieving our dishes and gifts. It's not hard to read the signs: the kids were getting restless and Mama looked exhausted. The guys' conversation had declined into a series of grunts and monosyllabic comments. It was clearly getting close to putting the final bow on another Christmas Day and a fine one at that.

But as always, the women ended the day chatting at the kitchen table. "Mama, you look exceptionally tired tonight," I said. "Are you okay?" I know my mom, and the silence that hung between us told me that she was *not* okay. "I hope these gatherings are not getting to be too much for you," I seriously asked. "Next year, let's celebrate Christmas at my house, Mama." Of course, I already knew she would have none of that. Still silence.

"Mama, what is going on?" Angie pressed.

"I really don't want your dad or anyone else to know."

"Know what?" I almost shouted. Still, she kept silent.

Very softly she whispered but didn't look directly at us, "I found a lump on my breast, and it's not going away."

"Mama!" both Angie and I vehemently responded.

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"When did you find it?"

"Have you seen the doctor?"

"Why don't you want anyone to know?"

Of course this barrage of questions rolled over her, and she began to weep. Watching her cry heaped guilt and fear on me at the same time. Mama has always been very strong—my rock. And she most definitely does not cry, at least not very often.

"Okay, Mama, let's take it a bit more slowly from the beginning," I tenderly said, trying hard to be the voice of reason. Silence—long,

long silence—filled the air. We quietly waited for her to respond. Finally, very reluctantly, Mama explained that while showering she felt a lump in one of her breasts.

“It was fairly small, so I let it alone, thinking it was just a cyst and would go away.” My sister and I simultaneously gave her an admonishing glance. “Well, it hasn’t gone away, in fact it is quite a bit larger,” she added.

“When was the first time you felt this lump?” I asked.

Mama looked between Angie and me with a diffident look before finally answering, “June.”

“What!” we both shouted.

“Shush, I don’t want this to be a big deal. Please girls let’s not spoil Christmas,” Mom returned.

Gently taking my mother’s hand, I firmly stated, “Mama it already is a big deal. You have to see the doctor right away, and you have to tell Daddy.”

After some hesitation and with tear filled eyes, Mama promised to call her doctor first thing in the morning. She also promised to tell Daddy everything right after her appointment. We tried in vain to convince her that Daddy should accompany her to the doctor’s office, but she dug in her heels, firmly stating that she will wait until after the appointment. “I want to have the facts. I don’t want to alarm anyone unnecessarily,” she responded.

“All right, Mom, but please, call me as soon as you schedule that appointment,” Angie said.

“And by the way, we are going with you to the appointment,” I stated. “No ifs, ands, or buts about it.”



The guys dutifully shoveled out the cars, and the snow had actually slowed down to a light flurry. No one had any inkling of our private conversation, and so we nonchalantly loaded the cars and began our goodbyes.

“Hey Angie, I’m off tomorrow, how about we grab some lunch, just the two of us?” I inquired, pushing aside my concern.

“Sure, love to,” she responded knowing me well enough to suspect my ulterior motive. Leah and Mia caught wind and started pleading to go with us, but we gently explained this is “sister time.”

“We’re sisters,” Leah reasoned, causing some weak laughter from Angie and me.

“Not this time kiddo,” I responded as I tickled her ribs.

“Let’s meet at that cute little restaurant we went to last summer, the one at the Methuen Mall?” Angie suggested.

“I love that place—quiet, great food, and not expensive,” I affirmed. That was settled and no one was the wiser that we actually needed to talk family business.



As we drove home Sal chuckled, saying, “Buddy must be crossing his legs, patiently waiting for us to get home and let him outside.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Apart from my blunder, I’d say it was a perfect Christmas. And what’s more, that dorky hat Angie gave me is beginning to grow on me.”

“Mmm hmm,” I murmured.

“Out with it,” Sal said grabbing my hand from across the car seat. “You’re way too quiet for just having left your family. Usually you are talking my ear off with all the gossip and details of the day. Something is wrong, out with it!”

I really didn’t need much prompting, since the tears were right there ready to fall, and fall they did. By the time we pulled into our snowy driveway, I had unburdened my load onto my husband’s broad shoulders.

“Let’s get the car in the garage and Buddy out, then we’ll talk, okay?” he said gently.

Agreeing to leave the shoveling until tomorrow morning, we unloaded the car and tended to Buddy. He was one happy dog, romping in the fresh fallen snow, acting more like a puppy than a full grown dog. *Oh, to be so carefree!*

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“I’m in the mood for some fireside hot cocoa,” Sal said while starting a fire. This man is my rock and knows me so well. Something warm and comforting is just what I needed.

“Sure, I’m just going to get into my comfy robe. I’ll make it when I come back downstairs.”

As the fire came to a nice roar, I settled down on the sofa next to my husband with Buddy snuggled at our feet. Silently staring into the fire and sipping hot cocoa, I broke the silence, stating, “You were right, it was a perfect Christmas, until Mama dropped that bombshell on us. Sal, I’m worried about her. She found the lump way back in June and never said one word to us.”

“Your mother is one of the strongest women I’ve ever known. She’s otherwise healthy, and there isn’t a living soul with a more positive attitude.”

“I know. You’re right, but still ... June! That’s an awful long time for a lump to go unattended, don’t you think?”

“It is, but you have to keep a positive attitude, and I know that’s not easy for you ... my little worry machine,” he said tweaking my nose. “It could be a harmless cyst.”

“I pray you’re right.”

“She’s going to be just fine, Trina,” he whispered as he embraced me, “just fine!”