

Searching for Poppa's Song

by Marilyn Geary



"Poppa"—Domenico Luigi Longinotti

Only a few of my grandfather's words echo in my memory. The patriarch of my father's family never made a speech, gave a toast, or lectured on the values he held true. Yet I'll never forget a song he used to sing to me after dinner when I was quite young. That song has haunted me throughout the years as the only words from my grandfather I can recall.

Head of a family that grew as strong and as abundant as the trees in his orchard, Poppa, as we called him, spoke little and did much. Domenico Luigi Longinotti was born in the Provincia di Parma in Italy in the late 1800s. His village, Bedonia, perched high in the lush forests of the Apennine Mountains, supported no industry and very little farming. To make a decent living, many men from the region went abroad to England or to America.

In 1906, at the age of seventeen, Domenico left his native village in the mountains for Le Havre, France. At the port, he boarded the vessel *La Savoie*, which took him in steerage to Ellis Island. From New York, he found his way to California and the lush, fertile Santa Clara Valley, then known as the Valley of the Heart's Delight. His older brother Luigi had already settled on a ranch there. To earn his living, Domenico took a job hauling manure by horse cart to some of the many vegetable fields carpeting the valley. By working in the fields for Italian friends and relatives, Domenico scraped together money for his future.

Through mutual friends, Domenico met my grandmother, Clara Peirano. After a suitably long courtship, Domenico and Clara married and settled down to create a family. Their first child, my Auntie Maria, was born in East San Jose on my great-uncle's fruit ranch. She liked telling us that she was born in a cabbage patch. Domenico and Clara managed to gather together enough savings to purchase an orchard of fifteen acres located in the Willow Glen district of San Jose. The

orchard was stocked with peaches, bing cherries, sugar prunes, walnut and apricot trees planted in straight rows lined neatly across the acreage. A solid, white Victorian house stood among the surrounding green shrubbery like a white-iced cake decoration. Two barns on the property housed chickens, geese, a horse and various farm equipment. Clara gave birth in this house to three sons: Eugenio, Giovanni and Carlo, my father.

Poppa was a big, burly man with hands like tree stumps, gnarly and stained from the tannin in walnuts. He dressed in Big Ben overalls, a long-sleeved checked cotton shirt and a crumpled hat that he never removed as he trudged in the heat through the rows of fruit trees. On Sundays and holidays, Poppa would dress for church in a brown suit with very thin yellow stripes, a crisp white shirt, suspenders, and a brown felt hat that covered his balding crown.

Although he had never farmed before, Poppa loved working the ranch. Most of all he loved his pigeons. He built roosts high up the side of the barn to house them. Each evening Poppa would dip a big hand into a pail of yellow grain and throw huge handfuls onto the gravel in his driveway. He'd call "Here peejy, peejy, peejy. Here peejy, peejy, peejy." The rustle of wings would muffle his calls as the pigeons flocked to the feed.

At dusk when Poppa could no longer see to work outside, he came into the big kitchen for the evening meal. Marie made the most delicious squab, *risotto* and *ravioli*, simmered in olive oil and basil. Her meals filled the kitchen with the exquisite aromas, but no matter the fare, Poppa always reached behind the big round oak table into the large tin drawer for his bread and cheese. He took large chunks and carved thick slices with a huge knife he kept for this purpose. The bread was tough and crusty, the cheese rock-hard, yet the knife in Poppa's huge hands dug in and sliced these staples into slabs, crumbs falling to the table. And while the rest of the family savored *minestrone* or veal, tender squab or *spaghetti*, Poppa chomped on his meal of choice: dry bread and Parmesan cheese.

We never could understand why Poppa preferred these simple foods. It's just one of many questions we had about the man. He was a mystery to us, his grandchildren. He never did learn to speak much English, but Poppa never spoke much Italian either. Conversations with Poppa kept to the basics. One of his children would ask in a very loud and clear voice, "How's it going, Poppa?"

He'd shrug his shoulders good-naturedly, shake his head and say, "*Va bene.*" That would be it. End of conversation. He'd then sit back in his chair and survey his rich harvest, his children and grandchildren, who led lives so vastly different from his simple life in the Old Country. We got the sense from the twinkle in his eyes that he was very proud of his sons and his daughter, and their children,

as they became accomplished professionals, successful in the ways of his adopted home.

Sometimes after dinner, Poppa would take me on his knee and bounce me up and down as he sang in pidgin English: "Ta da da da dada, my little red veen, my little red veen, ta da da da dada." I loved hearing his song as I rode on his knee. This great big burl of a man seemed to be having as much fun as I was.

Yet, with each bounce, I wondered, "What is he singing about?" I could not make out the words. I wanted badly to recognize them, as they were clues to understanding this strange and mostly-distant grandpa. Back then, I thought maybe he was singing a traditional Italian song about a tiny bird with red wings that he fondly recalled from back home in Italy. Later I thought he was probably singing about another love, the red *vino* that whetted his evening meal of dry bread and cheese.

Recently I've learned that the song was a popular tune of the Twenties called "Little Red Wing, the Indian Maiden." I was stunned at this discovery. Where did Poppa learn this popular tune? How could he sing of Indians, while I was dreaming of Italy? I have so many questions I'll never resolve about my Italian grandfather now long gone. Yet even though my search for this song took me far from the Italian roots I had expected, it has brought me closer to Poppa, and to my memories of a giggling little girl bouncing on his knee as he sang its sweet melody.

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