

I'm only writing this down because no one else wanted to, not because I'm qualified. Also because I want to be remembered and because I don't want to forget. Either way it should be on paper. Mama once told me that things in your memory last your lifetime, but things on paper last forever. So I'm writing because my lifetime is calling curtains, it's ending. Not cause I'm old, but because I'm dying. When mama said "your lifetime", I didn't think she meant this short. It's all the same while I'm young enough, just south of forty, to remember right, with out changing out the truth for what I wished happened, for what I wished I did differently. Out of the three of us, it shouldn't be me writing this down, but it's all the same. I'm not apologizing again for how it comes out, not that I have apologized really. It's about Aleksander and Garnett. Though people called them Bobby and Gary. My mama, Claudina, never liked nicknames. She called them half names and said half names are reserved for half people and "we are not half people!" So I don't like nicknames. Like I said, I'm only writing this down cause no one else wanted to. Mama gave me life but not a future. Heroine gave me the latter.

If you know anything about the 1950's the media sells you now it was all glamorous bullshit, full of puffy dressed, milkshakes, funny-sounding happy music, but it wasn't like that for everybody. It was like that for the dreamers not the people that were awake. Sometimes I watch a motion picture and wonder if maybe I didn't grow up where and when I thought I did. Hell, maybe I made it up. I wouldn't put it past me. My family came over to—oh, I guess I should tell you where we were and where we ended up. My family came to Staten island from Sicily shortly after the second world war and ended up in Wakefield in the East Bronx. We had a cousin, Salvatore, that had a meat shop, he let me, my mama, my pops and what should have

been my sister have the one-bedroom efficiency above him. He came during the first war with his first wife Carmela. Carmela always swore she was related to Umberto II and that New York was beneath her. I hated her, but she did my family a favor: she died. Cousin Salvatore snuck her in as his sister since they technically weren't married and on account that he knocked her up. Cousin Salvatore tried to deliver it himself, but neither of them made it. Again they did us a favor.

He didn't have the cash for a doctor back then, and we didn't have a place to stay. Our rent gave him the cash for a proper Catholic funeral. The efficiency ended up being all ours when the original shop owner died and Sal got the downstairs room. Funny how convenient death is. It took two months for him to have enough to bury her and just as long for my mama and pops to convince the priest that we were all good Catholics not communist sympathizers. It didn't help that I didn't know the catechism or one Bible verse. I could barely spell my name then. We had to go to mass three times a day just to bury a dead woman. Pops even stopped drinking after ten so that you couldn't smell the alcohol through his pores in the confession box. Mama said she could smell it from outside. The weirdest part of this whole ordeal, that I never thought about until now, is I don't know where Uncle Sal kept the body until our little charade worked—and no one asked. We just paid our respects and said thanks for the four hundred square feet above a stinking butcher shop, and mama wore a hat to the funeral. She hated hats.

It was better than the boat for sure. To this day, I still smell the sweat from the boat. It was like salt caked on a dead pig. It was acrid, wet and made me cough a lot. When I coughed or sneezed too much my pop would slap me on the back of my head. He said it was rude. It was

like I was caught between a round of applause with every *achoo*. To this day, I still look over my shoulders during allergy season, looking for those heavy, rough, hairy hands to come crashing down on my neck like a meat cleaver on a brisket. I guess I'm telling you this because if we hadn't lived here I wouldn't have met Gio, but at the same time I wouldn't have maybe never got sick. My name is Alfonso by the way, Alfonso Pasquale Lamberti. You can call me Al, unless your mama don't like half names neither.

Also I said what should have been my sister earlier because I remember my mama being pregnant on the boat. I remember being six and sitting on her lap and her stomach poking me in my ribs. It was annoying me because I've always been really skinny, despite my sickness. It hurt like a bitch after a few bumpy waves. I remember my pops slapping the back of my head, telling me I was too old to be on her lap. I wasn't trying to be a baby. I was ten. And I just wanted to smell her. Her smell blocked out all of the thick, musty smells of all of the bodies of the boat. Everyone smelled like a dirty version of his country. That's how I remembered it.

I also remember one night my mama making some scant version of pasta alla Norma and her belly was gone. I asked her about it and she acted like she had no idea what I was talking about. I rubbed my ribs with my bony thumb, hearing the nail scrape against my thick cotton shirt. There was a big, round belly. I know I didn't make that up. I yelled at her and called a big, fat liar and kicked a wooden dining room chair so hard it slid across the floor. She hugged me, her new flat stomach pressed against my wet cheeks. She shushed me, kissed the top of my head and whispered, 'There. Was. No. Baby.' She sure was crying a lot for no baby. I knew it was a sister. I dreamt about her. I named her Maria. Maria Providenza Lamberti, but I didn't tell mama. I dreamt about them a lot though. Mama and Maria I mean. Not pop so much. I've got

enough scars to remember him by. I've been dreaming about Maria more lately. Maybe she knows something I don't know.

New York was dirty then, surprise, surprise. There were so many kids in the streets. There was never a shortage of someone to play with and there was never a shortage of trouble. That's how I met Aleksander Bobiński. God damn, his English was so bad back then. Not that he talked much, not with his mouth anyway. He was Big Fist Bobby when we were kids, because his hands were too big for his body, and he'd punch the pope if you caught Bobby on a bad day. He looked out for me on account I helped his mama with groceries one day. It was not as big a deal as he made it out to be. Mrs. Bobiński tripped and her grocery bag broke when she was walking by my uncle's butcher shop. The kids were like rats running to steal the cans, and whatever jar didn't break. Her English was worse than Bobby's and she had a bum leg from a bad run with polio. Honest to God, I planned to take the can of beets that rolled closest to our front door, and stay out of it, but some tough guy grabbed her. It looked like it was about to be pretty bad. I had to do something. I may have been a skinny son of a bitch, but I was spry, too quick for him to hit me. I landed a quick slap, and got an elbow to his gut, nothing fancy, and dragged Mrs. Bobiński into the shop and locked the door. It was a Sunday so we were closed anyway. We didn't have a phone so we just hung tight until all of the cans were gone, and the rats went back into their nests. She cried like a baby, mumbling something in Polish, or maybe German. I could never tell the difference. My uncle, and mama was at church, and pops was passed out drunk upstairs, so I gave her some sausages, and pressed my finger to her lips, trying to tell her to keep it quiet. She just cried some more. Jesus, she was a pale-skinned, yellow-haired spigot, weeping and wailing like a banshee, but she eventually took it, blessed me in

German or Polish, and ran out with paper wrapped sausages under her coat. I got my ass kicked by my pops, on account she woke him with all of the crying, but it was worth it, and she got away before he got down the stairs. I guess that blessing worked more on her than me.

“Hey, Little Italy!” Bobby had said the next day.

“What?” I called back across the street.

He looked at me with a crooked grin and then waved me across the street. I followed because I wasn't going to school. Not cause it was out, but because I wasn't going. All you heard about was the Communists. Doom and gloom. I just wasn't going. Clearly, Bobby wasn't going either.

“I see you around,” he said. At least I think that's what he said. Listening to him was like trying to swim against a nasty current. Most of our friendship I just nodded.

“Yea? So?” I shrugged, not sure if I would get my ass kicked again over those damn pork sausages. Maybe he wasn't keen on pork.

“So, nothing,” Bobby huffed, sticking out his chest, “Let us do walking.”

He started walking, and I followed. He always walked with a purpose, looking over his shoulder like he was a leprechaun looking for a spot to store his pot of gold. Sorry, I don't know any Polish mythical creatures to compare him to.

“I don't want no trouble Bob—I mean Aleksander.”

“Ha! I answer to the Bobby. Tell truth, I like.”

More silence. We had walked two blocks, and the neighborhood was getting darker and darker, if you catch my drift. I stopped walking, and he whipped around to look at me.

“What gives, Bobby? You setting me up or something?” I said, under my breath. I didn't want no trouble. School and communism lessons were starting to look pretty good right about now.

“What?” he asked, his face screwed in knots like he forgot the little English he knew.

“Why we here?” I asked.

“Ha! You scared? No brave, no?”

“No! I mean—I just don't want no trouble—”

My throat went dry as a negro boy jogged across the street to where we stood. My stomach dropped into my dad's old loafers. I stepped back. Bobby looked over his shoulder seeing the boy close in on us.

“You're late!” The Negro boy yelled, jumping onto the side walk like it was moving somewhere. I had created several more feet between us, and the loafers were sliding over my skinny feet as I readied for my sprint.

“Who's your friend?” he jutted his chin at me, and my hands felt like they were being soaked in salt water. I never really talked to them, the Negros, before. Mama said they were trouble and pops always complained that they were taking all the jobs. Funny, since I have no memories of my pops working, not long-term anyway. Mama sewed so that kept us afloat.

“He's my friend,” Bobby lied, slapping my back with a big, pale hand. God, the kid was so pale it looked like body was covered in flour.

“I'm Alfonso,” I said, shoving my hands in my pockets.

“Garnett,” he said with a nod.

Garnett and I stood in silence with Bobby's long arms outstretched on both of our shoulders. Bobby was smiling like some slimy politician. Garnett looked at me with one raised, bushy black eyebrow. He was wearing jeans head to toe. Jean buttoned shirt and jean slacks. His hair looked like a mushroom, just as black and thick as his eyebrows. He looked a lot more calm than me. I was shuffling so much, I could hear my shoes scratching the pavement.

"What's this about, Alek?" Garnett asked, shoving Bobby's hand off his shoulder.

"You don't trust, Garnett. You never trust. Let's do walk," Bobby said, walking back towards our side of town. Garnett stayed put. So did I. Something didn't feel right, and even now I could slap myself for not seeing this moment for what it was: a set up.

"Nice try. I don't go to your side of town for nothing and nobody. Ain't nothing over there for me," Garnett said, crossing his arms over his skinny chest.

"Where your trust?" Bobby said, touching his chest.

"I'm gonna go," I said.

Before I could leave, a black car rolled up. It was a Lincoln coup to be sure, and it was so shiny I could see my freckles reflected on the door. Bobby squared his shoulders, as the back seat window rolled down. A fat man, with skin so browned he looked like he could be a relation of Garnett looked at us. I knew he was Italian though. I could sense it.

"Alek, come here" the fat man said. His voice was raspy and each word was punctuated with cigar smoke. The whole car was smoky. He waved Alek over, and I could finally see the cigar, a brown nub that should have long been thrown away as far as I was concerned.

"Gio!" Bobby said with a nervous smile, "Meet my friends!"

"What?" Garnett said.

The fat man smiled, and scanned the three of us left to right and then up and down. It's how mama looks at groceries at the store. Like she's looking for the cheapest box or jar.

"You scrapped the bottom of the barrel," he choked out, pulling a long drag from his nubby cigar.

"They are good, Gio. This one saved my mama, and this one so smart you wont know what hit," Bobby said, gesturing at me and Garnett.

"Look, I don't know what's going on, but I'm going home," Garnett said, pulling away from Bobby.

Gio pulled out a gun, and I'm pretty sure me and Garnett shit our pants. Even Bobby was scared, his gig hands twitching and flapping like wings.

"Get in the car, boys. Time for a field trip," Gio said, reaching back to unlock the back door.

We all obeyed. I mean even thinking back, what choice did we have. I won't bore you with the details since I'm sure the New York gangs are in your history books. I read them in the hospital just to see if they got it right.

I knew very little of it at that age. I knew about turf wars and zip-guns. I knew certain people shouldn't be on certain people's land, and that certain girls, no matter how pretty were just off limits. What I didn't know was what the Italians were doing to change the scene. What I knew of Italians was the farm we left after WWII. What I knew of Italian men was my pop, a drunk, and my uncle, a sap. Gio was nothing like either of them. He was as round as a snowman, and was always surrounded by tough guys, some who didn't even look Italian to me. And his women? Jesus H. Christ. I have never seen dames like foxy that before. And everybody



worshipped him. Me, Garnett and Bobby had a job that involved us going to Gio's club in Brooklyn on Fridays, and to his cousin Mike's auto shop on Tuesdays. Sometimes after school, and sometimes we had to wait hours so we forewent that schoolday, so to speak. I remember one Friday, I skipped school and met Garnett on the negro side of the Bronx to wait for our car. Gio always sent a car for us. None of the Negros bothered me because I was with Garnett, and on account of Gio's reputation was spreading like the influenza.

"Hey," I had said to Garnett.

He nodded, and kept his head down.

"What's the matter?"

"I want out," he whispered.

"What? Why? They pay us and I didn't know we could get out."

I really didn't know it was choice, and I didn't ask cause, well, after a couple months I was starting to get a taste for it.

Garnett, pulled a small envelop out of his pocket, and then shoved it back in. It was today's package. I had mine too. We just had to move it across town.

"Boys, like me I mean, are trying to do what Gio does on my side of town," he whispered again, looking over his shoulder.

I couldn't believe it. Gio would kill him. Hell, I wanted to kill him. What a traitor! After all Gio gave us. I had pocket money, a job, and I was even starting to stick up to my pop. Kind of.

"What the hell, Gary!" I said. I clearly said it too loudly, because a couple of men on the corner looked at me. Garnett nodded, telling them it was okay.

"Did you hear about East Harlem?" he asked me, keeping his voice low.

“No,” I spat out. I was fuming.

“Well, the Italians don’t have it anymore,” Gary said, looking over his shoulder again, “Things are changing, man. The Puerto Ricans run it. Negros too! My cousin lives there. The Italians are scared of people that look like me. And not scared like jumpy, scared like they don’t mess with us. They respect us.”

“Then move to East Harlem.”

Garnett shook his head.

“Nope. The Red Wings are already getting pushed out of East Harlem. We want the Bronx, and we are coming for it. There’s already a plan. I’m part of it. This stuff that Gio has us carrying, this heroin crap, they sell it too. Ours is cheaper. I don’t want no trouble with you, but as a friend I thought you should know.”

That was the last thing I heard from Garnett’s mouth. He didn’t talk during the car ride when the coup finally pulled up, and he didn’t talk the whole shift at the club. That next Tuesday he wasn’t on the corner with me, and neither was Bobby. Rumor was his mom dragged him to West Seneca to live with some cousins, on his fifteenth birthday rumor was he was in jail in Chicago for his sixteenth. Fact was he was gone.

I stayed with Gio. My pop died, apparently, while I was getting promoted to Gio’s second hand. Mama married Uncle Sal. Had three kids. I don’t know them. When Gio died of a heart attack in 1969, I thought I would take over. I was ready, but I had to show off to my mama. She coddled those three new brats like they were literally giftwrapped behind the pearly gates. The three of them, whatever their names are, were always clean at church or school, speaking good English; it was disgusting. I left the church service after they buried Gio, and

headed straight to the butcher shop. Mama was just coming in from church with her spit-shined kids.

“What are you doing here?” she asked me.

No kiss, no hug. But the way she eyed me up and down in my new suit, my new car was enough to show me she was impressed, jealous even.

“Came to tell you I’ve been promoted. This is my borough now, mama. Mine,” I seethed.

She pursed her lips, shooed her brats inside and waved me in. I had my body guards wait outside. The shop was unchanged. That’s all the description it’s worth. Mama ducked behind the counter and pulled out some paper-wrapped meat.

“Here,” she said, shoving it at my chest.

“What’s this?” I asked, holding it.

“Meat. It’s good. Straight from Sicily. It’s good lamb. Maybe you eat it and it remind you where you came from. I will tell your step-father you stopped by,” she said, stiffly.

“You mean my *uncle*.”

Her eyes cut up at me.

“Leave, Alfonso.”

Cystic echinococcosis. That’s what was in that lamb. I got it served up medium rare in Gio’s club. We were having a party to celebrate him, and me being the new boss. I ate it proudly with my body guards flanked at my side and two beautiful dames at my table. It’s deadly, and found predominantly in Italian sheep.

“Using dope, and boozing isn’t helping, Al,” Dr. Agostini said. He was Gio’s old doctor. He took care of the family. I had him making house calls. I couldn’t afford for anyone in the neighborhood to see me like this.

“I don’t use my product,” I said, pulling my bed covers to my chest.

“Look at your arms, Al. Even once in a while ain’t good. Your body can’t take it. I’m sorry, son. I would make arrangements.”

And he left me with paper and pen for a will. I made arrangements, alright. I made them the way Gio taught me to. I burned the butcher shop down to the ground.