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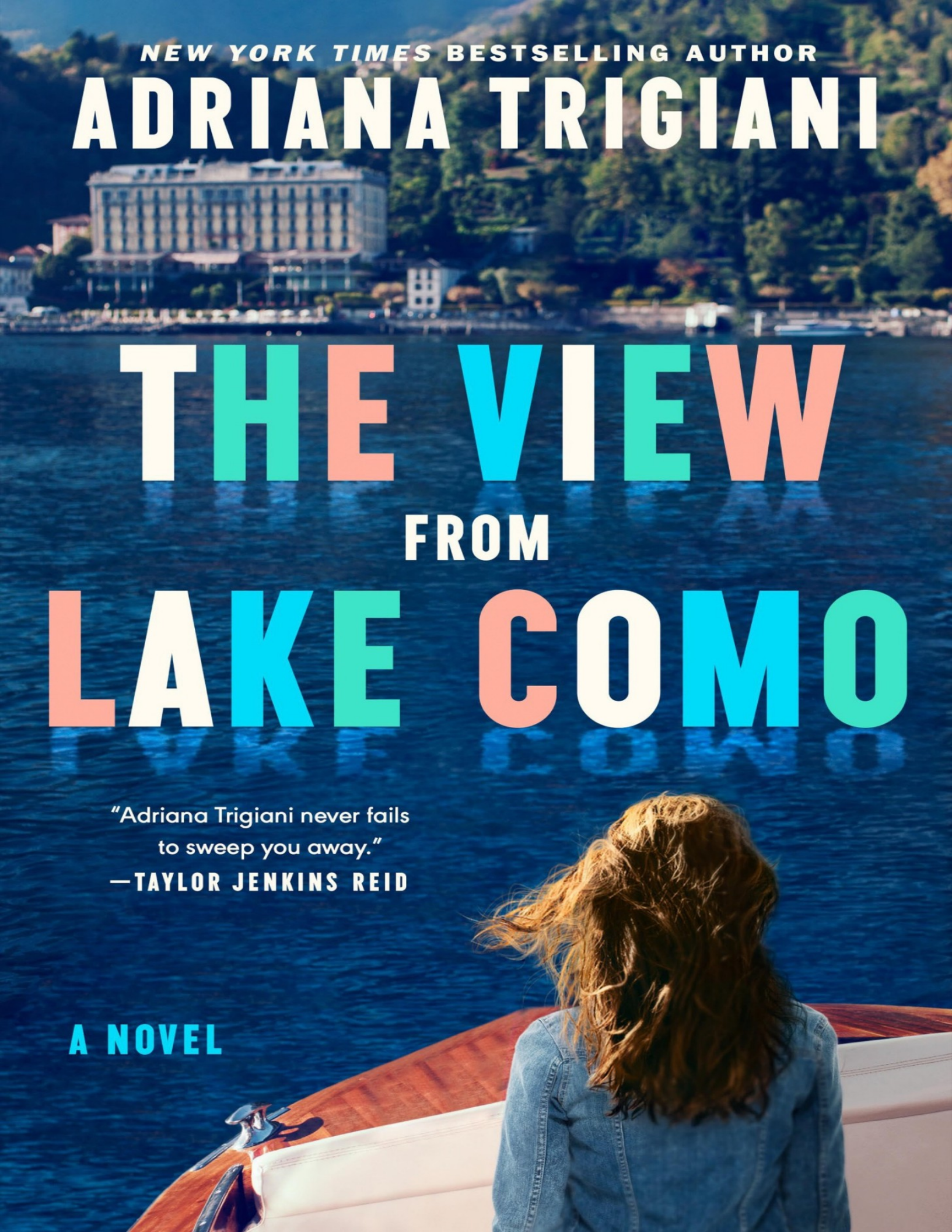
ADRIANA TRIGIANI

THE VIEW
FROM
LAKE COMO

"Adriana Trigiani never fails
to sweep you away."

—TAYLOR JENKINS REID

A NOVEL



ALSO BY ADRIANA TRIGIANI

FICTION

The Good Left Undone

The House of Love

Tony's Wife

Kiss Carlo

All the Stars in the Heavens

The Supreme Macaroni Company

The Shoemaker's Wife

Viola in the Spotlight

Brava, Valentine

Viola in Reel Life

Very Valentine

Home to Big Stone Gap

Rococo

The Queen of the Big Time

Lucia, Lucia

Milk Glass Moon

Big Cherry Holler

Big Stone Gap

NONFICTION

Don't Sing at the Table: Life Lessons from My Grandmothers

Cooking with My Sisters (coauthor)

SCREENPLAYS

Our Lady Goes Bananas

Very Valentine

Big Stone Gap

The
VIEW
from
LAKE COMO

A NOVEL

Adriana Trigiani





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The View from Lake Como is a work of fiction. The characters are entirely imaginary. However, the citizens of South Belmar, New Jersey, elected to change the name of their borough to Lake Como, New Jersey, on November 2, 2004. The borough officially became Lake Como on January 4, 2005. The author was inspired by the local chutzpah, but in no way intended to besmirch the democratic process of local government in the state of New Jersey in the United States of America.

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About the Author

In memory of my uncles
The Four Heavenly Horsemen
Orlando A. Bonicelli, Michael F. Ronca, The Honorable
Michael F. Godfrey and Michael R. Trigiani

One day Elsie de Wolfe said to Ludwig Bemelmans,

*“Italians are fortunate. They can always cry it away or sing
it away or love it away.”*

PART ONE



Cry It Away

1

Thera-Me

EXERCISE 1

I SHOVE THE PENCIL behind my ear. I hold the sketch pad next to my face and lean into the mirror. I take inventory of my features in the self-portrait. Let's see. I have rendered the oval shape of my face, neatly arched black eyebrows *alla* Puglia, and a satisfactory Tuscan nose, prominent yet not too large. The lips are full in the center with commas in the corners. And finally. The eyes. Two round, dark planets of pain.

I prop up the pad on the table and stand to observe the drawing from a different perspective. I've been looking at this mug for thirty-three years, so you'd think there'd be no surprises. I lean over my work and squint. The hair is not right. I hold the tip of the soft HB graphite pencil flat, whisking it above the forehead in quick, successive strokes, smudging the hairline with my thumb, softening the fine strands at the temples. I've used every technique to lighten the overall effect and lift the mood of this *faccia*, but no matter how I tinker, I'm looking at the portrait of an unhappy woman.

I snap a photo of the sketch.

Dear Dr. Sharon,

The self-portrait you requested is attached. I make my living drawing marble installations to scale. I'm a draftsman who also provides designs for customers. Forgive the lack of nuance in the sketch, but it is a truthful rendering of how I see myself.

They say the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, but it would appear my sojourn began with a litany of missteps that led to a face-plant. This is why I am here. I need your help to get up and move forward. Emotionally.

I read your Keys to Contentment online. **Make your own happiness.** I will be happy to when I am able to define it. **Follow your heart.** Easy for others to say, sure, follow your heart but only if you have a good sense of direction. **Listen to your inner voice.** Trying. When I follow the daily Instagram posts that feature a cup of coffee, a cookie, and the advice of general philosophers, it seems my life gets worse. I'm trying to change, but reinvention is impossibly hard work for someone who isn't sure where to begin. Or how.

You see, I'm the people pleaser in my family, the unsung cook, maid, babysitter, and driver. Looking down the road, I will become the nurse, responsible for our soon-to-be-elderly parents, because my brother and sister have families of their own. I am newly single and childless, which means I'm available to serve—more. My role has been carved as if it were etched in marble. And I know marble.

I created a dream board, with pictures and images of all I long for: it's in the shape of the country of Italy, which should tell you something about my heart's desire. There are the rolling hills of Tuscany, the marble quarries of Carrara, and the speedboats of Lake Como. I want to celebrate life, not dread it.

I moved into my parents' basement apartment when I decided to leave my husband. My family prays that I reconsider and return to my ex. They are not alone. The general population of my hometown concurs. In fact, at our church, the Sodality, the women's service organization equal to the Knights of Columbus for the men, even offered a (humiliating) mass for reconciliation. They were fervently praying one way, while I prayed the other. I said the rosary so many times during my divorce proceedings, I rubbed the face of Jesus off the crucifix.

I've held a passport since I was eighteen years old but have yet to use it. It is just one empty page after another of pristine navy jacquard without a single stamp to anywhere or the slightest scuff on the leather cover. When I went to renew it last year, the man at the passport office said, "Why bother?"

I want to bother! I want to know what it's like to see the places that have lived in my imagination since I first read about them in books. Is there something out there

for me, Dr. Sharon? Is there such a thing as bliss? If so, can you help me find it? With or without the cookie.

G.C.B., Lake Como, New Jersey

The Family Business

THE RED TAILLIGHTS on Uncle Louie's chartreuse Impala blink as he backs the car out of his garage on his way to pick me up for work. He and Aunt Lil live in the last house on the corner lot before the intersection of Surf Avenue, which leads to the beach. Their Cape Cod, the most landscaped home in all of New Jersey, stands out among the mix of white split-level and soft blue saltbox houses that hug the curve of the shore of Lake Como like a rope of shimmering opals.

Through the years, Aunt Lil and Uncle Louie have installed every manner of ornamentation and architectural interest on their half-acre lot. There's a koi pond, a three-tier marble fountain, and a walkway of gold-streaked pavers that swirls up to the front door like a yellow brick road. The backyard has a replica of the Parthenon built out of Carrara marble where they host the Knights of Columbus Weenie Roast every July Fourth. "My home is an advertisement for my business," Uncle Louie says. "Italian craftsmanship and American elegance?" he asks, before he answers, "I'm your man."

If he's your man, then I'm your wingman. Uncle Louie is my boss at Capodimonte Marble and Stone, our family business since 1924.

My uncle pulls up to the curb. I inhale the chill of the morning air. It tickles my nose and fills my lungs, which causes me to sneeze with my whole body. I fish through my purse for a tissue.

"Jess. Are you serious?" Uncle Louie says through his open window as I wipe my nose.

I climb inside and snap the seat belt. He rolls his fist. “Leave your window down so any germs blow out.”

“I’m not sick. It’s the temperature.”

“Now you’re a scientist? If you don’t catch a cold, it won’t catch you. Words of wisdom from my mother.”

“Your hypochondria flares up whenever the seasons change.”

“You noticed, huh?” Uncle Louie’s mouth curves into a smile.

I see everything, but there’s no point in bragging about it. A worldview doesn’t do you much good when you live in a small town, unless your passport is current. When it comes to Lake Como, New Jersey, the Capodimonte and Baratta families own North Boulevard. My Cap grandparents lived two houses down while the Baratta grandparents lived three houses down in the other direction. They’re all gone now; the Baratta homestead went to our cousin Carmine in 2019, while the Cap house has not been touched since Grandma died in 2022. We call it the Lake Como Museum because it remains intact; not a single teaspoon has left the premises since her death. Around the loop of the lake, the rest of the houses are filled with relatives.

Whenever we had a block party, we closed down the street and became a version of the Villa Capri in Paterson on their All You Can Eat Family Night. We were an Italian American a-go-go minus the floor show, free hors d’oeuvres, and two-drink minimum. Beyond our social lives, our family shares the street, a canoe, and our devotion to the Blessed Mother. A statue of Mary can be found in every yard on the lake. It may appear the patriarchy is thriving, but Italian Americans know it’s the mother who has the power. Philomena Capodimonte Baratta, my own *mamma mia Madonna*, is proof of that.

“What’s with the jacket?” Uncle Louie gives my outfit a once-over.

“Connie gave it to me.”

“You’re still in your sister’s hand-me-downs?”

“Does it look bad?” I smooth the navy linen with my hands.

I am not up to Uncle Louie's sartorial code. Never have been. Louie Cap is the last of a group of Italian American men who came up on the Beatles but never forgot Louis Prima. He's a sharp dresser, Rat Pack debonair. He wears size 8 suede loafers like Frank Sinatra and three-piece suits like Jerry Vale, altered for a streamlined fit on his trim frame. He is never without a fitted vest under his suit jacket because he likes the feeling of being cinched in.

"Clothes make the woman," Uncle Louie reminds me. "What the hell happened over here? You're Depression Central."

"I'm working on it. I signed up for Thera-Me. It's an online therapy program. I got so many Instagram ads for it I must be in their target market."

"Whatever that means," Louie groans. "My goal is to make it into the arms of my Savior without having to install another app."

"I was assigned to Dr. Sharon over Zoom."

"Is she a real doctor?" Uncle Louie asks.

"Board-certified. She had me draw a self-portrait. And she asked me to journal. Wants me to write down my memories, the happy ones and the painful times. She said past experience is the foundation of future mental health." I show Uncle Louie my self-portrait.

Uncle Louie glances over as he drives. "That don't look like you."

"What do you mean?"

"I'd take another run at it." Uncle Louie makes a face.

"Too late. I already turned it in."

"Is this therapy operation expensive?"

"Around the cost of a gym membership."

"Hmm. What a racket. Why do you need a therapist when you have me? I'm like a priest. At my age, there isn't anything you could tell me that would even slightly shock me."

"There are things I can't talk to even you about."

"Even though I have a very sensitive female side?"

"Not funny, Uncle Louie."

Uncle Louie's phone rings. He taps speaker. "Yo, Googs."

“I got a couple sleeves of black granite. You got a need?” Googs sounds far away, like he’s calling from the moon.

“Putting a floor in over in Basking Ridge. How much you got?”

“Ten by six. Looks like I have six sheets total. Foyer? Small?”

Uncle Louie looks at me. I confirm that we could use the stock.

“For a price,” Uncle Louie says into the phone. “Don’t soak me, Googs. I’m not in the mood.”

“Text the address and I’ll deliver.” Rolando “Googs” Gugliotti hangs up. He is one of Uncle Louie’s oldest work colleagues. He would be the Joey Bishop in Uncle Louie’s Rat Pack. He shows up, does his business, and disappears like a vapor until you need him again, or he needs you.

I look down at my phone. “How does he know exactly when to call? It’s creepy.”

“Not in the least. He’s an intuitive salesman. Make a note.”

I scroll to the notes app on my phone and await instructions.

“Aldo and Rena Lovisone’s reno. Granite drop. Arrange with client.” Uncle Louie dictates as he takes a right turn off Sixteenth Avenue and onto Main Street into the business district.

He slows down, surveying the buildings from one side of the street to the other.

“The Italian American Riviera is on the comeback.” Louie gives a low whistle of approval as he observes the new apartment building next to the renovated mixed-use warehouse, set among the restaurants, liquor store, radio station, and condos on the main drag. He stops the car in front of the vacant firehouse and leans out the window and squints. “They’re putting in a barbecue joint, Five Alarm, they’re calling it. It suits. Names matter.”

Yes, they do. I was thirteen years old in 2004 when South Belmar, New Jersey, had become a sorry suburban pit stop between Belmar and Spring Lake. Our pretty, working-class town had turned into a zoo for party animals. Property values had plummeted. It was decided that the best way to save our town was to start over. We needed a new name.

The residents agreed the sooner South Belmar was in the rearview, the better. Our town was settled on the lake close to the ocean one hundred years ago by Irish, Dutch/German, and Italian immigrants, and here, three generations on, they remain. The local Italians ran a campaign to change the name from South Belmar to Lake Como. The Irish and Dutch/Germans initially balked at naming the town for the lake, but the Italians argued that *Como* was easy to spell. Good point. It was also true that nobody was elated about the alternatives: Fuerstenfeldbruck or Lake Nobber.

Uncle Louie led the charge, and under his leadership, Lake Como won in a landslide, by 167 votes! We were South Belmar, New Jersey, no more. The new name proved to be lucky. A lyrical name creates a space to fill with beauty, like a contralto as she steps into a circle of golden light on the stage of an opera house.

No one knows that names matter more than me, as I have been tortured over mine. When I was born, my parents, determined to swaddle me in family history and my mom's version of Tuscan style, named me Giuseppina Capodimonte Baratta. When my brother couldn't pronounce it, he called me Jess for short. It stuck. Everyone calls me Jess except my mother, the purist.

Uncle Louie and I coast to a stop, joining the line of stalled traffic on East Street.

"Poor timing," Uncle Louie grunts.

"Drop-off." I watch a gaggle of girls in navy jumpers walk up the front steps. How is it possible that the girls of Saint Rose School are wearing the same uniform I wore twenty-five years ago? While we wait in the traffic, I open the notes app on my phone. I follow the prompt from Dr. Sharon. I connect the feeling to the words as I remember waiting for my mother. I write.



It was one of those warm October afternoons that felt as hot as the soupiest, most humid days in August. I dripped sweat as I wove through the line of cars throwing heat. The moms waited in air-conditioned comfort with their engines idling, ripping a permanent hole in the ozone layer over New Jersey. There was a reason we said a schoolwide rosary on Earth Day. We wanted to live.

I climbed into my mom's Plymouth minivan with plastic seat covers that stuck to my legs when I sat down. It was the year 2000; I was nine years old. I wore a hand-me-down school jumper and Lands' End loafers. My sister, Connie, was eleven years old. She wore an identical uniform one size up. She was strapped into the back seat behind Mom. I sat in the back seat my entire life until Connie learned that whoever sits in the front passenger seat is most likely to die first in a car wreck; ever since then, it's had my name on it.

My classmates looked like a flock of bluebirds in their jumpers with their regulation cardigans tied around their waists like aprons. It was so hot, the girls rolled their white knee socks down into small inner tubes around their ankles. This was the kind of fashion trend that caught on at Saint Rose, and everyone had to follow the fad or die a slow social death. I refused to roll my knee socks until I was allowed to shave my legs.

"Mom, when can I shave my legs?"

"You have to wait," Connie piped up. "I just got permission."

"I didn't ask you. I asked Mom." If the hair on my legs grew for three more years, I'd need to shave twice a day like Cousin Bear Baratta, who grew a full beard between breakfast and dinner.

"Let me think about it, Giuseppina."

"Hey, Jess!" Lisa Natalizio called out from the sidewalk. Lisa's blond braids were as thick as hay and had expanded in the humidity. Her smile was