

# “You Are Not One of Us”

## The Roots of My Militant Feminism

By *Laura Sabia*

**Y**ou're not one of us," she spat out. "You're educated, everything has been handed to you." It had been a tough but exhilarating evening. An audience invariably starts my adrenalin flowing. I had gone to Ottawa to give the keynote address at a Conference for Women sponsored by the Congress of Labor. Determined, outspoken women had always inspired me. Such a person was Shirley Carr, Vice President at that time of the Congress of Labor, who had invited me to speak to the Conference. There, too, was Grace Hartman, President of C.U.P.E., a quiet, strong and disarming person, and Madeline Parent, an old convent friend turned militant feminist and union organizer, long before it became fashionable for women to do so. I chuckled as I thought of Madeline — how could one convent have produced two such militant rabble rousers!

It was during the question period when that angry young woman stood up and berated me for daring to talk to "working class women" when obviously I wasn't one of them: how could I possibly identify with them? How could a person like me, raised with all the privileges of a comfortable family, convent bred, university trained, married to a professional man... how could I possibly understand? It was indeed a piercing question.

The angry words would not go away. "You are not one of us." "You are not one of us." Over and over again like a never-ending liturgical litany. My childhood, my youth, my whole adult life had been one everlasting "You are not one of us." That angry young woman had crystallized in a few pithy sentences all the conflicts in

my life, all the inconsistencies, all the drive and ambition, all the disappointments and frustrations.

As a child, I was not one of them — my parents were Italian immigrants, our neighbourhood middle-class English. The daunting words, "You're a dirty dago," would remain with me for the rest of my life. As a convent girl in the thirties, I was not one of them. They were daughters of the rich Americans, the wealthy French, the English Establishment, the aristocrats and diplomats of South America. I was the outspoken maverick, questioning, probing, disturbing daughter of immigrants — the new affluent — really!

As a young woman married to a doctor, I was not one of them. I could not fit into the mould of the doctor's wife, preferably quiet, subservient to his needs and his practice. As a mother, I could never identify with women who fulfilled themselves only through motherhood. I found no glory in motherhood, though I fiercely mothered my children.

As a Separate School Board member, I was not one of them. In the fifties in my St. Catharines community, the Board was a closed circle of Catholic Church establishment. It was a privilege to be invited on the Board. I had dared to break into the inner circle of the privileged few by forcing an election. I had dared to argue with the Monsignor on the Board as an equal, when I should have genuflected and prostrated before him. I became an outsider.

As an alderman and the only woman on the Council, I never became one of the boys. What did women know about sewers, parking and the environment? I was somewhat of a freak, to be patronized and tolerated. I did not belong! And even

when I became national President of the Canadian Federation of University Women, a prominent member with all the right pedigree would say, "But she's Italian. An Italian for President — really!"

And when in the sixties, having taken up the cause of Women, I fought for a Royal Commission on the Status of Women, the headlines would scream, "She must be unloved and unwanted!"

All my life I had not been one of them. All my life I had been out of step with my times. The gnawing question at the pit of my stomach kept repeating itself, "Why the constant push, the everlasting drive, the insatiable ambition to achieve?" Why? Why? Did I push myself to try the impossible because "You are not one of us" challenged me? Did I drive myself to prove that, even though I never owned a union card, I was part of them? Was my insatiable ambition to know more, do more, have more, due to the fact that I belonged nowhere — neither in the Union Halls, nor in the Establishment, nor in the middle class? What made me an outwardly aggressive, inwardly ambitious, headstrong, compulsive hard worker? Why was I never satisfied and always ready to tilt at windmills to take on the powerful, the élite and the pompous?

Somehow I had to go back to my roots, I had to find the soil that nurtured those roots. I decided to go to Italy, first as a tourist to Rome, Venice and Florence, and then drive the Amalfi Coast and the Strada del Sol to Calabria, Cosenza, and the little village of Figline and Vegliatura, the home of my parents and ancestors. There among the olive trees, the jasmine and oleander, nestled picturesquely in a hillside, were the tombstones of grandparents

and great grandparents — Grecos, Vilella's, side-by-side and vigil lights still burning in memory of souls long departed. A magnificent thirteenth century church, now declared an historical site, and perched on a hilltop dominated the countryside and influenced the lives of successive generations of peasants. Below, at Catanzaro, the sea: if you closed your eyes you could envision the mass migration of men, women and children, fearing the unknown, but searching for

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opportunities and a place to call "home." Let the story unfold — my parents were Italian immigrants from the beautiful hills of Calabria in southern Italy. When I was born my mother was then thirty-five and my father forty. Three years before the birth of my sister and me, my parents had lost two children in one convulsive day: they had both succumbed to the devastating Spanish flu. Only one son had survived. He was the eldest and had come over from Italy with my mother when he was six years of age.

When my sister and I were born, one year apart, the joy of my parents was indescribable. In their mid years, they considered themselves privileged to raise another family. By the time I was born, my father was well on the way to becoming a successful contractor. When I was two years old, Father moved his family to Montreal. His children must become bilingual: always ahead of his time, he foresaw the need for his children to know several languages. Quebec was Catholic, French schools were readily available, and Montreal was at that time the centre of Commerce. Opportunities would be there for his children.

We lived in Notre Dame de Grace, a middle-class English community with a small French population. There, my father bought a home on Oxford Avenue. I would spend my whole childhood, all my teen years until the day I married, in that comfortable home. I remember on a hot

July day as I walked down the stairs to the limousine that would take me to the Church for my wedding — Carmel, our faithful housekeeper, holding my train, and whispering to herself in Sicilian dialect, "the end of her happy days."

It was a happy home — for all three of us — my sister and I and a young brother. My oldest brother, a good fourteen years older than any of us, was always away at boarding school or at University, and we never considered him a brother. We rather looked on him as an uncle or an advisor of sorts, or someone completely detached from the three of us.

The Calabrian peasant is a hard-headed "*testa dura-Calabrese*" — determined, proud, and a hard-working individual. The poverty of the South of Italy, now referred to as the *mezzogiorno*, is well known. Agriculture is the only means of sustenance and a poor one at that. The Calabrese is well known for his rather stern and grave exterior, but it often hides a tender, sentimental heart. The harshness of the Calabrian soil has formed his character.

Out of that rigid, poor but proud milieu came my parents. My father, the eldest of three children, lost his father at the young age of thirteen. His mother, Rosa, was destitute. The year was 1893. It was incumbent on the eldest son to take on the responsibility of providing for the family. A priest in the village offered to pay his way to Canada. There would be plenty of work on the railroads for a strong, young lad like Pasquale.

For the last one hundred years, the men of Calabria had emigrated to the new world. It was the only way to provide for their families. Calabria was poor and unproductive. The courageous, the ambitious, those with tenacity — and perhaps those with a touch of wanderlust — left to seek fame and fortune in other lands. Canada got its full share of Italian immigrants at the turn of the century. They were cheap labor, good workers, physically strong and used to adversity. The railways, the canals, and later the highways were built by these intrepid immigrants — uneducated, simple, but fiercely ambitious.

Calabrese are old softies, but too proud to admit it. The Calabrese's caustic wit and laughter are legend. My mother was one of the wittiest persons I have ever known. The stories she told were gems. She poked fun and mimicked everybody and everything — the priest, the doctor, the rich man, the poor man: no one escaped her delightful biting humor. I loved to listen to her gossipy tales about every-

body in Figline — she was a unique story teller — and how she loved to cut down to size any pompous individual she encountered! Every Friday, for as many years as I can remember, she would tell us the story of why we had to eat fish on Friday. The Pope, she would say, had a brother who was a fisherman. He was lazy and poor and had difficulties making ends meet. It seemed no one wanted his fish. So, one day he went off to seek advice from his brother, the Pope. Now the Pope,

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calling on divine guidance — how else would he function, she would say — came up with a brilliant idea: he would decree Friday a fish day under pain of mortal sin! And on and on she went, embroidering on the story as she told it. She poked fun at the Pope's decrees, as the years rolled by, about fish on Friday, confession on Saturday, Church on Sunday and back to sin on Monday. There was a story to be told in every decree.

My father, on the other hand, was a very devout Catholic who never missed his daily Mass when he was at home. He would always feign shock at my mother's ribald tales of the clergy, but couldn't help breaking out in controlled laughter. A more devoted couple I have never seen — neither could do any wrong in the sight of the other.

Mother was not a devout person. You might even call her irreverent. She would send my father to church with the admonition, "You need it, go, I can pray scrubbing my floors — anyway, pray for me. Remember me to Him." Or she would laughingly say, "Well, you go and swallow all that bilge and then you can tell me all about it." She was a real character, strong, determined, made of steel, a typical "*testa dura*"-Calabrese. She made us go to Church on Sunday and keep the day holy, while she regaled us with all the wrongdoings of the powerful in her home town. She knew every Saint in the book and could tell you all the stories of their

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lives and why they became Saints. She didn't believe much in Saints, nor in Hell, and sometimes questioned Heaven too! So her stories were delightful anecdotes of the absurd.

It always made me feel good that my mother was so emphatic about Hell. I didn't have to worry about all those mortal sins that the nuns told us about and that plagued me as a youngster. If my mother said there was no Hell, there was no Hell! It was as simple as that! I can remember many a discussion about Heaven and Hell at the supper table. My father would debate seriously, but my mother, always in jest, had the final word: "Well, have you ever seen Heaven or Hell? Has anyone ever come back to tell us? No, of course not. There isn't any, that's why. God wouldn't be so evil to invent Hell. Hell was the invention of the Church. How else could they keep people on the straight and narrow path without a Hell to send them to?" And that was the end of the discussion. How could you argue with such convoluted logic? All I know is that it did wonders for me. I lost my fear of Hell, eternal damnation and pompous clergy at a very tender age. To this day, whenever anyone mentions going to Hell, I chuckle and remember my mother and all Hell breaks loose. I can never take a clergyman in the pulpit seriously either. I recall my mother's outrageous stories about clergymen and I dissolve into fits of laughter.

My mother was the disciplinarian in the home — she brooked no nonsense. My father, on the other hand, spoiled his two daughters extravagantly. We could do no wrong. He was often away, sometimes for as long as three weeks. We rarely saw him in the summer. Travelling in the twenties and thirties was not done by air; long treks by train to Northern Ontario and the West took days. When he came home, there was always great rejoicing. We knew we could ask for anything and get it. Even mother could not put the brakes on. Father would always say, "Let them have fun while they're young. God knows what the future holds for them." So we, as teenagers, took advantage of that largesse to

the utmost. If mother said "No" to some outrageous purchase or demand, we would wait for Father's return and slip him the word when Mother wasn't listening. He never refused us — "How could any future husband be found to put up with such extravagances?" Mother would scold. "It will be on your conscience if they don't get husbands." Father would smile and reply, "I like to see them happy — who cares about husbands?"

My father was the most dynamic, imposing man I have ever met. Tall, well built, proud. A man of quick decision, keen business sense, scrupulously honest, who took enormous risks and was always confident that he would succeed. He commanded respect and he got it. He had one driving, insatiable ambition — to give his four children the best education possible, to give them what he had never had, a happy childhood. He would have gone to the ends of the earth to give us everything we wanted. It's a good thing my mother was more practical and vetoed, to our consternation and sorrow, the many demands we made. My sister and I had perfected the fine art of asking, but we had to outmanoeuvre my mother — and that was well nigh impossible!

He had a favorite game he played with us. He would put his hand in his pocket, pull out a fistful of change and ask us to guess the amount. If we guessed correctly, we got to keep the change. It sometimes became very lucrative. Two or three dollars in change was a magnificent sum to ten and twelve year-olds in those days. Talk about present day lotteries, we had one every day he was home in our very own kitchen. Mother would throw her hands up in disgust and call on all the Saints she didn't believe in to help her!

I remember my Mother and the immigrant trains of the mid- and late twenties. She would rise early in the morning and take the streetcar to Windsor Station. The immigrant trains, it seemed, always arrived early in the morning from the East Coast, where immigrants had landed from the ships taking them to the new world. She would walk up and down the plat-

forms asking the immigrants from the open windows if there were any people from Calabria, and invariably there were. The trains were on their way either to the West or to Northern Ontario. Immigrants always came from the South of Italy. What arrangements she made with the officials to take them home for a few short hours is indeed a mystery. She would call a taxi, two if necessary, get her charges from Calabria into them — baggage and all — and home she came.

My sister and I and our young brother were left at home (my oldest brother was by then at University). My sister, ever prim and proper, wouldn't deign to come downstairs to help feed the immigrants. She hated the "smell of them," the crumpled clothes, the strange ways. I was the one pressed into service and I helped Mother get breakfast. I remember frying at least twenty-four eggs at a time, dozens of Italian sausages. It was like feeding an army. Those who wanted baths were sent upstairs, the children were sent downstairs to be washed, changed and combed, and Mother kept a constant conversation about all the goings on in her home town. I was fascinated by them all — the little girls with pierced ears, the beautiful curly hair and large black eyes. To this day I can still smell the musty blankets they carried. Mother and the housekeeper laid the blankets out on the back lawn and I can remember my sister and I being so embarrassed at what the neighbors might say; we always insisted that Mother leave them on the outside porch, hidden from the neighbors' view. About early afternoon — or so it seemed — she would gather them all up, call taxis and off she would go back to Windsor Station to return her charges back to the trains, while the three of us would heave a great sigh of relief.

During the summer months from May to September, I am sure the episode was repeated three or four times a month. Father never knew about this mass migration from the railroad yards to our house. We were sworn to secrecy. He would never have approved. He wanted his children to be accepted as Canadians: keeping

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ties with immigrants would only assure their non-acceptance.

I never heard my father say a complimentary word about his native Italy or even Calabria. He returned at twenty-four to marry my mother and refused to go back again, even as a prosperous business man. He had no love for the land that had turned him out at thirteen to fend for himself in a strange land. Mother, on the other hand, talked constantly of the beauties of her native Figline, of Cosenza and the mountains of La Sila. It was the only subject they disagreed on. My father always had a passionate love affair with Canada. It had given him the opportunities to succeed, and he never forgot it. My mother never lost contact with her people in Italy. She was a monumental letter writer. I know — I addressed the letters! She knew everything that was going on in the village. Father would have none of it, but would generously give her any amount of money to send to the various relatives. The whole town, it seemed, was related to each other. He kept the whole town of Figline. Every letter to Mother was a plea for funds and Father would quietly ask, "How much today?" Mother was a true politician and a great manipulator. She made sure that the demands for money came equally from both sides of the family. In this way she ensured that the money flowed to everyone.

My mother was the humanitarian in the home. Irreverent and sometimes outrageous, she nevertheless taught us a deep and abiding concern for our fellow man.

My only recollection of the Great Depression that started after the market crash of 1929 is my mother answering the door day after day, giving out fifty cent pieces (a princely sum in those days) from a huge purse she kept in the hall closet for that very purpose. Along with the money, she had a parcel for each person who came to the door asking for a handout. My sister and I were always pressed into service. We made dozens of sandwiches each day, wrapped them up and into the "ice box" they would go to await the inevitable ring of the door bell. When we left for the convent, my young brother was pressed

into service. He had no kind words for our departure and his indenture.

Father had no such compassion. He would always refer to them as "lazy bums." Having worked hard himself from the age of fourteen, he regarded anyone who begged as a derelict and not to be trusted. Fortunately, Father was seldom home and Mother ran the house like a benevolent dictator; whatever she thought necessary, she did! Mother may not have been an all over come holy Catholic, but she must have been the precursor of the Welfare State, the socialist distributor of wealth. She was a social worker, psychologist, do-gooder, all rolled into one. She understood the poor and the needy, and always identified with them. She had an odd tendency of giving away the clothes off our backs. If my sister and I wanted to keep a particular dress or coat, we had to learn to hide it where Mother couldn't get her hands on it. If there were a needy family, she ferreted them out and made sure they got what they needed. I remember an occasion when a poor family we knew came to visit with all their seven children. My sister and I stood there aghast, with our mouths wide open, as at least four of the seven children had our coats, hats and dresses. We both ran on the double upstairs to our cupboards: sure enough, our last year's Spring coats and dresses were gone. There was no earthly use in our objecting or demonstrating. We would get a long speech on being your neighbor's keeper — a socialist harangue on the distribution of wealth and that being a Christian meant giving, not going to Church, etc., etc. Better the Easter outfits go, than be subjected to Mother's primitive, socialist doctrines. She was the typical strong *testa dura* Italian mother who dominated the family, did as she pleased, manipulated everyone (including her husband), but always made sure to tell us that Father was head of the household!

Mother was the typical Calabrian woman — dominant, rigid. The women of Calabria are something else, let me assure you. Never have I met more strong-willed, determined and obstinate women.

When I visited Figline, my eldest daughter made the comment, "Mother, this place is full of Laura Sabias." She meant it as a compliment. As I spoke to them and listened to their tales of the past and their many experiences, I found myself identifying with them. I saw my mother in all of them, "Aquilinas" everywhere! For the first time in my life, I was conscious of who I was. Strange, that in order to understand oneself one must go back in time and place and find one's beginnings, find the soil that influenced those who nurtured you. In Figline, in Vegliatura, in the *mezzogiorno* that is Calabria, I found the roots of my militant feminism.

While the men of Calabria emigrated to Canada and other countries, the women stayed behind. Some, years later, like my mother, followed their husbands to the new land. Others refused to leave. However, the little hamlets, for all intents and purposes, were run by women: the young men had left, only very old men remained. They did all the manual labor, tilled the soil, built the homes, erected schools, taught the children, tended the sick, delivered the babies and ruled with devastating firmness and with rigid, moral and social mores. My mother often told the story of how she built her home herself (she married at eighteen). She did at times admit, after prodding from my father, that a few old men did help her, but only "ever so little," she would answer. She also had a small general store in her house and she considered herself quite a thrifty business woman. My father would send her money from Canada that she would save, while she used the profit of her little venture to keep herself and her first born. She kept the store until the day she embarked for Canada, bringing with her all her savings to proudly show my father when he met her in New York. She was then twenty-four.

Mother often told the story of her arrival in New York. Father was there to meet her. After getting her and his son out of Ellis Island he quickly whisked her to a store where he bought her all new clothes. He was proud and wanted her to look like

a lady. She remembered a beautiful large hat and an elegant hat pin, to go with a fashionable new suit and lacy ruffled blouse. She had never worn a hat in Italy, rarely shoes! She had difficulty balancing the hat on her head; then she would regale us with laughter as she walked from one end of the kitchen to the other showing us her balancing act.

My mother and father met in a rather strange and romantic way. My father had been in Canada now for ten years. He had never returned to Italy. At twenty-three his drive and ambition had made him a foreman on the railroad. Working for him were many young men who came from his home town. One of them was my Mother's brother, Rocco. He had a picture of his family which he proudly showed to everyone, which included a picture of his sister. My father would tell us the story of how he fell in love with the picture of my mother and vowed to marry her. When he left at fourteen years of age, Mother was a child of nine. He cajoled my mother's brother to send her a picture of himself and immediately wrote to the family to ask her hand in marriage. My mother did not fall in love with his picture but she was a wily, calculating soul: she argued to herself that, if he had been daring enough to go to Canada at thirteen and was now a foreman keeping his Mother and brother and sister in comfort, he would do well by her. They were married on November 21, 1904 in the worst downpour and deluge the town had ever had. A bad omen, the whole village thought. Poor Aquilina marrying an unknown, an expatriate who had lived in Canada for eleven years and never came home. It turned out to be one of those rare marriages of love, devotion and understanding.

As a child, I hated being "Italian." I resented the "dirty-dago-wap syndrome" of the twenties and early thirties. I wanted to be like everyone else. I wanted to belong, but no one, it seemed, would let me. I was reminded day-after-day that I was different. I was Italian. When I asked my father why I was called "wap," he would answer, "Don't worry about it. Just know more than they know, have more and they will respect you." "Achieve" became the answer to my dilemma. I set about it with a vengeance. It became an all-consuming compulsion. I had other frustrations, too — I loved to play baseball, but the boys on the street refused to have me on their team. I was a girl and, even though I could swing a mean bat, baseball was out of bounds! My father, to soothe my bruised feelings, would often say, "There's nothing a boy can do that a girl can't do better.

Beat them in school and show them." It soothed my bruised pride and my ego. I set out to do just that.

I was a real tomboy as a child. I hated dolls and broke the china heads off any that were given to me. I could take on and beat up any two boys together — especially if they taunted me with, "You're a dirty dago." That was war. My sister, always prim and proper, would run to the security of home. I would turn and defiantly take on all and sundry — many heads I cracked! Unfortunately for me, the mothers of the boys and girls I had trounced would go to my mother and complain about that little rough and tough Laura. My mother would apologize in her broken English and haul me in; her threats and admonitions in Italian were masterpieces. She ranted and raved and scolded and brought down all the angels and saints to witness her disgrace — to no avail, I kept beating them all. My father heard all the details when he came home from his many trips. He would chuckle, pretend to be cross, then when Mother wasn't looking, he'd wink and say, "Next time, take on three." Support like that was invaluable. It was superb ego building. How often had I heard my father say, "If only you had been a boy, you would have conquered the world." Did I want to conquer the world? Hardly! But I did rebel at the fact that because I was born female, my horizons were limited. Because I was the offspring of immigrants, I would always have the ethnic albatross to carry. Perhaps my aggressiveness stemmed from these two facts, or perhaps from my parents' makeup. They were two very strong characters, both exceedingly ambitious for their children but in different ways, born of the soil, raised in adversity, literally pulling themselves up from poverty to riches. They were determined that their children would have all the benefits that money and education could buy.

The soil of Calabria is in my soul, the blood of peasants runs through my veins. My feminism was nurtured long, long ago, in the rolling hills of Calabria, in a little town called Figline, by a blacksmith's daughter by the name of "Aquilina" and by a father, little schooled but two generations ahead of his time, who made me believe that "there is nothing a man can do, that a woman can't do better." Both of them in different ways influenced me enormously.

To them I owe my *testa-dura-Calabrese!*

## How To Kill Your Father

He breaks a promise on the road to  
Firenze.

You will not speak to him all through  
the drive in the Tuscan hills,  
the rented Alfa Romeo bitches  
but the poplar's got your tongue,  
long and green and aloof.

You abandon the car and walk  
into a Roman afternoon,  
you know how to kill your father,  
he knows how to kill you.

The wind is waving little white  
handkerchiefs wilting in the heat,  
they are for tears and for truce  
but your eyes are still red for quarrel.

Your head is being kneaded  
like dough in the noon  
baker's hand. Your flesh  
sizzles on the skewers  
of your bones. Then evening  
comes like a nervous sweat,  
as anger condenses,  
dew in cool grass.

You are alone on the highway to the  
sun.

Your north american education  
has taught you how to kill a father,  
but you are walking down an Italian  
way, so you will surrender  
and visit him in the hospital  
where you will be accused  
of wishing his death  
in wanting a life  
for yourself.

A scorpion's sting darkening  
your heart buries July in Italy.

### Mary di Michele

...from *Bread and Chocolate*  
(Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1980).