

Parental Passions

By Stephen Muratore

Someone once asked me whether my parents were passionate about one another, and demonstrative; whether they “kissed on Main Street.”

Many of my earliest memories of my dad and mom show them fighting with one another in very loud voices, red-in-the-face. My dad was known by family and friends to be self-effacing, soft-spoken, taciturn. My mom, however, had the expressive-emotive personality of the classic southern-Italian woman, and she knew how to push Dad’s buttons.

In those early years, Dad worked overtime, or took second jobs, as often as he could, to pay the mortgage, add rooms to the house, save for the kids’ future. (There were three of us kids then. A fourth arrives later in this story.) Dad usually left for work in the morning before we kids got up for school, and returned sometime after we had finished dinner, often after we had gone to bed. But he usually hadn’t eaten dinner before he got home, so he’d arrive tired, hungry, and dirty from hard physical work. When I feel like that, I get more than a little grouchy and oversensitive. Maybe low blood sugar and exhaustion affect taciturn people in the same way. And, God knows, my mom worked hard too. She got up as early as Dad, and worked until she dropped into bed at the end of every long day, preparing our food, mending our clothes, yelling at us kids, and cleaning. My mother was a fastidious cleaner.

In any case, soon after my dad returned from work every night, something would set them off, and they’d go at each other. Often the trigger was something my mother had placed before my father on a plate. Apparently he was a bit of a fussy eater, and truth to tell, my mother was not known as the best cook in our extended family. Dad would make a grumbling sound, and Mom would let him have both barrels of southern-Italian female rage. At other times, Mom would say something softly to Dad. As I overheard most of these conversations from my bedroom while doing homework or while lying in bed ready to sleep, I’d here nothing more than a murmur. I never knew exactly what she had said. But it was always the right thing to get Dad to roar at her. And, as they say at Belmont, they were off.

Thanks to his self-restraint, though Dad would holler and curse, he never once laid a hand on Mom. Dad was a big burly man. A swat from him could break bones. Mom, on the other hand, knew not such self-restraint. On occasion, she’d fling kitchenware, even plates, at Dad. Once or twice, I saw her launch into his chest with her fists. If it weren’t for the fear and anxiety these scenes caused us kids, they could have been comical. Whereas Dad was burly, Mom was petite. Mom pounding on Dad had as much impact as a gnat has on the horse it lands on.

Still, these scenes were not funny. They were terrifying. One night, my mother screamed my name, calling me to get out of my bed to protect her from my father. Bless him, my Dad walked out the door before his eight-year-old son had to make the choice whether to stand between his own father and mother. Dad stayed away for hours that night. But apparently he returned very late, in a cooler mind, and went off to work the next morning before we kids had awakened.

Were they passionate about one another. Yeah, I’d say so. I sometimes wondered why my mother hated my father so. What was wrong with him?

One of his friends told my dad about a great job opportunity. The two of them could sign a six- or nine-month contract with the Army to help with the construction of a military base in Thule, Greenland, inside the Arctic Circle. The Thule base is one of the cold-war “dew-point” bases constructed to protect America from nuclear missiles the Soviets could launch at us over the Arctic.

Apparently the pay scale for the contract job was very high, and compensation for overtime even higher. In half a year or so, Dad could make enough money to finish the new rooms for the house, maybe buy a

new car, “get ahead a little.” For the first time, I heard him talking to one of his friends about selling our house and buying a bigger one. My dad signed up, and flew to Greenland, maybe looking forward a bit to a bit of solitude.

In no time at all, my mother started pining. Good lord, did she ever miss him. Her face would light up whenever she received a letter addressed by his hand, or when she heard his voice during his rare-because-expensive phone calls. And what did Dad say to Mom? At first she wouldn’t read aloud to us kids the parts of the letters he had addressed to her alone; but after a couple of weeks, she allowed us bits of those parts. How he missed her! Army barracks are, at best, Army barracks; but our home was a real home. Did this fussy eater have anything nice to say about Army cooking? He missed my mother’s cooking, and longed for even a bowlful of her delicious *pasta e fagioli*. Unbelievable. But most of all, Mom read aloud, with a tear about to roll, he missed her, and their sweet (!) children.

After about three months in Thule, Dad injured his foot on a job site. In a stroke of Irony, the injury developed into gout, a disease which, by legend, was the province of rich people who ate too richly. The Army sent him home.

God, did Dad’s family give him a warm welcome! Because of the gout, Dad could not return to work right away. We had Dad home with us at times of day when we kids were awake. We kissed him goodbye as we went to school, and kissed him hello when we returned. He told us that he’d decided not to work so much overtime anymore. “We’ll do ok. We’ll still pay our bills. The money is not that important anymore.” And, after he returned to work, he did indeed show up in time for dinner with his family every night. But Mom would not let him sit down at the table when he first arrived. Oh no, she first had to embrace him, and get him to sit on the sofa so she could sit on his lap. I never again heard Dad grumble about Mom’s cooking. I swear I heard him say, “This is good, honey,” on several occasions.

Not long after that, my mother discovered she was pregnant with her fourth. The child was to be another boy, the one they named after my Dad. I don’t think Dad lived to see Joseph, Jr. turn one, but that baby stoked the newfound light in my father’s eyes, and brought a soft smile to his rugged face.