
SWEET HOPE

MARY BUCCI BUSH

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Michael Mirolla, general editor
Lindsay Brown, editor
David Moratto, interior book design
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*To my grandmother, Pasquina Fratini Galavotti.
You gave me the stories.*

*My great-grandparents Nazzareno and Maddalena (Spaccarelli)
Fratini and their four children: Marietta (Aunt Mary),
Pasquina (Granny), Giselda (Aunt Julia),
and Guerino (Uncle Germany).*

*And all the inhabitants of Sunnyside Plantation, Italian and
African American, whose voices were never heard
and whose stories were never told.*

PROLOGUE

ITALY was a dried-up fig, all leather and seed, hard and bitter on your tongue.

No. Italy is a wall of stone, they told each other, and everywhere you turn you walk into stone, hit your head against a rock, knock yourself out.

Impossible to make a living anymore. You fish to put food on your table, but who buys the fish? If you have wood to build a cart, who has money to buy the cart? The tobacco factory is sending people away. The fishery, practically closed down. And things only getting worse. The children have no life to look forward to if they can't even get a decent meal, a dry roof, a suit of clothes to wear.

But we're not starving, some said. Not like in the south. And even if we're lean, we're not dying from hunger. Not yet.

But what about the Antonellis? Didn't they lose everything, and two of them dead besides?

What about the Gregantis losing their land? Their fishing boat? Sending a child here, another there to live?

They said many things. They had many ways of saying the same thing, but all the ways came back to a single meaning: the children.

It was for the children that they left Italy and came to this place.

CHAPTER 1

Saving Tobe

October 1901

THE wagon rattled along the rutted dirt road, churning clouds of yellow dust behind it. Serafin drove, with his friend Lazzaro beside him and their families hunched in back amidst rakes and pitchforks and baling wire and jugs of drinking water.

“You’re doing good,” Lazzaro told him. He’d rented the wagon and was letting Serafin get a feel for driving.

They passed a family of Italians close to the road, several adults and a brood of children, their faces gaunt and sallow.

“You kids be careful when you drink the water,” Serafin called to his children. “Amalia, make sure you run the water through the cloth first before you drink it.”

The cloth turned brown when they strained the water.

The two women and the children looked at the jugs of water sloshing next to them, silty-brown, something you would throw out if you were back home — on your tomato plants or chard maybe, or against a tree. Fiorenza’s old mother, La Vecchia, hummed to herself as she reached out to touch the cloud of dust trailing the wagon. Serafin’s youngest daughter Isola watched the cloud and the old lady’s hand and the space between the two that never grew smaller.

“If we had a damn barrel, we could haul water from the lake,” Lazzaro said. “The lake water’s not so bad.”

It was a horseshoe lake, west of the river and a mile from their homes, whose southern tip curved back toward the

river and dwindled into a little bayou not far from the company store and office. There was water everywhere, water you never saw. In the day the air smelled of dust, or the pungent, drying cotton plants and the stink of mule hides and dung. But at night the river and lake and swamps rose into the air, filling it with the smell of the ancient river mud and the swamp bottoms and the lush wet plants that grew tangled at the edge of the lapping lake.

They reached a crossroads, the levee rising ahead of them. On one corner stood a row of managers' houses with a big garden and a barn and fence for the mules and horses. They could hear the clanging of the gin mill near the two tall oak trees, and smell the wood burning for the boiler. Smoke puffed above the trees, mixing with the dust and the floating cotton lint stirred up by wagons on their way to the gin and back. Men shouted to each other above the noise of machines and mules and horses. Dozens of people worked here, the ragged black people and a few Italians, and now and then a pale clerk or ruddy overseer, well-fed and healthy and dressed in unsoiled clothes.

Lazzaro directed Serafin down the road that ran alongside the levee, past the mule yard and pigpen, beyond the hay barn and the lumber mill that was now silent. They passed the building that rumor said would be turned into a church for them — if the company ever sent for the Italian priest they had promised. So far the Italians had to settle for the *bianco americano* who came to say Sunday Mass from the village across the lake — that is, when he wasn't late or didn't forget altogether.

A dozen dairy and beef cows mingled in the tall lush grass along the levee. Some stood on the dirt road atop the levee while others paused on the banks, chewing with bored expressions or nuzzling through the grass that grew up to

their shoulders. All livestock for the company; not for tenants or sharecroppers.

Serafin steered them into a field of mowed grass between the road and levee where the Halls and another black family were raking hay into bundles.

The Pascala children stared at the Americans: two of the Hall children and a brood of scrawny *neri* children who looked like weather-beaten fence posts, the same as their parents. Fancy Hall wore a faded sack dress that hung below her knees. Her head was tied up in a rag that might have been blue at one time. They all wore wide brimmed hats against the sun.

Step Hall motioned for the Italians to get down, and the others cast sideways glances, looking them over without much interest. He hoped he wasn't making a mistake giving them work. The two men were all right — and the young one's wife and her old mother. They'd arrived early summer, too late to make a crop, but they worked hard.

Serafin's wife was another matter. She'd arrived on her own with the three children just a week before, and when Step dropped them off at their cabin, she screamed at Step to come back and get her, and at her husband to take her home. At least he figured that's what she was saying. The next day she dressed herself and the kids in their Sunday clothes and took them out in the middle of a dusty cotton field like that, refusing to pick, cursing her husband, humiliating him. And the man stood there with dog eyes, taking it. The children stupefied and frightened. The oldest girl, pretty and dressed in a flower-brimmed hat and spit-shined shoes, fell to the ground and wet herself when Horton and his sidekick rode by shooting their rifles at ducks. He'd seen a lot of things, but he'd never seen anything like the Pascala family. At least they'd finally put away their Sunday clothes.

Step showed Serafin and Lazzaro how to rake the hay into bundles so the cut ends all faced one direction, and then how to tie them together. Then he pointed out the bales that were ready for loading on the wagon.

Fancy cast Step a look, as if to say, "This the one you told me about?" She handed Amalia a rake, and the woman stood there holding it.

Dry as it was, the hay was not as brittle and cutting as straw. Osvaldo swept a pile into his arms. "I wish my mattress had this," he said. "I could sleep good on this."

"You'd turn into a mule overnight," Isola teased him. "But taste it. It's good."

He gave his sister a questioning look, then put a blade of hay into his mouth and chewed.

"It tastes like grass," he told her.

"*Asino*," she brayed. He spit the hay out and ran complaining to his father.

Tobe Hall peered from behind his mother at Osvaldo's foolishness: a boy eating hay. The grown-ups were right. The Italians *were* crazy.

Serafin tied the bales while Lazzaro swung them into the back of the wagon. The women used long-handled rakes to make piles, and the children held them while Serafin looped twine underneath, pulled tight, and tied them off. La Vecchia went from one pile of hay to another, straightening the ends.

The dried grass soon gouged their hands, and the wire and twine cut them. Gloves would help, but Serafin had not seen a single pair of work gloves in his four months at Sweet Hope. Maybe Step Hall would have a rag he could wrap around his hands, he thought, like they did when they were cutting trees in the woods. The only good thing was that, with all of them working from sun up to sun down six-and-a-half days a week, they would pay off their transportation debt in no

time. Then maybe they could start paying off the rest of their contract and go find work elsewhere, or go back to Italy sooner than planned, admitting their mistake in coming here.

Serafin stayed behind while Lazzaro took the full wagon to the barn to unload. His hands were starting to bleed, hands that had been toughened from working with ropes and nets and cold salt water but were no match for the tough dry stalks and hard earth. He would have to change places with Lazzaro before long. Maybe if they switched off they could make it through the day.

Finally Step called for them to stop. One of the black men unhitched the mules and they all trekked up and over the levee to the stand of trees, to eat their meals in the shade. A scrawny old man led the mules to the river for water. The others stomped through the grass to scare away snakes before settling in the shade to eat and rest.

Amalia unwrapped the loaf of bread from its cloth and tore off chunks that she passed around to her family, along with shoots of wild onion she'd found in a field they'd worked the day before. The food made her anger rise, a reminder of all they had given up, how they had been duped, what a fool she had for a husband, how she hated him. Eating like wild animals. When she saw the prices at the company store, she nearly fainted. Everything was canned or dried-up besides. Serafin had already wasted too much of their money in his few months here. So they searched the ground for anything edible while they worked.

Fancy raised an eyebrow at the raw onion, said nothing. When Amalia caught her looking, Fancy smiled weakly. "Sweet 'tata?" she said, offering a taste. Amalia stared at the food without answering.

"You're not going to be crazy enough to refuse food, are you?" Fiorenza chided her.

"*Grazie*," Amalia told Fancy. "Good." She used Serafin's fishing knife to cut the potato into several pieces that the children quickly devoured.

"*Pane?*" she offered Fancy in return, but Fancy politely refused the bread and onions.

Serafin gazed down at the flies hovering over his bloody hands, too tired to shoo them away.

"You work too fast," Amalia told Serafin. "You're wearing yourself out for nothing."

Some of the American people talked quietly as they ate; others dozed on the grass with their hats over their faces. Step's son Tobe rose from the ground like water slipping over smooth rock. His liquid hand reached for a piece of sweet potato, drew back. His body moved among the adults like a quiet trickling stream until he slipped away completely, into the woods where the man with the mules had gone.

Osvaldo watched the boy go. He rolled onto his stomach, pretending to play with twigs on the ground, all the while keeping his eyes on the path into the woods and digging his toes into the soft earth to push his body forward, away from his family, trying to make himself into the same smooth, flowing stream. Amalia was cutting strips of cloth for Serafin to wrap around his hands. The girls were staring at the bloody rags their father and Lazzaro had thrown down, already buzzing with flies.

Osvaldo stood and walked into the trees. He followed barefoot Tobe to the river where the man was watering the mules. The river was wide and flat, with rippling currents. Osvaldo sucked in his breath at the sight of its expansive brownness, just as he had the day they crossed over on the ferry. He knew the Adriatic sea, but he had never seen a river.

Osvaldo watched as Tobe picked up a stone and threw it to a narrow sandbar not far from the shore.

Oswaldo heard a sound, like branches moving or someone walking, coming from the woods behind them, above the sound of the river. He touched Tobe's arm, and motioned for him to listen. But no parents emerged, no sisters. It gave Oswaldo a creepy feeling, as if the woods were alive and had eyes.

A great white bird rose up from the grassy shore nearby and flapped across the water, pulling its long dark legs in close to its body, its bulky wings almost dipping into the water as it skimmed the surface. And then the bird rose higher, stretched its crooked neck, made a graceful swooping turn and landed farther down near the shore.

Oswaldo asked Tobe if he'd seen the bird, but Tobe merely flopped onto his stomach and rested his chin in his hands, his legs floating behind him. Water licked at his face and he laughed and raised his chin. He had done this only once before, alone, but now with another boy beside him it was as if he had always played in the river.

Then a turtle floated by, and the boys waded in water to their knees to retrieve it.

Now that Tobe was in the water and his feet were still touching bottom, all the warnings he had heard about playing in the river vanished. It wasn't until his foot slipped and he felt his leg dropping, and then his body following, that something woke in him. He thrashed his arms and screamed for help.

Oswaldo took a step toward him, and then stopped. Tobe churned his arms toward shore as the current pulled him slowly in the opposite direction. His mouth opened and shut as he tried to cry out for help while spitting to keep the water from choking him.

Oswaldo turned toward the trees. "*Aiuto!*" he shouted. "*Aiuto!*" He turned back and shouted in Italian for Tobe to

swim, and he tried to reach an arm out to him. Finally he ran for the stick the boy had been playing with and called for Tobe to grab it, but the stick was ridiculously short. All the while Tobe's panicked eyes stayed on Osvaldo. His face bobbed farther out in the water, so that he looked like a flower, a dark floating blossom. Osvaldo stared mutely at the bobbing flower, then took off running for the trees.

THEIR dinner break was nearly over when Fancy Hall and Amalia Pascala each looked up, their noses raised as if catching something in the air. Their eyes moved slowly over the children and adults sprawled around them, and their ears listened, although neither of them knew in those moments what they were listening for. Their eyes met briefly as they rose to their feet. By the time they were standing, what their bodies had unknowingly sensed turned to sudden consciousness. Within seconds the entire group was running into the woods, calling for the boys.

They broke through the trees onto the sandy clearing at the same time Osvaldo leaped from the sand into the scrub oaks, shouting incoherently. Step Hall reached out as if to steady himself and caught the boy by the arm. For a moment Osvaldo dangled in mid-air while a dozen pairs of startled eyes watched his churning feet, the great river flowing behind him. Then Step dropped the boy and they ran for the river.

Fancy screamed when she saw her son slapping at the water, a dull, exhausted look on his face. He had already been carried another twenty feet downstream and farther away from shore.

Step splashed into the water while his wife followed, her arms stretched toward the boy. The others grabbed her skirt

Step Hall was standing before him. He grasped Serafin's hand with a powerful grip and pulled him to his feet. Step squinted into Serafin's eyes, as if straining to see something. Serafin smiled uneasily, tried to move his hand away. But Step Hall squeezed the hand tighter in his. Serafin flinched from the pain.

"*Niente*, it's nothing," he told Step. "I did nothing." He looked around helplessly. "You — you saved us both."

Lazzaro laid a hand on Step's shoulder. Finally the man let go of Serafin. They stood awkwardly, like drunken men, unable to speak, not even knowing what it was they wanted to say.

Step looked out at the river, then over at his wife and boy a long time. His feet were lead. For all his dreams, he was useless after all. He turned and called gruffly for the group to move along. He lifted his son and laid him against his shoulder like a baby, and when he started walking his family and friends followed.

The Italians fell in behind them, Osvaldo barefoot and carrying his shoes in his hands while his father stumbled forward, steering the boy with one hand laid across his neck. Serafin squinted ahead at the dark shape resting in his father's arms: the boy who was not Valerio. Behind them Amalia and the girls trailed, subdued and silent, and Lazzaro and his wife and the old lady, back to the hay field below the levee, back to the sweet grass and the grazing cows and the acres of flat, silent, dusty land, away from the beautiful, merciless river.

CHAPTER 2

Gratitude

October 1901

FANCY dangled the dead chicken by its bound legs over the side of the wagon, to drain the blood during the short ride. "Shoulda caught a couple rabbits, or some fish," she told Step. "Killin a good hen." She moved her leg against Tobe's, to feel his squirming, living body against hers.

"Wish't I had more'n a hen to give 'em," Step said.

"Corn too." She hated her pettiness, her complaining words that rang hollow inside her. She would give everything she owned, and then some, to save her child.

Tobe glanced with embarrassment back at Calvin and Birdie where they sat with a sack of their last sweet corn. "Don't see why I gotta go," Calvin had complained. Birdie was happy to go, though she didn't let on. She'd never been inside an Italian's house.

"We all goin'," Step had told them. "That's what's proper, and that's what we doin'."

All the families were stretched thin now, in the days before selling their cotton. The Halls had a small farm with a vegetable garden, more than any of the new tenants had, and more than many of the sharecroppers, too, something they were well aware of. Still, it had been a hard decision to kill one of their hens.

"You never done nothin like this before," Fancy told him. She glanced quickly down at Tobe as she spoke.

“Never had reason to before.”

It had been two days now since the river. He had been brooding over the incident since it happened, trying to put together the picture that always left him standing on shore.

“You pulled ‘em both out,” Fancy reminded her husband now.

“At the end,” Step answered through gritted teeth. “Boy was already saved.”

Tobe fidgeted, kicking his leg against the footboard as he listened to them talk about him like he really had gone under the water and turned into a ghost.

THE Pascalas came outside when they heard the wagon.

Tobe hung his head and wished he were anywhere but there, while the Pascalas crowded on their tree stump steps to watch.

Calvin peered at the family he had heard so much about. They looked like any of the other Italians, though not as raggedy — yet. Hanging back behind the rest of them, half inside the house, was the oldest girl, almost his age.

“Ho,” Step called, raising his hand in the air.

“Ho,” Serafin answered.

It startled him to see the boy sitting there in the flesh. Even Osvaldo sighed in relief.

“Come t’ thank you proper for savin my boy,” Step said as he walked toward Serafin. He noticed a pile of rocks at the side of the house.

Serafin took his hand. “*Niente. Prego.*”

Step called his family down and they stood awkwardly near the wagon, the dead chicken hanging limply at Fancy’s side.

Angelina moved forward as well, and Calvin saw her clearly now. Her dark, shiny hair was pulled back, but a few

curls escaped. Her eyes were large and dark, and her skin was smooth and the color of a pecan shell. As she moved outside the door, she placed a hat on her head, a straw-colored dress-up hat with a cluster of paper flowers attached to the brim. She flashed her dark eyes at him, and he swallowed hard and looked away. She was the prettiest girl he had ever seen in his entire life.

Serafin forced a smile at Tobe. "You good? No more the river, you."

Tobe hung his head in shyness.

"Git over here," Step told his son. "What I tell you?"

Tobe shuffled across the yard, head down, hands deep in his holey pockets. "Thank ya', Mister," he finally mumbled.

Serafin touched the boy's head, making Tobe look up. Serafin's throat tightened, his eyes stung. He forced a laugh, tousled the boy's hair. "Strong. Good boy. *Buon ragazzo*," he said. He looked at the bare feet of the Hall children, then at their ragged clothes.

Step saw the glistening eyes, and sucked in his breath. "Fancy, give 'em the hen," he called, to break the spell.

Fancy raised the dead chicken to them, but no one came forward.

Step had to take the bird out of his wife's hand and place it in Serafin's. Another mistake. It looked like the man would start bawling over a dead bird. But finally Amalia took the chicken and moved away quickly. The Pascala eyes were hungry, grateful, wary.

"Bring that sack a' corn," Step called to Calvin, and the boy came to attention. He walked self-consciously, all eyes on him now in the silence.

"This my oldest boy, Calvin," Step said, as if they could understand. Calvin straightened up, gloating. It was about time his father noticed how grown up he was. He could feel

the girl with the hat watching him, but he dared not look her way again.

She stared at the odd way he carried the sack: pinched between his fingers and thumb, as if carrying something he disdained. The rest of him moved in a jumble: awkward, smooth, defiant.

When Step pulled out an ear of corn to show Serafin, he cocked his head quizzically. "*Perché?* For what?"

"What is it, daddy?" Isola asked.

"Corn," Serafin said, baffled.

"Maybe he'll give us a pig to go with it," Amalia said sarcastically.

Serafin swept his arm toward the surrounding land. "*Ma non abbiamo l'animali.*" And then he was off explaining in Italian: It was just the five of them living there, as Step well knew. They had no cow or pig, no animals.

"What in the name of the saints do they want?" Amalia asked Serafin.

He shook his head.

Step shrugged at Fancy. Then he stripped back the husk, and squeezed a few kernels with his thumb to show Serafin the milky freshness.

Serafin held his hands out. "But no understand."

"Eat," Step told them.

"Eat?" Serafin asked, surprised. "*Mangia?*"

Step nodded, dug out a few kernels with his thumb and popped them into his mouth, then chewed in an exaggerated way. The Pascala children burst out laughing.

Isola made grunting pig sounds, but Amalia grabbed her by the shoulder and she stopped.

"Well I'll be danged," Fancy said. "Don't you peoples know 'bout eatin sweet corn?" Birdie grinned and made a face at Isola, before her mother could see.

With gestures and few words, Fancy asked for a big boiling pot and had Calvin fill it at the pump. Amalia and her children stood back and watched in surprise as the black woman took charge. Fancy kept Tobe by her side as she marched them all inside the house, indignant yet pleased, the Pascalas following.

The kitchen was nearly empty, save for the table and one makeshift chair, and a few shelves and a cupboard near the stove, unlike the Hall house that was cluttered with years of living.

Step went to stoke the fire and saw a few more rocks lying on the floor near the stove. "What the 'tarnation?" he said.

When the Pascalas first arrived, the shack had mortified them, but they were slowly turning it into a home. Now with the Halls inside, the shack was an embarrassment again, unfit for even a mule's shelter.

Angelina hung the chicken over a nail on the wall. Amalia took the hat from her daughter's head with a quick, disapproving look, and hung it on a nail near the chicken. Quickly, she brushed crumbs from the table, away from the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary that stood on a crocheted doily, her broken arms extended. A stub of burned-out candle sat in front of her. It had been her grandmother's statue, one the old woman had wrapped in a woolen sweater herself for the family's journey. Amalia carried it like a baby once they left their ship in New Orleans and began the last leg of their grueling journey. It was across the river, as that horrible agent Rosconi prodded them over the cobblestones to the waiting ferry to Sweet Hope, that a frantic family jostled Amalia, and the bundle fell to the stones. Devastated, she refused to unwrap the statue to learn the truth she already knew until long after Step had dropped them off at the sweltering shack that would be their home.

Birdie reached for the statue. "Look, mama, a doll."

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“Drowning” in the anthology *Growing Up Ethnic in America*, eds. M. Mazziotti Gillan, J. Gillan. Penguin, 1999.

Drowning. Chapbook. Parentheses Writing Series, 1995.

“Planting” in the anthology *The Voices We Carry: Recent Italian American Women’s Fiction*, ed. Mary Jo Bona. Guernica Editions, 1994 & 2000.

“Mule” in *VIA (Voices in Italian Americana)*. 1997.

“Love” in anthology *HERS 2: Brilliant New Fiction by Lesbian Writers*, eds. Terry Wolverton & Robert Drake. Faber & Faber, 1997.

www.marybuccibush.com

Mary Bucci Bush received her M.A. and D.A. from the graduate program in creative writing at Syracuse University, where she worked with George P. Elliott and Raymond Carver. Her short story collection *A Place of Light* was published by Guernica in 2006. She lives in Pasadena, California.