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MICHELE, THE HUSBAND

By

michael vocino

Rita Podesta's husband was born in San Nicandro Garganico in the province of Foggia, Italy. You always needed to add the "Garganico" because not far away was a similar town, San Nicandro di Bari. Michele Podesta immigrated to the United States with his mother in the mid-1920s. His father, Luigi, came earlier with a promise of work from his brother who had made the trip earlier with his family. He couldn't speak a word of English when he finally went to school and because of the discrimination of teachers, the taunting of the other children and the loneliness and alienation that accompanied both, he grew strongly independent and became a defensive individual always on his guard if for no other reason than self-protection. He desperately wanted to "fit-in" and had to jettison his culture to do so. On his walks to school, he would throw his lunch away. He didn't want the sausage sandwich his mother had made for him. He wanted a peanut butter and jelly sandwich like the other kids. He removed the gold medal of St. Anthony from around his neck early on, but the one thing he could not remove was his olive skin and his beautiful black curly hair. He stood out in a classroom of children of Northern European decent and because of his difference, he suffered the cruelty children are sometimes capable of inflicting without guilt or remorse.

His teachers thought him unteachable and put him in a group of youngsters of the same ilk. The sons and daughters of other immigrants, not all Italian, became his companions. They could not attract any positive attention from an "Anglo" teacher who had no use for any of them. He and the others thought of school as a place of confinement rather than the liberating experience it could have been had he and his friends been treated fairly. Instead, he and his

friends sought out and found attention by acting negatively. They became the troublesome children their prejudiced instructors assumed them to be.

Isola learned all this from family members and friends of Michele Podesta. He also learned how these alienated boys committed petty crimes. They stole from railroad boxcars, local candy stores, bread from the local baker; they were generally seen as the scourge of the neighborhood in which they all lived. They were all on the verge of being put into juvenile detention centers for their life of juvenile crime. The police notified Michele's father of the situation and the father decided his son had to be separated from this "gang." He sent Michele to Connecticut, to New Haven where there was a large population of Italian immigrants, to live with "paesani" who could control him. The one person they thought could control Michele was Donato Grasso. Donato worked in a lumberyard and for a native of the Italian Mezzogiorno his height was astounding at just over six feet. His hands were huge, muscular and thick. They were dignified by many scars, calluses, and other healed contusions that are the mark of a man who works at hard physical labor for his existence. With a heart as large as his hands, Donato took Michele from his parents with a stern look and the promise of a fair life in New Haven as long as Michele behaved. Michele heard Donato immediately, not what he said so much as in how he said it and with the help of Donato's menacing physical appearance, the immigrant boy discovered how to behave, if only just barely. At fifteen his hard street days were over and he knew it.

When Michele returned to the home of his parents, he was approaching 18 years old. World War II had just become a reality with Pearl Harbor and when he passed the mark of 18 he joined the Marines. In three months, even with their need for manpower, the U.S. government decided that Michele Podesta needed to be discharged into the custody of his parents, as a result

of the work of a Marine chaplain, until he matured a “bit more,” as the Marine officer told his aunt who was translating for his parents before Michele was returned.

Michele couldn't stand the confines of the neighborhood without other men his own age to pal around with, and he felt guilty about being on the streets while others were in the service. In a bar one night, he met a friend who had become a Merchant Marine. His stories of life at sea and the places he visited, but mostly the promise to take him out of town and away from the control of his parents brought Michele quickly to the Merchant Marine hall to get his first assignment.

His first assignments were relatively short trips on oil tankers up and down the East Coast of the U.S. Later he went to Texas and Louisiana and finally on a foreign trip to Buenos Aires. He always regaled the family, especially his younger brothers, with tales of these travels, but he said little about the Buenos Aires trip. It was an unusually long trip, but the tales of intrigue and places unknown didn't flow freely from Michele this particular time.

He made one trip, though, that made the local newspapers and made his parents proud. He had been traveling to Central and South America on a number of occasions after the Buenos Aires trip but he never crossed the Atlantic which is what he really ached to do. The danger of German U-boats frequently following American cargo convoys challenged his “street” courage and he wanted to prove himself against the country's common enemy. He wanted to be able to share stories with the other men in the local bar about the exploits of war.

He got his chance in 1942 to cross the Atlantic on a trip to Britain. He and his fellow Merchant sailors were roused out of their bunks on a number of occasions to face possible enemy fire, but in all the crossings they made, and they made many, a ship he was working on never,

surprisingly, came under enemy attack. That changed the following year after a year and a half of constant transporting between Boston and Britain.

It was early August in 1943, when all hell broke loose on a ship he was working during a Boston to Britain run. It was just about 11 p.m., and Michele was sound asleep after a long watch. Horns, bells, whistles, everything seemed to blare at once at the sighting of a torpedo headed directly for the ship. Michele and his bunkmates had but several minutes to get to the deck and not but several minutes more to find themselves lowering lifeboats after a severe direct hit by the German U-boat. The North Atlantic was cold even in August but he was not in the water long when he saw his boat, the one he was lowering, when the second torpedo hit and took the ship to the bottom in short notice. He was alone in the boat for a short time, but was soon joined by two other Merchant seamen. They were lost at sea for three days before another cargo ship found them bouncing in relatively rough seas. They survived the three days on several bottles of Scotch whiskey that someone had hidden in the lifeboat. They were all drunk, in relatively good health and made it back to Boston in couple of days after rescue.

While home after the rescue, Michele met a woman who was walking with her friend on a street near his home. He saw the woman, who turned out to be Rosanna Podesta, fall from the curb and turn her ankle. He pulled over, asked if the women would like a ride, and the rest is history.

The two were married in a Catholic Church the following August of 1944 while Michele was home on another short leave. Those short leaves, however made for trouble quickly between the two married young people and Rosanna gave Michele an ultimatum. He either had to find work on land now that the war was nearly over or she was filing for divorce. Michele

loved Rosanna, even loved her more than he loved his work on the sea. He started looking for a job.

He was in the meatpacking district of Boston looking for work when he walked by the Mid-American Packing Company. One of his former sea buddies standing on the shipping platform saw him and waved him over. After a few words, Michele was told that this corporation was hiring and he should apply immediately. He did, got the job, and spent the remainder of his working life with the same company.

By the time Seth Isola met Michele Podesta, he owned the meatpacking firm. Seth also noted that he liked Podesta very much. He was a man's man. He drank hardy, lived the same way, and seemed to be genuinely honest. In fact, while researching Podesta, Isola came across accounts of how Podesta was the cooperating witness in a case that involved U.S. Department of Agriculture meat inspectors blackmailing meat packers. The government inspectors were in the meat packing plants to insure quality and that the appropriate standards of health and cleanliness were adhered to by the plant operators. The inspectors in Boston soon discovered they could have little favors granted by the owners if they always gave them a clean bill of health. If the owners didn't come across with the favors (money, expensive gifts and the like) the inspectors would shut down a plant for an hour, or two hours or a day until the favors were given.

One day a government inspector came to the office of Podesta and threw down an advertisement of color televisions. The inspector pointed to the most expensive and said to Podesta, "I sure would like one of those. In fact, I'd love to find one in the back of my station wagon by tomorrow." Podesta knew exactly what the inspector meant. He wanted Podesta to buy and deliver the set to him.

Podesta had enough and went directly to the local FBI office and blew the whistle on the inspectors' scams. He took a lot of heat from the new inspectors assigned to the plant, but even they saw the corruption as a scandal that needed to be ended and soon let Podesta off the infamous "hook."

Nothing in the life of Michele Podesta that Isola or Riggins could find would indicate that Podesta would kill his wife. He had no debts, he had no outside women. He loved his wife, in fact, worshipped her. He loved his kids and was crazy about the grandchildren. He was a well-respected businessman and everyone to whom Isola spoke indicated that Podesta was not the perpetrator of the death of Rosanna Podesta.

When a wife is murdered, usually the husband commits the crime or hires someone else to do it. The Podesta case seems to be one of the exceptions. Isola was sure the husband didn't do it. He didn't have the reason or the temperament to kill his wife. Except for a few outstanding inquiries on Podesta that Isola hadn't received yet, the inspector decided to mentally "clear" Podesta—at least for now.

"Time to move on to other suspects," Isola thought to himself as he left Podesta's office that afternoon.