



THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

Year 2006

Article 9

1-1-2006

Capisci?

Maelina A. Frattaroli

Gettysburg College, fratma01@cnav.gettysburg.edu

Class of 2006

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury>

 Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Frattaroli, Maelina A. (2015) "Capisci?," *The Mercury*: Year 2006, Article 9.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2006/iss1/9>

This open access fiction is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Capisci?

Keywords

creative writing, fiction

Author Bio

Maelina Frattaroli is a senior and a double major in English and Spanish. After graduation, she aspires to "find herself," whatever that might entail, and then proceed at some point to graduate school for either an MA. in Spanish or an M.F.A. in Creative Writing, or both. She hopes to travel the world someday: either when she's young and broke or old, retired, and rich. She also plans on consuming ridiculous amounts of garlic for the rest of her life because that's her obsession. She would like to thank Dusty, Kim, and Fred for believing in her and motivating her as a writer.

Capisci?

—1—

I remember watching, in the dim, fluorescent glow of the kitchen light, my mother's heavy hands kneading. This was what Mamma did every Sunday afternoon: kneaded out her worries. Took out her nostalgia and aggression on the glob-like gluten formation, soon-to-be hard-crust bread. Kneading was like pottery to her. An art form that took those worries and baked them into a kiln. Temporarily vanished within the absorbency of the bread dough. Temporarily vanished under the holy vigilance of the Madonna statue adorning the corner of the plastic-covered table she labored upon. I was ten, and even after sitting in the kitchen every Sunday of my life, the near-violent love she put into perfecting the dough never ceased to amaze me.

Clutch. Fold. Wrap. Roll.

Turn.

Slam.

Pound. Sprinkle.

Knead.

Sometimes, she would speak to the dough, but her hands always spoke *for* her. Like the rest of her, they were plump and rotund. Their olive complexion was a dark contrast with the pasty whiteness of the dough. She hated her hands. Loved them only because of the dough. They were more massive than my father's and he would make fun of them because her fingers were so swollen. They were not unlike those pork links Sam the butcher, also a close family friend and my parents' saving grace, sold to us for half-price at the Grand Union. Sam had come to America a few years before we did. Things were cheaper in the late 1960's, even in New Canaan, Connecticut, but cheap was still expensive for the six of us. Five pork sausage links on one hand. Priceless. Priceless and powerful.

It had been ten years now, and my mother still hadn't removed the ring. Skin popped up in fleshy valleys around the metal encircling it. But the diamond in her wedding ring remained intact, despite its frequent passionate mingling with the dough. She refused to have it removed. Refused a lot of things.

"Figlio della puttana!" *Son of a bitch.* My mother's thunderous cursing reverberated through the kitchen and the shockwave of its sound bounced from wall to wall of shoddy, off-white sheetrock onto the brown, linoleum tile floor. She stared, wide-eyed and ominously into the bag of Pillsbury All-Purpose Flour as she reached for another handful to coat the ball of dough. Glistening droplets of perspiration birthed from her forehead, and two or three of them drizzled into the flour bag. My father used to joke that Mamma's sweat made the bread so moist that it didn't need olive oil for dipping. But something was wrong.

"Quegli americani pigri!" *Those lazy Americans.*

I stuck my head into the flour bag, careful not to breathe it in like I did that one time. I had had a coughing fit for the next fifteen minutes, and Mamma had tried to exorcise it out of me by holding me upside down and pouring water down my nose. I saw nothing there except miniscule, brown dots I thought were part of the wheat.

"Andate più vicino." *Go closer.* Still nothing.

"Con le mani, Maria!" *With your hands, Maria.* Maria, all pure and holy. I slowly submerged my hands into whatever impurities were lurching in the American flour.

"Guardate." *Watch.*

I observed in wonder the flour, in mountain-like heaps upon my palms. The brown dots were not wheat grains at all. They were alive. Crawling. Jumping. Winged things buried in the powdery, white blanket of flour like an army of ants harboring from the rain. I released the infested flour onto the plastic tabletop, and the flour flies leapt in a state of panic from the impact of the half-foot fall that must have been stories to them.

"Basta!" *Enough.* She slapped the backs of my hands with hers, and lumps of elastic dough clutched onto my knuckles. I should have thrown the flour outside behind the Japanese barberry bush.

In broken English, Mamma scolded, "Bad gal! Take the bread outside and give to dog! No gonna cook. Maledizione! *Bread damned to hell.* Stupid American flour..."

"Mamma," I interjected and shook my head in disagreement. "The dog'll choke. It's no one's fault. It wasn't the Amer-"

"State zitta, ragazza!" *Be quiet, girl.* "Throw outside-a now!" she demanded relentlessly.

I clutched the heavy ball of dough and cradled it tight to my chest like a newborn. The gluten adhered to my oversized, red cotton hand-me-down tee. I opened the rusty screen door and carried it outside toward Massimo's barb-wire den. The dog barked and roared. He salivated voraciously as if being offered a plentiful hunk of meat. Massimo was my father's ugly, putrid, unfriendly hunting beagle. He only acknowledged me in the presence of food.

Mamma Anna glared at me from inside the kitchen window as if I were about to deliberately disobey her. The brown irises of her almond-shaped eyes speckled with a kind of sadness and longing for the could-have-been bread. But it wasn't just the bread.

As I pulled the dough off my shirt, it made a tearing sound, like lined paper being de-perforated from a spiral notebook, only less sharp. The shirt was okay. I reluctantly tossed the ball of dough into Massimo's lair. He scavenged after it, but immediately lost interest upon olfactory instinct. It

wasn't meat. Rather, my mother's Italian bread damned to hell because Americans didn't exercise enough care in manufacturing their wheat products.

—2—

"Why are you carrying that?" Antonia, one of my sisters, asked on our daily morning walk to East Elementary School. She pointed to a half-sheet of paper with type-written print.

I held it closer to her face and grasped it tightly so the November wind wouldn't swirl it away, leaving it to be forgotten in the tornado of fallen, autumn leaves.

"Museum of Natural History..." she began to read, chestnut-brown eyes squinting in the near-direct intensity of the morning sun, shaded by wispy strands of straight, brown hair. "Oh, wait. I thought -"

Toni was a year and a half my junior, but her astronomical IQ results placed her with me in the fourth grade. But, being the oldest, I was expected to use my brains to benefit the rest of the family. I was Mamma and Papà's accountant, interpreter, their babysitter.

"I'm not going; you already know." I interrupted. I said no more.

"Yeah, Papà would have killed her if she said 'yes...'"

Toni's voice droned with the wafting whistle of the wind, and the next thing I knew, I found myself sitting at my usual front-row-center desk inside Mrs. Mooney's fourth grade classroom. It was Wednesday, the day to hand in the permission slip. The last day. I tried.

I pulled a dully-sharpened number two pencil from the front zipper of my tacky-pink book bag and placed it in the special pencil alcove carved into the right-hand corner of the wooden desktop. I had forgotten to print my name on the blank line of the permission slip right in front of me: I hereby do/do not give permission for my child, _____ to participate in the day trip to New York City's Museum of Natural History on Monday, November 14. I have/have not enclosed the required \$15.00.

Parent Signature: _____

Please contact Principal Boyle, 203-966-9463 if you wish for your child to attend, but cannot afford the payment at this time. All financial concerns will be kept in the strictest confidence.

No. I was the "No" and the Parent Signature was "No." Mamma didn't know how to write anything in English but, "hi," "yes," and "no." She had clumsily scribbled the first "No" in blotchy, red ink and Papà the second in green.

"Penelope Anderson!"

Mrs. Mooney called in her stern, authoritative voice. It was even sterner and more authoritative when she called roll.

"Present, Mrs. Mooney."

"Margaret Brooks!"

"Here."

"Present!" she corrected Maggie as usual.

"Pre-pre-present, Mrs. Mooney." Maggie stuttered.

My classmates trudged up to the front, one by one, and handed in their permission slips, paper-clipped to small envelopes plentifully stuffed with cash.

I was the last. R.

"Maria Recchia!" *No.*

"No!" I declared modestly in my muffled, mousy voice. Talking in class was dreadful, more dreadful than sitting in the front-row center spotlight of Mrs. Mooney. I still rolled my R's, even after two years. I still did it.

"Excuse me?" she snapped, clearly infuriated with me for the lack of respect she thought I had shown her.

"I said...prrresent," I blurted, dumbfounded.

"No, you did not say 'pResent.'" She emphasized, with what seemed to be ten octaves higher, the soft pronunciation of the "r." "You do *not* answer back to a teacher like that, not in this classroom!"

"I-"

"Silence!" Mrs. Mooney interrupted my fallen attempt to defend myself.

The class broke into roaring laughter, and she raised her hand to restore her beloved silence.

"Now, please correct yourself and come up here and hand me your permission slip."

"Prrresent, Mrs. Mooney," I meticulously articulated. She rolled her eyes and sighed as I rolled my "r" and attempted to breathe.

My spastic palms began to moisten with warm perspiration as I clutched the off-white half-sheet with both hands. Their tremor sent the red and green ink-scribbled "no's" into a dancing frenzy. It became increasingly difficult to maintain my composure with every step closer to Mrs. Mooney's desk I just barely towered over. My feet and underarms too began to perspire and nearly freeze with the frigid draft circulating through the classroom's open window. I inched as close to her as I could until the scrutiny in her bold, blue eyes and the intimidating, robust frame of her tall body expunged any courage from me.

"Hmm..." she sounded, examining in perplexity the permission slip she seized from my hands. "No, and...no? You *do* realize you're the only one unable to participate. But, it looks like you didn't even show this to your parents. Care to explain this?" There was a subtle attempt in her mannish voice to keep the conversation between just the two of us. She just wasn't careful enough. Everyone heard; she had a way of doing that. Humiliating you. Humiliating *me*.

"I - I, I didn't wr-wr-write that," I unsuccessfully verified.

"Then who else *would*?" she questioned.

"I - I didn't. It wasn't me. My mother and father...they said..." My heart palpitated rapidly as I choked back my public humiliation. "No. Both of them. They said no. They can't -"

"Sit down, please, Ms. Recchia," she silenced me and pointed to my desk.

I sat myself down on the harsh solidness of the desk chair. Under the belittling, laughing gazes of Davy to my left and Frances to my right, I felt more insignificant than ever. With my chin against my chest, long chestnut hair cascaded down like a frozen waterfall over the skin of my face, and I felt heat. I crossed both arms and cocooned my body within my oversized winter coat. I sank further into the seat until my head barely peered over the rim of the desk. In that moment, I let myself become swallowed by the tattered coat that fit me like a parachute. I kept my head bowed and starred down shamefully at the puffiness of my coat.

Mamma had originally said "no" because she had always refused to give consent without Papà . Over dinner the night before the slip was due, Papà 's cheeks and forehead turned from a healthy olive color to a meaty, luminescent red at the mere mentioning of the field trip. Silence permeated the dinner table. Not even the Madonna had anything hopeful to offer. Mamma, Emilio, Toni, and even three-year-old Clara stopped chewing and looked down at their plates.

"Non hai bisogno di andare. *You don't need to go. Troppi soldi per quel museo dove non c'è niente importante!*" *Too much money for that museum where there's nothing important!*

"Papà , I --, look --" I ambitiously shoved the permission slip into his sight while dropping onto my lap the anchovy and oil-coated fork that twirled the linguine.

He shook his head and silenced me, "Chiudate la bocca!" *Shut your mouth.*

This was one of the only times I dared to disobey my father:

"No! Papà , you didn't read the second part. Leggete questo. *Read this. La seconda parte!* It says we can borrow -"

Lash.

My father loved me, but he also loved to discipline me. In this case, my disobedient back-talking deserved a whiplash from Papà's belt. Papa purposely bought pants that fit him tightly around the waist so he wouldn't have to weave the belt through the loopholes. He only buckled it; that way, it was readily accessible for disciplinary threatening.

It struck my waist for the first time in my life. It stung, stung numbly even through my cotton shirt.

"This family not borrow money. Never! We not beggars. We here to work, not take free money to have fun. That embarrassing! Some day, you go; not now! And non dimenticate, *don't forget*, you do bills Monday," he exclaimed, plopping another tong full of anchovy linguine onto my plate. Those were Papà's last words that night.

Anchovy linguine – his favorite. He expressed his love to me in the strangest of ways, even if he made me calculate the bills and balance my parents' checkbook because he was convinced numbers in Italian and English were different.

Mamma chimed in, "Ascoltate tuo padre, capisci?" *Listen to your father, understand?*

Though Mamma tried to mask it, there was a glimmer of resistance in her eyes as she spoke.

I silenced myself, but I still wanted to go. Wanted to see the Lucy exhibit I wrote my first science project on. Wanted to see her there ever since.

"Nice coat, MARRIA," bucktoothed Davy mocked.

Frances, his accomplice in ridicule, laughed along with him. "Don't get lost in that, now." I ignored them, but my heart beat much faster. And that day, I neither participated in the Pledge of Allegiance nor sang along to "My Country 'Tis of The."

—3—

Maria Anna Recchia. Maria Anna...ear? *It's true*, I thought, as I pulled my long, scraggly hair behind the creases of my ears. Recchia: ear. A feminized version of the word with the beginning "O" chopped off. I was all ears. Ears made to listen, obey. They made the rest of me look small in comparison. I studied myself in the fingerprint-clouded mirror of the hallway bathroom. I had escaped from the blandness of my brown-bag lunch into the bathroom where I allowed myself to think. Think of anything but the scathing glares I received from my classmates when they saw me bite into triple-decker peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Sandwiches on hard-crusting Italian bread Mamma packed me because I'd have starved with just flimsy Wonderbread.

They were too big- my ears, my coat. Ears handed down to me genetically through Mamma, coat handed down to me by Good Will. My father

scarcely accepted hand-me-downs from Good Will; it made us look lazy, poor, foolish, shameful, he would say. I had begged him for a coat, though. Mamma had taken my side even though it was hard for her to part with my old, white one. The coat was a Christmas gift from my late Zia Loreta, *Aunt Loreta*. Loreta had held me close that Christmas when we were still together there. So close. I had felt her bony, sickly embrace penetrate through the coat's stuffing. I had grown out of it by the time I turned eight.

The pink puffiness of the thickly-insulated winter coat left only my neck, head, lower calves, and ankles exposed. It adorned my less-than-four-foot frame like a man's bathrobe would. The pocket seams were coming undone, pink stitching unraveling down to nothing but fine remnants of thread. Moths had eaten away at the right elbow, leaving a vacuous circle where the fabric would have been. The zipper had broken when I first tried it on. There were no remaining buttons. I used the strength of my arm muscles to wrap the coat around me.

I hated it. The coat, a hand-me-down. The evidence of its secondary nature was the cursive stitching of "Nancy" on the left pocket. It was clearly not my own. Mamma and Papà said the coat suited me just fine, but no one else seemed to be able to contain their laughter.

My hands, encased in the cushiony tunnel, had no need for gloves. Studying my scrawny mirror-body hidden within the obesity of the coat, I resembled an uncooked, fatty sausage link. Maria Anna Recchia: a sausage with Dumbo ears, scraggly hair, and tired, raccoon eyes. Poorly dressed. Poor in Italia. Poor in America. Poor.

For the first time that I could remember, I actually cried for myself.

—4—

From the walk home that day with Toni, I remembered almost nothing. Nothing – a striking resemblance to what I felt I had become. The walk was a moment frozen in time. I remember freezing – freezing even through the thick, tattered coat that had always kept me so well-insulated.

The one thing I remember was that halfway through the walk, I told Toni I wanted to be alone. We parted paths and I began to walk toward the center of town. New Canaan's most redeeming quality was that everything was close-by. I decided to take the back roads toward Main Street; I was born with a good sense of direction.

Within ten minutes, I arrived at the Grand Union. I figured I'd seek shelter from the November wind in there and visit Sam in the meat department. Sam was in the back shoveling processed, mutilated carcasses of soon-to-be meat onto the large, metal scales. He caught my eye for an instant, removed his blood-stained gloves, and approached me.

Leaning over the high meat counter, he said in perfect English, "Hey, how's it going?"

I waved, nodded my head, and shrugged.

"I stopped in today while you were at school and talked to your Mamma and Papà. It's been a while."

"Really?" I replied. "What about?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out, troublemaker!"

He clutched hold of a sausage link and aimed it at me playfully.

"I bet it's Papà that told you I was a troublemaker," I retorted, refusing to humor him.

He began to hum a tune as he chucked the sausage link over his head. He chuckled when it hit the ceiling.

"Oops," he shrugged. "No, your parents don't think you're a troublemaker, okay? Besides, I said only good things to them about you! When do they ever not listen to Sam the man, eh?"

"What?" I asked in perplexity.

"Niente." *Nothing*. We started at each other for a few empty seconds and then he gave me an odd wink. Even though I suspected he was up to something and was mildly curious about it, it was time for me to walk home.

"Arrivederci, Sam."

—5—

The pungent, garlicky stench of the kitchen wafted at my face as I opened the screen door to no one. Papà must have been on call at Waveny Care Center; Mamma was raking the dry, fallen leaves outside with Toni by Massimo's fence. She had already prepared dinner for the evening: pan-cooked rabbit legs with fried, red peppers and onions. Papà bred, stabbed, and skinned our poor rabbits. I had dry-heaved the time I walked into a skinning scene downstairs when I was hanging Mamma's dress to dry. Papà's gloved hands were a glistening scarlet crimson, fingers bejeweled with stringy rabbit entrails as he penetrated the knife deeper into the meat. *La carne del coniglio. Rabbit meat.* It repulsed me. My eyes welled up with tears from the overpowering scent of pan-fried onions and garlic.

I thought I was just crying onion tears, but I couldn't stop. Even in the solitude of my own family kitchen, I felt overshadowed under the scrutiny of Mrs. Mooney and sneering of Davy and Frances. Most of all, I felt the need to shield myself from Papà's leather belt and Mamma's slapping, dough-covered hands.

I made my way to the pantry cupboard and pulled open the folding, wooden door until the gold-medaled white bag gazed at me directly in the eye. Pillsbury. It was brand new. I grasped it and fell while doing so, bottom against wooden floor. With both thumb and index fingers, I vigorously

ripped open the creased top of the bag. Mounds of powdery whiteness ejected onto the hand-me-down, "Nancy" coat I was still wearing.

I stood up and raised the bag of flour high in my right hand. I stepped back into the middle of the kitchen floor and began to spin around. I let my left hand loose. I didn't care that it hit the rim of the kitchen table after each revolution. Gradually, I tilted the Pillsbury bag. A spiraling, dusty corkscrew of white released itself, falling rapidly like an avalanche onto every part of the kitchen. Flour coated the plastic-covered table, the holy Madonna at its corner, the oily rabbit meat and peppers left to languish in the skillet, the linoleum floor, and even part of the kitchen sink. The entire kitchen was a winter wonderland of wheat when the dust finally settled.

"I'm American too! Does that make *me* lazy?" I apostrophized.

As I began to run toward the bedroom I shared with Toni, I was jolted forward by the slippery grains of flour under my feet. I fell onto my chest; the coat's insulation hadn't saved me since the middle was not zipped shut. My only line of vision was that which appeared under the kitchen table. The belt that Papà had left under the table.

I regained my wind and grasped hold of the belt, almost fearing its reptile-like, prey-savoring hiss. I used the seats of the chairs to help myself up. Standing up cautiously now, I rummaged through the drawers where Mamma kept our utensils. The steak knife. The sharpest one Mamma had. I needed privacy.

I locked the bedroom door behind me, sat at the edge of my bed, and slashed away. My clammy, unnerved hands quavered as I held the tip of the knife up to the soft, yet violent leather of Papà's belt. It took a while for the sharpness of the knife's tip to finally penetrate the leather and cause enough noticeable destruction. The trick was to guide the knife with ease. When I was done, there were long gashes of exposed wounds, some X-marked ones, and other randomly placed punctures. Tough, fibrous black flesh: wounded. A softer, underlying whiteness was exposed around the tender, severed openings.

"No, *you* don't listen to *me!*" I exclaimed out loud to myself.

I released the knife and belt onto the polyurethane-glazed wooden floor and let my head slam against the softness of my comforter. Only, it wasn't soft. It was crunchy-sounding. I groped the back of my head and felt a piece of fairly wrinkled paper. I flicked on the rusty, tall lamp beside my nightstand, grabbed the paper from under my head, and read:

Dear Mrs. Mooney,

We know it's late, but we changed our minds. We want Maria to participate with the class on their trip to the Museum of Natural History. We will accept Principal Boyle's offer, and because we are a proud, hard-working family, we will pay you back the fifteen dollars sometime in the future.

Thank You,
Alessandro and Anna Recchia

The handwriting was neither Mamma's nor Papà's; they *couldn't write*. Even when they attempted to write, they never wrote on college-ruled paper; the paper wasn't ours. And Toni would never betray them for my benefit.

I read the note over several times and speculated the possibilities. My speculation then lost itself in the events of that day.

Sam. The note was the brainchild of his suspicious wink. He must have worked his magic on my headstrong parents.

I heard a slamming of metal against the wooden door hinge followed by a heavy, exasperating sigh. Mamma. She saw. I was left with no time for repentance.

"Maria, where are you?" She asked loudly and tumultuously where I was. In English.

"Nella mia camera, Mamma!"

I reluctantly unlocked the door, swiped the belt off the floor, and held it out in front of me. I beckoned it to Mamma as she opened the door, expecting a few disciplinary whiplashes for destroying the kitchen and mutilating Papà's weapon.

Mamma clutched the belt from its center, elevated it over her head in what seemed like a momentary state of fury, and threw it onto my bed.

"Look what you do!" She shouted.

"Mamma, mi dispiace, ma non mi avete capito." *I'm sorry, but you guys didn't understand me.* "Mi dispiace molto."

"You wrong. Now I understand," Mamma remarked. "Sam help -"

"Io lo so." *I know.*

"You clean and get Papà new belt tomorrow, or you not go to museum! Capisci?" *Understand?*

I understood, even through her initial anger toward me. For once, we understood. We all did.