

BEATING THE SHOE

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An uncle with the red face of a drinker arrived with his mandolin and sat before a tumbler of Grandpa's wine. He listened with his head cocked as he strummed and tightened the strings, then lit a cigarette and started a song. The grandparents and aunts and uncles gathered in the basement sang along and clapped their hands for certain parts and their emotions followed and they laughed or shed tears and Charles at age six couldn't understand a word of it, only later he understood they were singing of the world left behind that would lose its outlines but leave tracks that could be followed, and even the tracks would fade but still remain long after Charles had left the earth. The language would be lost, the old dialect from Louis Prima, or in bits from gangster films, or on Grandpa's kitchen radio in the falsetto voice of Carlo Buti.

The man with the mandolin was known as Uncle Willie but his real name was Vito, a cousin of some kind, he'd owned a restaurant in Greenwich Village around from the Waverly Theater. Even though the restaurant had gone south, the sign still hung over the street, its red neons still muttering *Ristorante Italiano*, and Charles, drinking wine with his friends one night pointed to the sign with pride as before him swam the image of the uncle with his tumbler of wine and the cigarette in the corner of his mouth and an impish look on his face, but the restaurant was lost because of his drinking.

Some of his friends didn't have what he had. They didn't have Frank Sinatra or Joe DiMaggio, or Roy Campanella. They didn't have the Orchid Room next to the public library where Charles first read Homer and where the big shot owner shot faster than his assassin and they dragged the body on the sidewalk in front of the Toddle House and played dumb when the police arrived. They didn't have pastries sprinkled with powdered sugar and wrapped in a box with red and white string by young women wearing their grandmothers' hoop earrings, they didn't have Frank Costello who owned slot machines from here to Kingdom Come who told a

senate committee that he paid his taxes, or “Scarface” Al Capone or Lucky Luciano who controlled the docks.

Charles wanted to write about being Italian. His grandmother, whose emotions had no trouble following Uncle Willie’s songs, made sure the house was quiet in the morning so Charles could work. One day she fell down the basement stairs and broke a hip and never recovered. With the clock ticking the grandfather sat by the living room window and watched the two Irish sisters go by every day on their way to the Blarney Stone, the bar on the corner under the el. In better weather he sat in the driveway with a sprig of mint in his mouth. *How are you, Grandpa? What are you doing?*

Pass the time, he would say and when he died the uncles sold the house and moved upstate.

In 2018 Charles phone banked in Texas for Beto O’Rourke and on one call his New York accent was recognized. *I’m Italian too*, said the voice, and in a conspiratorial tone he asked, *Do you know the Italian Alphabet?*

Charles braced for the stereotype.

Fuckin’ A, Fuckin’ B, Fuckin’ C.

Charles is not proud of all things Italian. Too many Italian-Americans have fallen for the Mussolini avatar currently in the White House. He’ll put things in order. He’ll get rid of the riff-raff, as Italian-Americans were once called. Why did so many take his side? Why so many names with vowel endings? Is it that Italians are basically conservative and their belief in order starts in the kitchen with their food snobbery, and extends to politics and the desire for simple answers? As a teenager Charles worked after school in an Italian deli. The owner, Paul Scalzetti, was warm and friendly and generous. About him it was said, ‘he’d give you the shirt off his back,’ and yet Scalzetti would buy a pair of Thom McCann shoes and wear them for a month and then beat one shoe on the curb until the sole came off. He would then return the shoe and demand a new pair. The trick always worked.

There’s a photo of Scalzetti at seventeen with a full head of curly hair. His stomach is flat as a board. It’s Easter Sunday and he wears a suit with a white carnation in the lapel to signify rebirth. With hands behind his back he looks skyward with all the idealism of youth, and yet he wears a mischievous expression that suggests a hidden side to his character. Later he’s drafted for the Korean War and at basic training punches a Sergeant who gave him an order, for which he’s

sent to the brig and dishonorably discharged. He tells this story to Charles with a sense of pride, and Charles, at sixteen, knows this is not the way to behave, and yet the needle of his compass trembles slightly. He's still an observer, sitting behind the freezer and half hidden by a beer sign. He waits with anticipation as Scalzetti, balding now and with a pot belly, stands behind the counter which holds a quarter wheel of grating cheese. He shaves off pieces of the cheese and eats them like potato chips. A woman in a blue suit comes into the store. Her dark hair is neatly trimmed to shoulder length. She carries herself with a sense of dignity. She orders a half pound of salami and turns to the wall of canned goods to make a selection. Her back is to Scalzetti, who comes out from behind the counter, and says "Can I help you?" Deliberately he places his palm on her bottom as if to lift her up. The woman takes this with a disgusted look but says nothing. Charles is shocked but also says nothing.

He wonders where this behavior comes from, this taking of advantage. The shoes, the dishonorable discharge, the abuse of the woman in the blue suit. The aunts and uncles clapping and singing and shedding tears to Uncle Willie's mandolin were nothing like that. They worked with their hands from the day they were born. There were no gangsters in this family.

In a blink of time Italian-Americans went from being lynched and vilified to being fashionable by virtue of their culture and sensibility. Americans fell in love with their food, their clothes, their art, their boxers and singers and the real and imagined gangsters who provided villains when plots failed. Writers still tell their story as they try to capture this duality of good and evil. Charles reads that Italians are stoics. They tolerated the World War II internments, protested until the government lifted the sanctions and replied with the back of the hand under the chin. Italians have too much pride.

In his thirties Charles learned to speak a passable Italian and visited the Sicilian town his grandfather left because in his words, "There was nothing there!" The cousins stuff him with food and show him their simple lifeways. The basement of their house is a stall for the donkey, fed with fava bean shells or hay cut on the road with a hand scythe. They sit down to spaghetti with peas, eggplant dried in the sun and sauteed. They show him tomato sauce preserved in wine bottles and sealed with olive oil. There's wild fennel in the spaghetti pot to flavor the water, which was scarce and not always available. Plumbing was basic, chase your poop with a little water, place used toilet paper in a separate bucket.

Charles would never ask whether they knew the stories of the great heroes who passed that way. Did they know of the Punic and Peloponnesian wars fought over this very island? Or the Greeks and Spanish and Muslims and French who colored their blood as well as their language? It would be insulting to ask those questions. The influences he seeks lie within them, in their habits and way of life, in the blood of history, in their manner of speech.

As a writer Charles never captured Italian-Americans to his satisfaction. He still picks at the question of why so many embrace authoritarian rule. Scalzetti beats his shoe on the curb to get a free pair when he doesn't need the money. Breaking norms is encouraged by laws based on common sense, equal treatment, and the fragility of trust. And why do so many Italian-Americans work for this new Mussolini? Why so many names with vowel endings? They forgive his transgressions, they argue his side in court and bully the judges, they beat Human Rights like a shoe on the curb.