

TITLE: How I (Inadvertently) Took My Mom's Advice and (Accidentally) Found a Nice Italian Boy
By Adeena Mignogna

I was born Rosa Carlotta Silvana Grisanti, but in the mid-Eighties, I legally changed my name to Eve. I was 16, and this was the best my teenage rebelliousness had come up with. My old name was too long, too traditional, as I had told my mother. Our family had been in America for a couple of generations now. Most other families had long since let go of the old traditions in order to blend in. I thought it was time for my family to do the same.

She would always grab my cheeks and tell me that I'd appreciate our traditions more when I was older. That was almost 20 years ago. My mother has since passed away so I feel ok saying this: She was right.

It didn't occur to me how much I'd grown apart from the family since I'd been living in San Francisco for the last 10 years. The company I work for moved me out here in 1995 and I just recently convinced them to let me go back to New York. My father is ill. He's still living in the house where we grew up in the Bronx. Both my brother and I decided to go back home.

My brother was actually going to be staying with our Dad. I rented a real nice little apartment on the west side of Manhattan on 101st Street. Easy enough to get to work, easy enough to get to Dad.

My brother was flying out to San Fran to help me pack up and drive back to New York. He had been living near Washington D.C. and already had one of his buddies help him with his own move. I'd been waiting in a Starbucks at the airport for a half hour now, brooding over my chai latte. Not brooding, really, more like wondering how I spent 10 years in this town without feeling any real attachment to it or anyone in it.

2:15pm. Time to meet Vince at the gate. Before I moseyed off, I picked him up a chai latte, too. All things considered, Vince and I were as close as a brother and sister who are 7 years apart in age and living on opposite sides of the country could be. Luckily his work brought him out here often, and Vince is great at being the one to pick up the phone and call and tell me everything. If it wasn't for him, I'd probably be even that much more cut off from anyone else.

He walked out of the gate chatting with some guy. Very handsome. I'll bet he was gay, too. He shook the guys hand quickly and said bye once he saw me wave to him. Vince was easy to spot in a crowd. He wasn't that tall, but he had what I like to call a classic Italian look: black hair, dark skin – it was just a look that didn't seem to be common anymore.

“Hey sis!” Big hug, kiss on the cheek, hand him his latte. “Packed and ready to go?” How was he this energetic and enthusiastic after a cramped, cross-country flight?

“Yeah, sure” I responded. He knew me... packing was a last minute thing in my world. That’s partly why he was here.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “we’ll get it done. Lead on!” And with that, we made our way back to my car and my apartment.

Two days later, the rented U-haul was full, I had my security deposit back from my landlady and we were on our way. Plenty of time to catch up. I got the whole scoop on the men Vince had been dating, and the *real* whole scoop about his breakup with his last serious boyfriend. Vince tried to pry more info from me about the men I had been dating, but alas, there wasn’t much to tell. It had been more than a year since I was involved with anyone seriously and most of the other guys I had the chance to meet, let alone date, were pure duds. They were boring, they had no sense of... I couldn’t really find the right word for it.

“Roots,” Vince said.

“Huh?”

“It’s roots. Don’t you remember what mom used to say about the guys you brought home and she didn’t like? She would say ‘He has no roots! No family! So he is not good enough for you!’” Vince smiled. We both missed mom, but his young age made her death sting that much more.

Roots. *Sigh*. Was the woman actually right about everything?

My new landlord would be waiting for us when we arrived at the building. Apparently, some family managed to buy up several of the row houses on this block over the years and converted them into quaint little apartments. Mr. Fiorelli said either himself or his son would be meeting us at the apartment with the keys and to collect first and last months rent.

We were supposed to meet at 1 pm. At 1:30, a man came racing down the block. He had on jeans and a t-shirt and a book bag that bopped up and down his back as he ran. He stopped right in front of the apartment.

I was fuming a little. *This must be the son*. I’m a reasonably punctual person. Okay... I’m completely anal about being on time and I expect the rest of the world to be, too.

“Sorry!” was the sound we thought young Fiorelli was making as he leaned over, hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath. Maybe two minutes later he was actually able to speak again.

“I’m Giovanni Fiorelli. You’re Eve, right?” He held out his sweaty hand. I glanced at Vince. “Oh, right.” Giovanni said and wiped his hand off on his jeans before offering it again.

Vince took it first. “Vince Grisanti. This is my sister, Eve. I’m her hired moving help today.”

I was still too annoyed to notice what Vince saw: a *very* handsome man standing in front of us.

Giovanni sat on the porch and opened his book bag. He took out a set of keys. I took this as a cue to hand over the rent check. “I’ll give you the 2 minute tour, then I can help you guys bring in your stuff.”

He brought us up to the second floor, fumbled with the keys a bit and opened the door. It was a very nice apartment given the cost. Wood floors. Kitchen that was large enough to cook in and had an eat-in counter (good thing I had some stools from the last apartment), and a small balcony overlooking an inner courtyard garden.

“Gardening is Mom’s job. You’ll see her out here most days. Except this summer. My folks are going to Italy in a few days. They’ll be gone till early September.”

A few hours later, the apartment was full of boxes and randomly assorted furniture. There were a couple pizza boxes scattered about since we had to break for dinner in the middle of moving in. That was when we found out that Giovanni was a PhD candidate at NYU, he came here from Italy with his parents and siblings when he was a baby, spoke fluent Italian and was *not* gay, much to Vince’s chagrin. After finding out that tidbit of information, Vince managed to uncover that Giovanni was not married and did not currently have anyone serious in his life. After the pizza, Vince and I needed to return the truck.

We said bye to Giovanni, who also claimed he needed to get home to do some of his own work. We all headed down the stairs and started out the building. Giovanni made a big turn at the bottom of the staircase and proceeded to open an apartment door.

“Oh, yeah, I live right down here. Just let me know if you need anything.” And in he went.

All the way out to the truck and on the drive to the rental place, Vince kept nudging me. “He’s cute.” He kept saying. “He’s single.” He kept saying. “He’s Italian!” He kept saying. “What more do you need? You should go out with him.”

“Vince... I just moved. I need time to settle in, to get back to work, to...”

“Blah, blah, blah... you’re just making excuses and you know it. And I happen to know for a fact that he thinks you’re cute, too.”

“Oh really. How do you know that?”

“I have a special form of Gay-dar. It not only senses other available gay men, it picks up on the attractions any man for someone else.”

Sheesh, he was full of it. But I didn't have a response to that one just yet.

After returning the truck, Vince headed back to Dad's place and I went to my new home. I'd be coming up to Dad's place for dinner the next night after a full day of unpacking and getting a little order back into my life.

I *thought* that 7am on a Sunday was pretty early to get up and no one else would be out at this hour. I was wrong. At 7:15, there was a knock on the door.

It was a smiling Giovanni holding a grocery bag. He just kind of walked on in the second I opened the door.

“I didn't think you had a chance to get some groceries yet and we didn't leave you any pizza last night so I brought a few things over.”

“That's, uh, very nice, but I...”

“Don't mention it. Here, have a croissant. Do you drink coffee?” I nodded. “Great. Then you'll have to try this. I didn't know if you had any cups or anything so I brought a couple, too.”

Huh. I thought, *Guy I just met, bringing me breakfast. That's never happened before. But who am I to complain?* I pulled up a stool to the kitchen bar. Giovanni took out two very large cappuccino mugs, two Styrofoam cups I assumed was filled with coffee and some hot chocolate mix from his grocery bag. He proceeded to mix the coffee and chocolate mix in each cup.

“Here, try this,” he said as he handed me one of the large mugs.

I sipped it. I liked it. A simple breakfast was one of the nicer ways to start off a day, in my mind.

“You're now having a typical Parisian breakfast, courtesy of your local Italian boy,” he said with a cute smile and leaned back and started sipping his own chocolate-coffee.

“There's a wonderful little French bakery two blocks from here. You can eat fresh bread and croissants every day.”

What started out as a sweet, one-time gesture turned into a welcome routine. I discovered that Giovanni was an early, crack-of-dawn riser and he could always tell when I was up by hearing the creaks in the floor. The first few days he'd pop up when I was barely out of bed, but eventually I started getting up a little earlier so I could be dressed

by the time he got there and we'd be able to chat for a while before I had to rush off to work.

About three weeks after I moved in, I decided to invite him to Sunday dinner at Dad's place. He accepted. I was on the phone with Vince that night, trying to explain that this was not a *date*, it was just two friends having dinner and that Vince shouldn't get overly excited about it, nor cause anyone else (like our Dad) to get overly excited about it.

Dinner came and went, followed by the next Sunday dinner with Giovanni at dad's house again. And he came the next Sunday, too.

The more time I spent with him, the more I noticed: he was handsome. Very handsome. The words "date" or "relationship" or anything else like that never came up, but the better we got to know each other, the more we would be able to exchange in just a glance. And anytime he could, he slipped in little comments like telling me he thought I was pretty. I was starting to wonder if he'd bring up the topic of "dating" or if I should. What did he think about our time together? Plus, Vince would nag me relentlessly about it.

But it was *like* we were dating. Breakfast nearly every morning and Sunday dinner at my Dad's place with my family. Giovanni couldn't yet return the favor since his parents had been spending the summer in Italy with relatives. They'd be back in a couple weeks.

Giovanni's parents were returning on a Sunday so he wouldn't be able to make dinner that night. We had to rush through breakfast so he could get to JFK to pick them up.

"I can't wait for you to meet them," Giovanni said. I could sense some tension and nervousness in his voice.

I went out late that morning to pick up some groceries. When I returned to the apartment, I could hear raised voices coming from Giovanni's place. It was all in Italian. I used to understand it when I was little, but no one's spoken it to me in years so I didn't remember most of it.

I thought I could make out the Italian words for "unfair" and "stop" and maybe even "my life." Those were definitely from Giovanni. I knew his voice pretty well so it was easier to make out. The other person? No, there were two people – must be his parents, I guessed. Well, my curiosity would have to wait till later or the next morning.

The next morning Giovanni didn't knock at his usual time. Somehow I wasn't surprised, given the shouting the previous day, I knew something was wrong. I had to find out and make sure he was okay.

When I knocked on his door, he opened it and invited me in. It looked like he had either just gotten out of bed or hadn't gone to sleep the previous night. I found out later that it was the not sleeping thing.

“What’s wrong?” I dared ask.

“I, uh, um. Morning, Eve,” he said as he sat down on the couch and buried his hands in his face.

I sat down next to him, gave him a moment and asked again. “What’s wrong?”

He took my hand, turned to me and began to explain. “I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you this before. I was hoping it wouldn’t work out. All the stories I’ve ever heard is that these days, it usually doesn’t.” He paused. I think he was just trying to gather a little more strength to tell me the next part. “My parent’s weren’t just over in Italy to visit relatives. They were there making arrangements for my wedding.”

Wow. That absolutely was *not* what I expected to hear. Overnight I had imagined a few different things that could be wrong and how to react, but this wasn’t among them.

“You... uh, You’re, you’re getting married?” I finally managed to stammer out.

“It would seem so,” he replied and stood up. “I’m so sorry, Eve. I never thought it would work out like this. I always believed that my parent’s would go back there, and find out that she had fallen for someone else and this whole thing would be over.”

I was starting to grasp the situation just a little. Emphasis on *little*. “You mean this is one of those arranged marriage deals? I thought that was something... well... something that wasn’t done in this day and age.”

“It’s an old custom, yes, but it’s still *sort of* practiced. These days, what usually happens is that even though the parents arrange this, the happy couple is still free to choose to go through with it or not on their own. So, even though I always knew this was there, I never thought I’d be truly forced into it.”

“But you are. That’s what you were arguing about last night, right?”

“You heard all that?”

“Yeah, but I couldn’t understand any of it.” Now came the awkward silence phase of the discussion. There wasn’t anything I could say. Of course, now is when I realized that I really like this guy. Sheesh, is that what it takes for me to admit to myself that I have feelings for a guy? Finding out he’s about to be married?

I couldn’t take the silence much longer. “I think I should be going. I have to get to work.” Okay, I didn’t need to leave for another hour and he knew it. I just wasn’t sure what else to say or do.

“Eve, don’t go.” He took my hand again to stop me from moving anymore. “You know the family and the traditions are very important to me. But some things are more important.” He was looking deep into my eyes as he said that. “Like you.” He smiled. “I’m just going to have to tell my parent’s that it’s time to let go of *some* of the traditions.”

I smirked.

“What’s that for?” he asked.

“Nothing... it’s just that I said something similar to my mom many years ago.”

“How did she take it?”

“Eh, not *too* bad.”

Somehow he had gone from holding my hand to holding me in his arms. Then finally, *finally*, he kissed me. This must be what a connection with my roots feels like – I could absolutely learn to appreciate this. I think my mom would have even approved.

2-3 sentence bio

When not researching her own Italian heritage, Adeena Mignogna, spends her time writing everything from non-fiction articles about her business to sci-fi and fantasy stories. This piece is her very first completed attempt at chick-lit.