



[Ovunque Siamo](#)



## George de Stefano

### THE KINGDOM OF TWO SICILIES



Illustration by Pat Messina Singer

### *Bridgeport, Connecticut, 1958*

The mother, an attractive woman in her mid-thirties, has brought her two sons to visit their grandmother on a late July afternoon. The boys don't love their nonna. She is polite to them but not affectionate. She never hugs or kisses them, never gives them funny nicknames, like she does with her other grandchildren. She sits in her favorite kitchen chair, hands clasped over her big belly, looking at the dark-haired, dark eyed, olive-skinned boys. She turns to their mother and says, in English still flavored with Napoli, "Keep them out of the sun. They look like eggplants."

The mother, whose parents came to America from Sicily, has heard too much talk like this from her napoletano in-laws. She glares at her mother-in-law and then says to her sons, "Okay, time to go, say goodbye to Nonna."

In the car, she's silent but the boys can tell she's angry. When their father comes home from work at the gas station, he can tell something is wrong.

"Your mother," she hisses at him.

The older boy is confused. Why did Nonna say he and his little brother looked like eggplants? They didn't. They were boys, not the long, black-skinned vegetable their mother cooked for them, in so many delicious ways. And he knew, from the way his nonna said it, that she wasn't complimenting him and his brother. He would soon learn – from uncles and aunts and cousins and others — what his grandmother meant, and why, although eggplants were good to eat, you wouldn't want to look like one.

### *Whitestone, Queens, New York, 1964*

The men rouse themselves from their late afternoon naps, yawn and stretch. "Madonna mi'," one says. "What a fuckin' feast." He shifts his big ass on the plastic-covered sofa, which produces a pop that sounds like a fart. The two other men sharing the sofa laugh. "That how you show your appreciation, Ray?" one teases him. Aunt Lina, her daughter Lucy, and the other women are chatting in the kitchen, having cleaned up after the Sunday feast. The kids are restless, running around the house, making noise. "Ooch!" one yells. The others take it up. "Ooch! Ooch!"

A few hours before, when they were all at the dining room table, between the antipast' and the macaroni, Lina was talking about a relative, an old woman whose name sounded like "Smoddyooch." Every time she said it, Anthony Jr. started laughing. "Ooch! Ooch!" he exclaimed at each mention of the name. Aunt Connie, who had gone to college and talked to everyone like she was their professor, said to Anthony Jr., "You shouldn't make fun. The name means little Aunt Mary. Zia Mariuccia." She rustled Anthony Jr.'s blond hair and said, "Capeesh?"

"What's capeesh?" he answered. "Capeesh! Capeesh!" he yelled and then started laughing. "Ooch! Ooch! Capeesh! Capeesh!"

"Cut it out," Lucy warned him.

“Yeah, stop acting like a chooch,” her brother, the boy’s Uncle Ray, said.

“Chooch? Is that like ooch?” Anthony Jr. brattily said. “Ooch and chooch! Ooch and chooch!”

“Enough!” Lucy said.

“He takes after his mother,” said Lina.

“Uffa, that puttana,” said Lucy.

That was the word they used when talking about Anthony Jr.’s mother, or “Irish whore,” because she left Anthony Sr. and the boy to take up with a “moulanyan”. (Some said Anthony Sr. didn’t mind that much, that he was glad to be rid of her. He didn’t object when his mother and sister called her a puttana.) Anthony Jr. lived with Lina, Lucy, his father and his Uncle Ray, and he was, as they always said, “a handful.”

Anthony Sr. and Frank rearrange themselves on the sofa. Ray gets up, goes to the dining room, and comes back wheeling a glass cart covered with bottles.

“Little grappa?” he says to his brother, Anthony, and his cousin Frank. “Nah,” says Anthony. “Gimme some anisette.”

“Put on the TV,” Frank says. “Sullivan comes on in a little while.”

“The reeeelly big shew,” Anthony Sr. says, imitating the show’s odd, awkward host, the way everybody imitated him.

One of Anthony Jr.’s cousins, a dark, skinny boy on the cusp of adolescence, says, “Yeah, the Supremes are gonna be on tonight!”

Anthony Sr., Ray, and Frank, his father, look at him like he said something strange. And then they laugh, like they often do when he talks. Like when he said he was “enthused” about starting high school in the fall. His mom and dad were the same, they’d laugh at things he said and would say to him, “Who do you take after?” or “Where did you come from?”

“You like them, huh?” Ray says to him, in a teasing tone. “You like colored girls, Joey?”

“The Supremes are great,” the boy says, upset by the teasing. “Everybody knows that!”

He doesn’t pay much attention to the other acts Ed Sullivan introduces to his audience at home. Some guy spins plates, another tells jokes the adults laugh at. Then finally they come on, smiling and shimmering, beautiful with their high hairdos and pink dresses. They’re standing close together, with Diana in the middle. “So come on hurry, come on and see about me,” they sing, looking so happy.

“Hey, look at her,” Ray exclaims, pointing to Diana. “Don’t she remind you of Antoinette?”

“The Sidgileeon girl who used to go out with Tommy?” Anthony Sr. says.

“Yeah,” Ray says. “The Sidgie.”

“The eyes,” he says, imitating Diana by bugging out his eyes.

“That ain’t all,” Anthony Sr. says, and the other men laugh.

They’re talking over the music and the boy wishes they’d shut up.

“Maybe she’s part-Sidgie,” Ray says. Then he turns to the boy’s mother, who’s standing a few feet away, watching the show. “Hey Gina,” he calls. “Maybe she’s one ‘a your long-lost cugines.”

“Ha ha,” his mom replies.

“C’mon Gina, I’m jokin’,” Ray says.

“It’s not funny,” his mom says. “I don’t appreciate it.”

“Ah, come on, don’t take the heat. It was a joke.”

“Yeah, sure,” his mom says grumpily.

“But she does look Sidgie!” Ray exclaims, and everyone laughs.

*Bridgeport, 1988.*

Christmas dinner has been finished and the table cleared, but the family — Gina and Frank, Joe and Mark — is still at the table, talking.

“There used to be a lot more of us,” Gina says. “But it’s nice like this.”

“Yeah, a lot less to clean up,” Frank laughs.

“I liked it when everybody went visiting, making the rounds,” Joe says.

“Well, it’s just us now and it’s fine,” Frank replies.

Eight years earlier, when he and Mark got together, he never would have expected to have him and his male, Jewish lover included in that “us.” When he came out to his parents, they hadn’t reacted well. No yelling or what Joe called “guinea drama,” just cold anger on his father’s part. But then Joe had to acknowledge he hadn’t done it right. He hadn’t in fact come out to them at all; they found out when an article in the “alternative” newspaper he used to work for described him as “a gay activist now living in New York.”

“Is this true?” his father demanded. When Joe confirmed it, there was silence on the other end of the line. Then his mother came on. “How could you do this to us?” she cried. “What did I do wrong?”

“Oh, c’mon, Mom,” he said. “Can’t you come up with something more original?”

For several months there was no contact between Joe and his parents. Then, one December afternoon, his mother called.

“You’re our son and we love you. We hope we will see you for Christmas. With Mark.”

They did, and for every Christmas thereafter.

Now, with grandparents and aunts and uncles dead and sons and daughters scattered across the country — Joe’s younger brother Michael had moved to California and gotten married there — there would be no Christmas for the Zullo family if Joe and Mark hadn’t come.

Gina, who rarely drank, had permitted herself a glass of red wine during dinner and it made her chatty. And nostalgic for her beloved father, Giuseppe, who had been dead for twenty years.

“I had a wonderful father,” she says, turning to Mark. “The best.”

“Here she goes,” Joe thinks.

Her father Giuseppe — for whom her son was named — had immigrated with his parents from Sicily when he was fourteen years old. Gina wasn’t exactly sure where her father’s family came from. She always said “Ragusa” but she didn’t know if that meant the city or the province. She seemed to know little about her father’s life before she was born, other than that he met her mother, Anna, when he was working as a pants presser for a Jewish tailor.

It had not been a happy marriage. Anna, who also was born in Sicily and came to America with her parents as a small child, grew up in a strict, conservative family. Marriage was her escape. As her husband soon learned, she had no intention of being a dutiful, self-sacrificing Sicilian wife and mother. After Gina was born, she told Giuseppe that was it, no more kids. She neglected the one she had, preferring to spend time with her unmarried girlfriends, who, like her, loved to smoke and gossip, play cards, and take weekend car trips. One of Gina’s most vivid and bitterest childhood memories was of being sick with the measles. Her mother, dressed to the nines, looked in on her for a few moments, felt her forehead, and said, “You’ll be OK, Papa’s here” before leaving with some friends for an Atlantic City weekend.

“I didn’t have a mother,” Gina said. “But my father did everything for me.”

Joe knew that one of the things his grandfather did “for” his mom was to take her out of school to care for her ailing mother. Anna died when she was only thirty-five and, for many years, the cause was a mystery to Joe, like so many things in his mother’s family’s history. Anna had had “milk legs,” according to his parents, which mystified him when he first heard the name of her

condition. Years later, with the help of some Internet research, which he followed up with questions to his mother that she clearly wanted to avoid, he determined that what killed Anna, the grandmother he never knew, was thrombophlebitis, a blood clot in her leg that she acquired in the hospital while being treated for cancer.

“Her legs got all pale and milky-looking,” Frank says. “It was a shame. She was a good-looking woman with a nice color.”

Gina changes the subject. “My father was a saint,” she says. “He was like a mother and father to me after that witch died.”

“He was too easygoing,” Frank says. “He didn’t know how to handle her.”

Joe for years has suspected that Anna had picked Giuseppe Rizzo precisely for that reason, less because he couldn’t “handle” her than because he wasn’t the kind of Sicilian man who saw himself as the lord and master of his family.

“He was something,” Frank says to Mark. “He was a cardsharp and a pool hustler.”

Giuseppe had also been a semiprofessional guitarist who played classical music and jazz, until the rheumatoid arthritis turned his hands into stiff claws that could barely hold a spoon, let alone play the guitar.

“He was a communist,” Joe reminds his father.

Mark had known this for years, ever since he and Joe became a couple. One of the things they had in common was a family history of radicalism; Mark’s parents had been members of the Workmen’s Circle when they were young New Yorkers, the children of socialist, Yiddish-speaking Hungarian and Russian immigrants.

“Yeah, that’s right,” says Frank. “He kept getting fired because he was always trying to organize the workers.”

After Giuseppe died, in a nursing home owned by one of Frank’s brothers, Gina and Frank went through his possessions. Among the things they discarded was his collection of communist newspapers, pamphlets, and other paraphernalia. By then Joe considered himself a radical—one of the last conversations he’d had with his grandfather was about the Vietnam war, which Giuseppe adamantly opposed—and he was outraged by what his parents had done. When Joe confronted them about it, his father said, with a nonchalance that infuriated him, “Well, what were we supposed to do with all that stuff?”

“Joe takes after my father,” Gina says to Mark.

“I know,” Mark says, smiling.

“Not after his father’s side,” Gina says.

“And we’re off,” Joe thinks.

“When I got married,” she says, “Frank’s family treated my father bad. They said terrible things about Sicilians.”

“Really?” Mark says.

Joe shoots him a look.

“Oh, you wouldn’t believe it,” Gina says. “The Nobblydons, they said we were superstitious, dirty, bad people. And my father was so cultured and they were a bunch of gavones.”

“Hey,” Frank says.

“It’s true!” Gina replies. “The nerve, calling us superstitious when your mother was always doing the maluke.”

“You know what that is?” she asks Mark.

“The evil eye, right?”

“Yes, she believed in all that. And she used to play the numbers after looking them up in the dream book.”

“You know what that is?” she asks Mark.

“Yeah, I’ve heard about it.”

“Hey, my mother didn’t stop me from marrying this hard-headed Sicilian,” Frank says, giving his wife an affectionate nudge.

“Ba fa’ Napule,” she says, pushing his hand away and getting up from the table.

**George de Stefano** is an author and journalist living in Long Island City, NY. He is the grandson of immigrants from Sicily and Campania. He is the author of *An Offer We Can’t Refuse: The Mafia in the Mind of America* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux) and a contributing author to many other books, including the *Routledge History of the Italian Americans*. His writing also has appeared in many print and online publications, including *The Nation*, *PopMatters*, *I-Italy*, *La Voce di New York*, *Gay City News*, and *Rootsworld*. He is currently working on a book about the Sicilians of New Orleans.