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Reliving Life's Golden Era

A recent death and a yellowed note put part of my past in a new light

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My San Francisco landlord Dominic Mattera weaving crab nets
Courtesy of John Stark

When I was in my mid-twenties I took a lease on an apartment in San Francisco's North Beach, the Italian section of the city. It was a roomy, second-floor flat in a three-story building. My landlords, Dominic and Carmella, were an Italian couple in their 60s. They lived one building away, a cobblestone alley separating our two wooden structures. When I moved in, my rent was \$175 a month. Imagine.

I didn't know it then, but with age and perspective, I do now: That

apartment represented a golden era of my life.

My flat, like all the others on my block, was long and narrow, with a bay window in the front. I was fortunate. Because of the alley, I had windows and sunlight on three sides. From my living room I could see the Bay Bridge. From my kitchen window in the rear I could see the docks at Fisherman's Wharf. There was a cable car line at the top of my steep street.

I worked downtown at the San Francisco Examiner. I rode the cable car to and from work. It cost a quarter.

My soundtrack consisted of its clang, clang, clang, foghorns and church bells.

(More: Why Today Is Better Than the Past)

Dominic was a retired crab fisherman. He spent his days in the small yard behind his three-floor building making nets for the younger crabbers, charging them only for the materials. He wove his large round nets out of wire. No gloves. He didn't say a lot. But he didn't miss a thing either. He had a sly grin and the kindest eyes. They were the color of amber.

Dominic was from the isle of Ischia in the Tyrrhenian Sea. He came from a long line of fishermen. One day as we were talking, the blast of a foghorn interrupted us. He couldn't believe I didn't know which foghorn it was. "Each one has a different sound and pitch, everyone knows that," he said incredulously.

If you saw the movie *Moonstruck*, then you know Carmella. Olympia Dukakis could have been channeling her. They looked and talked exactly alike. Carmella was always running up and down her front and back stairs, or hauling bags of groceries. She grew up on this block.

Having Second Thoughts

After I moved in, I began to have my doubts about being there. I was the first person to live in the

building whose name didn't end in a vowel. For the first three months I felt like I had wandered into one of those post-war, neo-realistic Italian films that played in art houses. The elderly widow in the top-floor flat of Dominic and Carmella's building aired her bedding out the windows. She'd toss her cigarette butts into the alley from those windows. Living in the flat below Dominic and Carmella were their son and daughter-in-law and their three children. The dynamics were intense, to say the least.

Carmella was always yelling at me. I played my music too loud. I wasn't keeping my place clean enough. I said I had one cat, "now I find out you have two!" My friends were always parking in front of her garage door. If it wasn't one thing, it was another. One day, as she was shouting at me, I had enough.

"Why," I demanded to know, "are you always screaming at me? I can't stand it anymore!"

She suddenly went silent, as if I'd pushed a mute button. Finally she spoke. "I'm going to tell you something, and I'm only going to tell you this one time," she said. Her voice was calm, warm, almost a whisper. It was like she had stepped out of character to deliver an aside to the audience. "I only yell at people I love. That's how Italians are."

I smiled and nodded my head. She gave me a big hug and resumed her tirade. Welcome to the family!

You're One of Us Now

And for the next eight years, I was family. Dominic and Carmella welcomed me to all of their events, including their 50th anniversary party. On Christmas Eves they'd feed me baccala, the salt-dried white fish from Italy.

If I was hungry, I just had to go up the rear stairs to their back door, which was always open. It wasn't Carmella who did the cooking, though. It was Dominic. I can still see him standing in front of the stove making crab cioppino. My favorite dish was his cold crab salad. He'd refrigerate the crabmeat in a marinade of olive oil, garlic, lemon, parsley, and hot red pepper flakes. He taught me how to cook and clean the Dungeness crabs so that I too could make these dishes. Dinner consisted of several courses, and pitchers of red wine. A round or two of Manhattans that Carmella prepared in a cocktail shaker always preceded the meals.

Sunday dinner included their kids and grandkids around the table. It was always a scream-fest as the three generations freely expressed themselves. At one point Carmella would turn to me and say, "Can you believe how they talk to me?" Everyone would shrug and keep eating.

Although Dominic and Carmella had a dishwasher, they never used it. Dominic did the dishes. "I like putting my hands in the warm water and looking out at the bay and the sunset," he explained. "There's nothing more soothing."

Carmella loved poker. She and her Italian lady friends would play several times a week, usually after Dominic had gone to bed. I could observe them from my dining room window, which looked out on the alley. Carmella would wave me over. I loved playing poker with these card sharks. They'd bet, laugh, curse and give one another the evil eye. We'd drink liqueurs and feast on Italian pastries.

Arrivederci San Francisco

I left San Francisco in 1985 for a job in New York. "Oh, Mother," Dominic said to Carmella, when I broke the news to them that I was leaving, "I knew this day was coming." Carmella, choked up, made us Manhattans.

Dominic died a year later. He had a heart attack while in the hospital recuperating from a hip replacement. Coincidentally, I had come back to San Francisco for a visit and had seen him a few days before. He seemed to be doing fine. Over the years I lost contact with Carmella.

The other night I got a call from an old friend who had known Dominic and Carmella. We hadn't talked in a long time. "I tracked you down," he said. "I wanted to let you know that Carmella died last week." He said she had never remarried or moved. She died at home. We figured she had to have been in her late 90's.

I recently came upon a yellowed envelope while going through an old cardboard box in my basement that contained cards and letters. When I opened it, I found a handwritten note from Dominic. He had put it in my mail slot all those years ago. I never threw it out, and I never will.

"Dear Giovanni," the note read. "Due to an increase in property taxes I can only lower your rent \$5 a month next year."

I told you it was a golden era.