

Nothing was going right. I had no new plans—me, the boy full of plans. I went back to the alley with the dead dog. I threw pieces of a crushed wooden box into a barrel, to make a clean layer on top of whatever was inside. Then I toppled another barrel and rolled it against the first. I climbed from it into the standing barrel. I looked up to say good night to the stars, but I couldn't see any. At home, no stars meant rain was on the way.

I checked to make sure the documents were safe in my pocket. Then I recited every charm of Nonna's I could remember—charms to keep evil at bay.

That was where I spent my first night in America.

PJ Our Way is a fun and interactive Jewish program for kids by kids!

Go to www.pjourway.org to learn more. And spread the word!



Sponsored by the Harold Grinspoon Foundation



YEARLING

A Yearling Book
New York
ISBN: 5.0
12

Cover photograph: detail from *Mullen's Alley, Cherry Hill*. Museum of the City of New York, The Jacob A. Riis Collection.

COVER PRINTED IN THE USA



**THE KING OF
MULBERRY STREET**

DONNA JO NAPOLI

WENDY
L A M B
BOOKS

Published by
Wendy Lamb Books
an imprint of
Random House Children's Books
a division of Random House, Inc.
New York

Copyright © 2005 by Donna Jo Napoli

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the publisher, except where permitted by law.

Wendy Lamb Books is a trademark of Random House, Inc.

Visit us on the Web! www.randomhouse.com/kids
Educators and librarians, for a variety of teaching tools,
visit us at www.randomhouse.com/teachers

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
is available upon request.

ISBN: 0-385-74653-9 (trade) 0-385-90890-3 (lib. bdg.)

Printed in the United States of America
October 2005

BVG 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



CHAPTER ONE

Surprise

I woke to Mamma's singing in the kitchen.

I pulled the sheet off my head. Mamma had tucked it over me to keep out mosquitoes and malaria.

The room was stifling. I got up from my bed of two chairs pushed together and opened the shutters. I straddled the windowsill, one leg dangling out, and savored the fresh air.

In the alley below, mothers hurried along on errands. I hoped someone would see me—the brave boy on the sill—so I could wave. A child from the market walked beneath me with a basket of flat beans on his head. They looked good.

There was a saying that no one starved in farmlands. My city, Napoli, was surrounded by farmlands, yet we'd been hungry for months. People went

to bed trying not to think of food. Maybe Mamma sang to ward off that empty feeling.

I looked back into the room at Uncle Aurelio and Aunt Sara's bed. Baby Daniela's cradle sat on the floor. Aunt Rebecca, a widow, and my little cousins Luigi and Ernesto slept in another big bed.

Uncle Vittorio snored in the cot farthest from the kitchen, our other room. He cleaned streets, a night job, and slept by day.

I was nine, the oldest child in our home. Before I was born, a diphtheria outbreak killed all the other children and one aunt. So our friends celebrated at my birth. My grandmother, Nonna, told me they roasted a goat. They celebrated even though Mamma had no husband and I was illegitimate.

Nonna was the tenth person in our home. In winter we crowded into the kitchen to sleep around the oven, but the rest of the year the kitchen was Nonna's at night. Her cot was beside the credenza with the mirrored doors and lion feet that my grandfather had carved. She said his spirit lived in it, and she slept in the kitchen to be near him.

She also slept there so she could protect our home. She was tiny, but she knew dozens of charms against evil.

Now Baby Daniela made gulping noises. Aunt Sara scooped her from the cradle with one arm and rolled onto her side to nurse.

I got down from the window and walked into the kitchen to find warm bread on the table. Mamma kissed me, her anise-seed breath mixing with the smell of the bread. "Beniamino, *mio tesoro*—my treasure." She fit my

yarmulke on my head and we said prayers. Then she tore a hunk off the loaf for me. I chewed in bliss.

Nonna's slow footsteps came up the stairs and I ran to open the door. She handed me a full basket of clothes.

Mamma got up in surprise. "For Sara?"

"And you," said Nonna with reproach in her voice.

Mamma wiped a drop of coffee from her bottom lip. "I'm going to find an office job," she said in a flat tone. "Soon someone will hire me. Then you'll all be glad."

"*Magari*," said Nonna. It was one of her favorite words. It meant *if only that were true*. "In the meantime . . ." She jerked her chin toward the basket.

Aunt Sara took in clothes for mending. At least, she used to; lately it seemed that people couldn't afford it. She'd be happy for this pile of work.

Mamma motioned to me to set the basket under the table. "How did you collect so much?" she asked Nonna.

"I was early and beat the competition."

"You don't have to go out that early," said Mamma. "You don't have to work so hard at your age."

"*Magari*." Nonna dropped onto a bench with an "oof." "Maybe I'll crochet today."

Nonna made baby clothes to sell at Hanukah and Christmas. It was my job to keep her yarn balls in order, piled just right. I went toward the yarn cabinet.

Mamma caught my arm. "Get ready. We're going out." Her smile surprised me; the night before I'd heard her crying quietly in the dark.

I raced into the corridor, to the water closet we shared with the neighbors on our floor. When I came back, I

heard Nonna say, “Give up this idea of an office job. No doctor or lawyer will hire an unwed mother—and a Jewess, at that—to greet clients and keep records. You should work in a restaurant, cleaning up.”

Mamma said, “You don’t know. People will appreciate how well I read if they’ll only give me a chance.”

They hushed when I came in, as though they thought I didn’t know it was my fault Mamma couldn’t get an office job. But right now that didn’t upset me. Mamma was in a good mood and errands were fun.

I pulled my nightshirt off and Nonna folded it, while Mamma held out my day shirt and pants to step into. As we went through the doorway, Mamma’s fingertips grazed the box mounted on the doorframe that held the *mezuzah*. She boosted me up so I could touch it, too, though I scarcely looked at it. I didn’t need its reminder—for I knew the Most Powerful One was unique and perfect.

Our alley opened onto the Via dei Tribunali, full of merchants and buyers and laborers on their way to work.

Men hooted obscenely and called things to Mamma as we passed. This happened to any woman alone; the prettier she was, the worse it got. Mamma was beautiful, so I was used to this. But I still hated it. Heat went up my chest. Even nine-year-olds knew those words. I glanced up at her, wanting to apologize for not being big enough to make them stop. But she didn’t seem offended; she never did. She neither slowed down nor sped up, her leather-shod feet making quick slaps, my bare ones silent.

Mamma pointed at a small boy in the Piazza Dante. “That’s Tonino’s son,” she said. “Tonino just sent money in a letter from America.”

That spring, Tonino had left for America, where everyone got rich. “Good,” I said. “Will they join him there now?”

“Not yet. He hasn’t made much money.” Mamma’s hand tightened around mine. “But he will. He works in a coal mine.”

We turned left down the wide Via Toledo. Gold numerals on black marble over the doorways told when the fancy shops were founded. Through glass windows I saw carved picture frames and chandeliers and shiny dresses. We passed a store filled with artificial roses, camellias, carnations, dahlias.

Mamma hesitated at the flower shop. I smiled up at her, but she stared at nothing, as though she was about to weep. Then she turned quickly and moved on. “Watch where you walk,” she said.

The streets were dangerous for my bare feet. I looked down.

Mamma went into a cobbler’s. That was odd; we never bought outside our neighborhood. From the doorway I peered into the cool dark. She talked to a man at a workbench cutting leather with giant scissors. He hugged her. She wrested herself free and beckoned to me. The man shook my hand and went into a back room.

Mamma called, “Wrap them, please. They’re a surprise.”

A surprise? I perked up.

“Come look first,” he answered. “It’ll only take a minute.”

I waited while she went into the back.

She came out carrying a parcel wrapped in newsprint, tied with yellow string. The man handed me a licorice.

We continued down Via Toledo. I watched that surprise package. Mamma held it in the hand farther from me, and when I changed to her other side, she shifted the package to her other hand. It became a game, both of us laughing.

Mamma turned right, toward our synagogue. Napoli had only one synagogue and no Jewish neighborhood. Uncle Aurelio said the Jews of Napoli were the world's best-kept secret. The Spanish had kicked them out centuries before. But no matter how many times they were kicked out, they always snuck back.

We were as proud of being Jewish as of being Neapolitani. My cousins were named after famous Jews: Luigi after Luigi Luzzatti, a Venetian and the first Jewish member of the House of Parliament; Ernesto after Ernesto Natan, one of Roma's most important businessmen. Uncle Aurelio lectured us cousins on the possibilities—*le possibilità*. “You can do anything if you put your heads to it and work hard. It doesn't matter what adversity comes; we are Jews—Neapolitani Jews. We never miss a beat.”

At the Piazza dei Martiri I climbed over the fence onto the back of a stone lion. Other kids' mothers didn't let them. But Mamma said that if the city didn't want kids playing on the lions, they shouldn't make statues just the right size for climbing on.

We turned down the alley A Cappella Vecchia and into the courtyard. Napoli's buildings were mostly three or four stories high. Around this courtyard, though, the buildings had five floors. Passing under the thick stone arch, I felt as though we were leaving the ordinary and coming into someplace truly holy.

“I love this courtyard,” I said.

Mamma stopped. “More than you love the synagogue itself?”

I didn’t want to answer. Maybe my preference for the openness of the courtyard meant there was something lacking in my soul.

She squatted, put a pinch of anise seeds in my palm, and looked up into my face as I chewed them. “Stand here and think of why you love this place. Then go spend the day doing exactly what you want.” She straightened up.

“What do you mean?” Usually my family needed me to run errands.

“Visit all your favorite places. And, please, visit Uncle Aurelio and Aunt Rebecca at work.” She put her hands on my cheeks. “I don’t have money for you. But don’t go home to eat at midday, because if you do, Nonna or Aunt Sara might give you a chore. No chores today. See Napoli. See all that you love.”

I nodded in a daze of happiness. I would visit Aunt Rebecca at midday. She was a servant to a rich family and she always snuck me meat from their table.

“Stay well. You know how to be careful. I’ll see you at dinnertime.” She kissed my forehead. “Stay well, *mio tesoro*.”