

Prologue  
“Vanzetti’s Garden”

Whenever the people whose stories you are about to read asked me why I wanted to talk to them about their gardens, I would tell them this story. It’s how I earned their trust, and why they shared so much with me.

I told them how I grew up in a huge extended family that spoke a richly embroidered tongue, an English made to lurch and sing and wail by the Neapolitan dialect it was stitched onto. My mother’s people—Natales, Ianaconis, Piambinos, and Pescatores—were cooks and tailors, casket makers and seamstresses. My mother’s parents, who grew up in Caserta, met in the Italian enclave of Hoboken, New Jersey. They came over separately in steerage in the first decade of the twentieth century, the epic period of European immigration to America. My grandfather, Antonio Natale, traveled with his brother, Stefano, in 1907. My grandmother, Virginia Delia Migliaccio, came with her brother, Amadeo, in 1908. They left from the port of Naples and steamed into New York Harbor past the Statue of Liberty, landing on Ellis Island, where, after the long and anxious wait to be processed, they struggled down the ramp with their baggage to take their first steps on American soil.

I told the gardeners how I didn’t inherit my Italian grandparents’ language except for a few choice expressions. Growing up, I heard exactly one story about my grandfather’s life in Italy—how he saved a crust of bread from his lunch on a hike into the mountains and was glad to find it in his pocket on the long and hungry walk back. I knew nothing at all about what it had been like for my grandparents and their brothers and sisters to leave their families in Italy and cross the Atlantic to begin the difficult process of becoming Americans. Our past was a blank. We were so new to America that we seemed to have no history.

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All of this changed on the afternoon of my father’s funeral, when the innocent wish to preserve what was left of our family stories brought to light a photograph that connected my family with one of the greatest betrayals of ethnic Americans in the twentieth century—the trial and execution of Sacco and Vanzetti for a crime they did not commit. These two Italian immigrant were avowed anarchists who had fought for the laboring class’ right to a just wage and decent working conditions. Their real crimes were their ethnicity—as Italians, they represented the largest group of the “darker races” of immigrants arriving in America at the time—and their politics, which frightened many in 1920, when America was still in the grip of the Red Scare.

Violet, my mother’s youngest sister, handed me a small black-and-white photograph, its surface scratched and stained, then waited expectantly for my response.

“Who are these people?” I asked my aunt.

Obviously, they were Italian Americans, this small group of children sitting on the wide wooden stoop of a fine house on a bright summer’s day. But whose? There had always been so many of us.

“What do you mean, *Who are these people?*” Violet said. “Don’t you recognize us? That’s your mother.”

And she pointed to the dark haired girl in the center of the group. I’d never seen an image of my mother as a girl before, so I stared and stared. *She was so beautiful.*

She sits on the stoop of her parents’ summer home on Bay Avenue in Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey. Elegantly dressed in the long, slim style of the twenties, she is

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flanked on her right by her brother Joey (Giuseppe) in knickers, on the left by her sister Nancy (Nunziata), who would die young.

“That’s me,” Violet said, pointing to the child dressed in a little sailor’s suit, her hair cut like a boy’s, one knee crossed over the other, an apple in one hand. Set apart from the beautifully dressed Natale children sits an Italian man with a mustache wearing a chef’s hat and an apron. Joey mugs for the camera, the cook looks grim.

My mother, Esther (Esterina), and Nancy, hold up newspapers. Nancy, whose daily shouts some sports scores, looks tentative. My mother, a look of mild derision in her eyes, as if she is thinking, *What has this to do with me?* holds her paper stiffly upright, as if following an order from the person holding the camera. Clearly, she is not reading. It is we, who would see this image on some future day, who are meant to read the huge banner headline across the front of the *Hoboken Daily Mirror*:

BRANDEIS DENIES SACCO’S APPEAL

“When was this taken?” I asked my aunt. “What do you remember about Sacco and Vanzetti?” But no one in the room that day, including my mother, could tell me. Their blank faces only deepened the mystery. I knew that Sacco and Vanzetti had been put to death and that their trial and execution had been a cause célèbre, but I didn’t know why or when.

The absence of memory among my mother’s generation, and my own failure of recognition, soon propelled me across America to collect the stories of ethnic Americans for whom the making of a garden is a way of keeping memory alive and protecting their cultural heritage from everything that threatens their survival as a people.

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Back home, I showed the photograph to a reference librarian at the public library in the small New England town where I now live.

“Come with me,” she said, leading me into the stacks. She pulled out a small paperback, *The Letters of Sacco and Vanzetti*, and handed it to me.

I dated the photograph from Vanzetti’s last letter, written from the Death House of the Massachusetts State Prison in Charlestown. It was August 22, 1927. My mother was twelve. She would turn thirteen exactly one month later—and decide to change her name, hoping to disguise her ethnicity so that people would stop calling her things like dago, wop, guinea. On the afternoon she was wearing her stylish dress and elegant shoes, Bartolomeo Vanzetti, a fish peddler whose Italian neighbors testified that he had sold them eels for their traditional Christmas Eve supper on the afternoon he was supposed to have committed the robbery and murder for which he and his friend, Nicolo Sacco, a shoemaker, had been condemned to death, wrote to H. W. L. Dana, a Harvard professor who had become a passionate advocate for justice in the case.

*Dear Friend Dana,*

*...I am writing now because it seems that nothing and no one is going to stop our execution after this midnight...*

*Yesterday, Judge Brandeis repelled our appeal on the ground of personal reasons; to wit, because he or members of his family are favorably interested in our case, as demonstrated by the facts that after our arrest Rosa [Sacco’s wife] and her children went to live for a month in the empty house of Justice Brandeis in Dedham, Mass.*

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*...The Defense Committee, the Defense, our friends here, Rosa and Luigia [Vanzetti’s sister] are working frantically day and night in a desperate effort to avoid our execution, and they fail second by second and our execution appears always nearer and unavoidable. There are barely 12 hours to its moment, and we are lost...*

In New Haven, I spooled through hundreds of pages of the *New York Times* in the basement of Yale’s Sterling Memorial Library until I found it, the headline for the morning of August 23, 1927:

SACCO AND VANZETTI PUT TO DEATH EARLY THIS MORNING;

GOVERNOR FULLER REJECTS LAST-MINUTE PLEAS FOR DELAY

AFTER A DAY OF LEGAL MOVES AND DEMONSTRATIONS

Less than twelve hours before Sacco and Vanzetti were put to death in the electric chair, while thousands of people stood in vigil outside the Death House, which was guarded like a besieged medieval fortress, my illiterate Italian grandfather, who was Vanzetti’s age and had come to America the same year Vanzetti had come, posed his children on the front steps of their summer house and took their picture. Not only was my family’s past not a blank, it had been shaped by the tragic force of history.

“Sacco and Vanzetti,” novelist John Dos Passos wrote, “are all the immigrants who have built this nation’s industries with their sweat and their blood and have gotten for it nothing but the smallest wages it was possible to give them. ...They are all the...factory fodder that hunger drives into the American mills through the painful sieve of Ellis Island.” And in their passion for justice for the working class, Dos Passos added, they stood for “the dreams of a saner social order.”

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The Sacco and Vanzetti case, Edmund Wilson noted gravely, “revealed the whole anatomy of American life” and “raised almost every fundamental question of our political and social system.”

In the aftermath of the tragedy, the Italian ethnic community turned inward on itself. Silence closed over the wound.

My mother learned to be ashamed—of her name, her black wavy hair and dark eyes, her olive skin, her parents’ accents, her very name—*Natale*, from the Latin word for birth and the Italian word for Christmas. She vowed that she would never marry an Italian—only an American—so that no one would ever laugh at her again. She would put it behind her. But forgetting did not protect her; it only robbed her of a context for her shame.

Now when I studied the photograph, I could feel the pressure of history behind the silent image of my mother on the front porch of the house I visited all my childhood—Grandpop Natale’s house, where he made us *pastina* with pats of butter for lunch when we’d walk over from St. Agnes Elementary School, and gave us red wine diluted with a little water in jelly jars painted with oranges and strawberries. For so long, all I had of my Italian heritage was the memory of food: my grandfather’s thin-crust pizzas—*bizza* to us; the pastries my beloved great -uncle Giro, the casket maker, would bring when he came down from the city to play the horses at Monmouth Track, my mother’s thick red sauce, her *pasta e fagioli* on Friday nights; and a little red glass pepper, a charm against the evil eye, that she gave me when I was in my twenties. Now I had something more.

My Italian grandfather had not wanted this moment of America’s betrayal of the immigrant to pass unrecorded, and now his silent act of witness had come to me.

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But what could I do with it? The more I learned about the case, and the history of injustice toward ethnic Americans, the darker it all became. For a time, I felt it would sink me. I returned to the letters Sacco and Vanzetti had written in prison and began to read them through from the beginning. That’s how I found Vanzetti’s garden.

On October 7, 1926, just two weeks before Sacco and Vanzetti’s eighth and final attempt to win a new trial was rejected by Judge Thayer—though someone else had confessed to the crime and two FBI agents assigned to the case had sworn affidavits stating their belief that Sacco and Vanzetti were innocent—Vanzetti answered a letter from a woman named Mrs. O’ Sullivan who had written to thank him for a gift he had sent her. From the way he responds, I see that she must have expressed her hope that he and Nicola Sacco would be granted a new trial, and then described her family’s farm in Kansas.

*Dear Friend, Vanzetti’s reply to Mrs. O’ Sullivan begins. Your letter of 1<sup>st</sup> October was handed to me the day before yesterday. I am grateful for all you are doing in our behalf, and glad that you appreciate the little pen-holder.*

Next, he answers her hope with his own frustration and despair. *Your letter voices your hopes and optimism on the good outcome of the case—Would it be as you believe,” he begins, “—but I cannot share your good expectations. . . . Only the thunders of a mighty world-wide agitation and protest could induce the enemy to free us. In Europe it cannot be done; in America it is not done—to explain why, would drive me crazy.*

Then, without pause, Vanzetti moves from anguish to peace, from despair to joy, as he describes his father’s gardens in Italy. His mother had died when he was a young man; grief over the loss of her had impelled him to emigrate to the United States.

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*You speak of wheat farms..., he writes. My Father has plenty of good land and a beautiful garden.*

*As for our garden, it takes a poet of first magnitude to worthy speak of it, so beautiful, unspeakably beautiful it is....*

The catalogue of what they grew is astonishing. Acres of corn, wheat and potatoes. Mulberry trees for silk worms. Vegetables, some for market, the rest harvested and stored for their family—onions, garlic, red and yellow peppers, carrots, spinach, cabbages, fennel (*anicettes*), tomatoes, parsley, lettuce, asparagus, cucumbers.

Next, the fruits, including grapes for wine: *We have fig trees, cherry trees, apple trees, pear trees, apricot trees, plum trees, peach trees, rhubarb shrubs, and three hedges of grapes—two lines of black and one line of white...*

And then Vanzetti pushes beyond the edges of the cultivated fields. For him, the garden includes its grassy paths, and the meadows beyond, comprehending a great web of relationships that includes the wild with the cultivated, all on an equal footing.

*And the singing birds there: black merles of the golden beak, and ever more golden throat; the golden orioles, and the chaffinches; the unmatched nightingales, the nightingales over-all. Yet, I think that the wonder of the garden’s wonders is the banks of its paths. Hundreds of grass leaves of wild flowers witness there the almighty genius of the universal architect—reflecting the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars, all of its lights and colors. The forget-me-nots are nations there, and nations are the wild daisies...*



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If his friend were to walk his father’s garden, Vanzetti writes, a “rainbow cloud” of pollinators would rise up with each step she took—*the king wasps, big velvety...and the virtuous honey-bees...the hedge’s butterflies and the variated armies of several genuses of grass eaters, the red conconcinas, the meadows gri-gri*. She would be enveloped, he told her, by the sound of the *multi-phoned vibration of wings*.

What power does a garden have that a condemned man can turn from anguish to rapture in remembering it? Even in his extreme circumstance—he was allowed only one hour a day to walk outside—Vanzetti relished the aesthetic and sensual satisfactions of a garden. To dwell in the garden, even in memory, is to experience ecstasy—to be ravished as the flower is ravished by the velvety bee. The garden offers solace, consoling him in his loneliness and grief.

But the energy in the details of Vanzetti’s garden suggests that the garden, as he understood it, comprehends far more than this.

A moral universe is mapped here, one that transcends intolerance and injustice. Remembering the garden, Vanzetti returns to what it means to work the land, where the harvest offers a just reward for his labor.

The garden reminds him who he is and who his people are. To walk the garden’s paths, even in memory, surrounded by clouds of insects, singing birds, and drifts of wildflowers, restores to this man stripped of his freedom—a man in exile, stateless, soon to be robbed of his very life—a place in vast and intricate community that reaches well beyond the human. Here in his father’s garden, Vanzetti is a citizen of the land. Remembering his place in the community of living things in the garden provides him with a sense of coherent meaning,

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distinct from the chaos and tumult of the legal battle raging around him.

If a garden holds this power for the gardener in a moment of extremity, might it hold this power at all times, but we just don’t see it?