Prologue

This story is about my childhood from birth to age ten when my family immigrated to America. Over sixty years later, as I fly back to my hometown of Jonadi, in Calabria, Italy. I sit back and reminisce on my journey. Memories of my childhood have always bubbled inside me, and now I feel compelled to write them. I was beginning to know and love my home country when I was uprooted and moved, never again to feel those roots or cultivate the memories I thought I would complete in Italy. This change in my life left me longing and wondering what might have been.

When we arrived in America on July 4, 1958, we came to join my father, who had gone before us two years earlier; I decided to discard all memorabilia I had brought with me to make a testament, a commitment to learning American ways. I even started resenting my father singing words from Italian operas, or watching Italian programs on TV. I thought that Italian was useless once we were in America, as it contradicted my strong desire to thoroughly learn the new culture and language.

We all spoke in the Calabrian dialect, but amongst us children, we switched to English, and not with Mom and Dad. I often wondered if my parents could have become more Americanized if my siblings and I had spoken English to them and not just thought of them as settled in their ways.

Writing this book has allowed me to search inside for answers to questions about where my people originated, not simply where I came from. I had profound, soul-searching questions about things I considered to be embarrassments I tucked inside myself while growing up. I had inhibitions I wanted to lose every time I felt the shyness press on my soul. I had the type of hang-ups that suddenly strangled me when it was time to give an oral book report in front of the class. During such a moment, I would become conflicted because I could not decide if the people looking at me were with me or against me, and the doubt forced an actual internal conflict. The battle was like a racquetball bouncing back and forth. You could hear it in my voice as I tried to speak. My palms began to sweat, and my heart raced, I wanted to hide, but I was frozen in plain sight. In fear, I bowed my head in shame and walked away in despair. It had been so different in Italy, my natural turf, where a desire to succeed could, despite that fear of strangers, help me avoid such an awkward moment. In America, social situations became too complicated, and this tormented me.

We settled in Long Island, New York, and, to my surprise, we did not live in an Italian community. I liked it because it enabled me to mix with the American kids and learn from them at a better pace. In Italy, I craved an education. I loved the smell of new books and diving inside them to read and study new things. There, compulsory education was only for fifth grade, but I always wanted to keep learning. I was

thrilled to discover that now, in America, there was a shining new hope. I could get a complete education. However, my father insisted on the Italian tradition for graduation. I rebelled against his plan to drop out of school at sixteen.

At thirteen years old, I found an ad in a comic book and enrolled in an animation art correspondence course at Continental Schools, Inc. in Los Angeles, California. I made the monthly payments of seven dollars by doing odd jobs. In June 1965, I received my diploma.

Because two of my sisters dropped out of school at sixteen, I graduated high school. Scholarships paid for my first year of film school at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. I exhausted my savings for the second year and received a Fellowship from the school for the third and final year. My student films garnered awards and recognition, which rewarded me immediately with finding a job in the film animation industry.

My college success precluded me from working in construction like my father had done. Still, my accomplishments did not stop him from wishing I had dropped out of school and fulfilled his hope of forming a landscaping company that would have enabled him to leave his construction job. He didn’t know that I had hoped to make it big so he would not have to work anymore.