

I LEFT MY HEART IN SAN FRANCISCO...

When people ask me where I come from, I say "San Francisco, San Francisco's my home". I know it inside and out and I love the tastes, smells and feel of the city. America has always been too big of a concept for me and while I was living in the states, I never necessarily thought of myself as American. I only began to feel more American after living in Italy for a while. I'd never even sung the national anthem, which generally is a requirement for many American students until I found myself in a crowded church on the eleventh of September of 2001 and was moved to sing it, suddenly feeling part of a larger community mourning the deaths of the three thousand people who died when the twin towers collapsed in New York City.

The flat where I spent most of my childhood was in San Francisco, one of the foggiest – but probably the most beautiful – cities in the states. It was a Victorian house that had survived the famous San Francisco earthquake in 1906. It was spacious and in walking distance from our school. There was a porch out back where I kept my rabbit.

On sunny days I took my rabbit out for walks in the park and sometimes I'd meet our neighbour walking his little black pig. I couldn't understand why he had a pig in the city. I saw it grow bigger and bigger, and then I didn't see it anymore, and it made me wonder just what had really happened to it... We had lots of other rabbits during my childhood. My mother took them with her to the

COLOURING RAINBOWS

I have two sisters, Nicole who is older than me and Lara who is younger. Nicole is an opera singer and lives in an old country house in France. Lara just graduated from the University of California in Los Angeles and wants to become an actress. I've always been very close to my sisters, and to make up for the distance between us we spend hours on the phone together. The thing I probably miss the most about living in Italy is being far from them.

When we were young we used to play all sorts of games together, hide and seek, or hopscotch, or we'd ride our bikes or skateboards around the block. I have a vivid memory of my sisters and I walking to and from school every day. We all had braided hair and lunch baskets (we ate at school) and dresses that my mom had made us. We went to a Waldorf School where every subject in one way or another was connected to art.

I remember always drawing during recess in kindergarden. Rainbows were a favourite of mine, and I could fill pages with colorful rainbows. I loved the colours on the page, the feel of the crayons. In elementary school we didn't have many textbooks, we were given blank books, which we would slowly fill with stories, science experiments, mathematical equations or grammatical rules learned during our lessons. The part I loved the most wasn't necessarily writing in our main lesson books, but illustrating them. These were the first books I ever illustrated, so it may have been because of this that I decided to become a children's book illustrator.

ICE CREAM ON A RAINY DAY

I was eight years old when my father took me out for ice cream, just the two of us, and told me my parents were getting a divorce. I really only started to understand what it meant when we came home and my mother was crying and for some reason I started crying too.

It took another eight years to deal with custody issues about who we were to live with, and my parents went to court many times to sort out everything. Even now I'm still finding out bits and pieces of the story, trying to find the reasons that made their marriage not work out.

I only have a few memories of my parents together. I remember jumping on their waterbed in the morning and being tickled by my father. I remember hikes in the woods in Montana and going to see my grandparents in Vermont. I also remember the arguments they had, a few plates being broken, but for the most part I remember the nice memories, the happy moments.

My father remarried after a few years and moved to a house outside the city. My mother lives outside the city as well now, in a house surrounded by trees, where squirrels walk along the windowsills. After the divorce I spent a week at my mother's house and a week at my father's.

My mother's house was fun, but a bit crazy, chaotic with projects always half finished. After the divorce my mother basically stopped cooking at home. When we were with her we almost always went out to dinner, even if she could hardly afford it, because she wanted to give us something special, and do something special for herself also. My mother went back to teaching elementary

MY GRANDPARENTS

Grandma Rose lived in Buffalo, in a towering apartment building next to the church my mother went to as a child. We used to go visit her and she'd take us to play Bingo. She was a Bingo Queen! She could play ten cards and my two as well, and it seemed like she would always win. Once she won up to a thousand dollars!

She lived alone in an apartment on the sixth floor and her small flat was full of our drawings and photos. Her apartment smelled of mothballs and she had the television almost always on. She liked to watch game shows and ice skating competitions. She was very caring and helped the neighbours in her building with their shopping or house cleaning and took care of some of the older women. Grandma Rose's mother had immigrated to the states from Sicily when she was still young. My grandmother never spoke Italian though, but when I visited her with my Italian boyfriend a few years ago she began to sporadically throw in some Sicilian expressions that she remembered from her childhood. Even though she struggled to get by on her monthly social security check, she had a generous heart and gave us as much as she could. She was always knitting us sweaters and blankets or wool slippers for the winter.

Two years ago my grandmother went to sleep one night and never woke up again. It was difficult for my family to accept her death because she was so young and it was so sudden. Every now and then I light a candle for her when I find myself in a nice church.

My father's parents, Granny and Popsie, live in the mountain state of Vermont. They live on a hill that over-

WHITE GLOVES AND BLACK TIES

When I was eleven years old my father sent me to ballroom dance lessons. I hated them. 'Mid-weeklies' they called it, because it was always on a Wednesday. They taught us the Waltz, Cha-cha-cha, and Tango. I dressed up in skirts with tights, and the most important part were the gloves. I had two or three sets of little white gloves that I had to wear, that was the rule, and the boys all had to wear suit and sties.

I remember just hating getting out of the car and walking down the street in these absurd clothes that I felt so uncomfortable in. Slowly I made friends. I was a bit shy when I was young, and it always took me a while to meet people.

The dance class took place in a big hall. The boys sat on one side of the room and the girls on the other. The teachers would show us a dance step, and then the boys would come over and ask the girls to dance. Since I was shy the boys seemed to avoid me, and I almost always got stuck dancing with the younger boys that came up to my chest, and having a little boy staring at your boobs for ten minutes while you try to step in place is really no fun, especially when you're a self conscious adolescent!

I did learn to dance though, and I love dancing now. Even if I don't know the steps I can follow pretty well. When I got older I used to go out swing dancing with my sisters. Swing hasn't really hit Italy yet, I'm just waiting for it though. It's from the twenties and thirties, those dances where the guy throws the girl in the air or she slides through his legs. They also have the basic step too, which

LEAVING HOME

I was sixteen when I left home to go to a boarding school three thousand miles away (which for an Italian would be like going to study in Russia!). It's not that common for children to leave home so early in the states, or to go to boarding schools at all.

I spent three years at the Putney School, a high school set in the green mountains where students study art and music as well as academic classes. It's all on a working farm with animals and gardens to tend to, north of New York and Boston, in the state of Vermont. I had been to Vermont to visit my grandparents, so I had some family there, plus my older sister was going to be at Mount Holyoke College just two hours away.

I decided to enroll a week before classes started. I was enthusiastic, but I didn't know what was in store for me. I had never been away from my family for more than a few weeks, so it was a difficult adjustment.

My father and my older sister came with me to register and move into my new room. They went out to dinner with the promise that they'd be back to say good-bye later that evening. I remember the scene well, when they came back and weren't able to find me. I was walking up the lawn at dusk and I saw my father's car slowly roll by, I started running towards it but it kept on going, I ran faster and faster but it sped up and finally disappeared down the road, the tail lights glowing in the darkness.

It took six months for me to finally decide that I wanted to stay, six months of homesickness and crying. I wasn't alone though, most of the students came from far away and quickly strong friendships sprung up which

SUMMER JOBS

There was a time when my allowance was twenty-five cents (which is the equivalent of about 20 cents in euros) and all I could get at the corner store was a piece of candy or potato chips. Then slowly it went up to fifty cents and made its way to about ten dollars (about 8 euros). I remember saving up for a special doll I wanted or going out to a restaurant with my friends just to get some French fries.

Given my economic situation and my growing need for independence, I started baby-sitting very early on. When I was twelve I began to understand that I could make a lot more money by working than by waiting for my measly 10 dollars a week. From the age of thirteen on my summers were spent working so that I could have some money during the year, as well as help my mother pay for my schooling (schooling in the States is usually very expensive). My first job was at a deli in the tourist area of Pier 39, where I learned to froth foam for cappuccinos and tell the difference between ham and roast beef, though I never did taste them because I was still a vegetarian.

The next summer I got a job in a coffee shop outside the city where I had my first art exhibit. I framed some of my San Francisco watercolours and hung them on the wall. The only paintings that sold though were a few \$2 handmade postcards.

Each summer I looked for a new kind of job, and every summer I asked for a higher hourly wage. I had many different jobs: I worked as a manager in an architecture firm, in clothing stores; as an interior designer, in jewellery stores, one of which was the famous Tiffany's known from the film *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

During my last year in high school I began to look for a college with a strong artistic program. I looked into about 50 schools in different parts of the country, visited at least twenty and applied to thirteen in all. The Universities in the States only let in a limited number of students, and there is a long application process you need to go through before being accepted. Overall, my college search took quite a while, because the choice of where to spend the next four years of my life seemed like such a life-determining decision. In the end I chose a small progressive college in southern Vermont, called Bennington College.

I was drawn to Bennington because it was small, green (like most of Vermont) and had a nice welcoming atmosphere and a very large art department. In some ways it was similar to my high school, little white dormitories on green lawns stretching out over the campus, strange hippie creative-type students working on art and science projects out on the grass, and professors who asked you to call them by their first names. There were no in-dorms by ten or lights-out-at-eleven-o'clock rules. I had a car and could go to town whenever I liked. I was treated like an adult and expected to act like one and, more importantly, work like one, that is independently and quite a lot.

I studied a great deal at Bennington, and even though I usually ended up studying in my room, I loved studying outside on the lawn when it was sunny, or in the library or a café. During my first year I often went to Friendly's ice cream parlour in downtown Bennington with my room-