

# The Sin of Saying No:

1947

by Richie Swanson

I remember it was a Saturday, and Papa's fan was in the window in the apartment in Gravesend. Mama had put a loaf of bread and pan of hot tomatoes and zucchini on our table, and the steam from the casserole was floating across the apartment in a hot cloud.

Pepe scrubbed the grease from his nails and hands in the bathroom, and he came out and stood behind the table and let the steam fill his nostrils.

Mama did not like it, but Pepe wore one of the old tee shirts that had straps instead of sleeves and showed off the bare skin of his shoulders. The knit was very thin, and he took a breath, and we watched his chest swell, and then he sat down, his hair all shiny with tonic. He bowed his head while Papa said grace, and then he lifted his face and spoke in a voice as low as the prayer.

"The *Angelina* is in port."

Papa said nothing, and Mama stayed quiet too, because *The Angelina* was from Italy, and the last time it had been in Brooklyn, a letter had come from Aunt Rose and had said her son had disappeared in France.

"Maybe Guido is free now," I said. "Maybe he got to some village that hid him and sent him back to Florence."

Papa grunted, and the casserole and bread went around the table, and no one said anything else. No one even looked up from their plates, and I

got mad at myself, feeling afraid I had broken a mood that everyone was keeping for Guido.

But finally Pepe glanced at me, and I remembered the thing I did for him each night at dinner. I got up and went into the front room and brought him the mail from the afternoon. Pepe sorted through letters and stared at them as if they were pieces of machinery that were put together in a way that made no sense to him.

"Tommy's number is higher than mine, and he got his notice yesterday!" said Pepe. "Even Dominick got his this week!"

Pepe threw down his letters, and I felt sure he would not let up because Dominick was a runt with a crooked nose who carried wrenches between mechanics at Pepe and Papa's shop. I did not think Dominick could count past ten, and I knew that even when someone let him crawl beneath a truck, he could not spread his arms out far enough to find the right bolts, and he always yelled for Pepe to help.

Pepe put a forkful of zucchini and tomato in his mouth and frowned as he ate the food. Then he picked up a piece of bread, and I loved what he did. He put a dab of butter on the bread and stared hard at it and then smoothed the dab out with a knife. He smoothed the dab fast at first, then slow, and then his face got soft the way it would when he believed he was not saying no to himself. He went back and forth with the knife with one grand stroke after another, like he was painting, and suddenly he put his bread down and smiled at me and at Mama and at Papa too.

"I am going to get my mail tonight," he said.

"Estella got you your mail right there," said Mama. "I am going to get Monday's mail," said Pepe. Papa snorted. He had been squeezing a piece of bread and pushing it across his plate, and now he pulled the bread apart and watched the tomato juice drip from its broken crust. Papa mumbled and shook his head no to himself.

"In a hundred years maybe," he said. "With a bribe."

"I bet you three dollars," said Pepe.

"Five?" said Papa. "Yes, five," said Pepe. "No more," said Mama.

"Five is good," said Papa. "It will make me ten."

Pepe laughed and then ate fast and put a five-dollar bill beside the radio in the front room. Papa put another five dollars there, and then Pepe and I walked down the stairs and out of our building. Pepe insisted paying the two nickels, and we got on the Culver Line and took the subway toward downtown Brooklyn.

"Dominick!" said Pepe. "He'll be in the army in September! And Tommy will go by October! And I'll be here, greasing clutches!"

He sat with his hands pressed hard against his knees, and halfway to Fulton Street, at Ditmas Street, a girl and her mother got on our car and moved into the seats across from us. Pepe relaxed his arms right away, and his eyes lit up. He nodded at the girl as if he had known her all his life, and I felt embarrassed. He smiled constantly at her, and I wished he would stop.

The girl was blonde and had a plain nose and plain lips. Her skin was so pale I thought she was sick, and her eyes glowed with a sheen like the weak light of a daytime moon. Passengers came onto the car and got off, and the girl looked straight at them but seemed to see past them. Pepe stared at her, and she blushed and looked down at her lap, and then I saw that her feet were not crossed at her ankles. Her feet were flat on the floor, and she had no ring on her fingers, no diamond or anything else.

The train stopped at Fulton Street, but Pepe did not get up.

"We go the Brighton Line to Broadway," I said.

"I'm waiting right here," he said.

We rode a few more stops, and the girl and her mother got up. I said no, but the girl gave Pepe a long look, and we followed her onto a train to Queens and then off the train and onto a sidewalk.

The girl walked slow on the back of her heels like she was an old woman pacing herself up a hill. Her mother held onto her arm and talked to her with her mouth close to her ear, and it was a hot evening, and Pepe's tee shirt was soaked, and his arms and his thick, black hairs were shining with sweat. He took a deep, quiet breath and slowed down his step, so we did not get too close to the girl and her mother.

"You'll lose your bet," I said.

"I want to ask her to dinner to De Lucia's," said Pepe.

"It's not her," I said. "It's Tommy and Dominick."

"Guido didn't get away to any village," said Pepe, "and no one found him."

We walked on, the girl's mother never looked back. She held onto the girl's arm and kept talking, and finally they stopped under a tree at the end of a street. The girl leaned heavily against the tree, and I saw a parking lot and a tall, ugly, white building, the Queens Community Hospital, and I slowed my step. But before I knew it, Pepe was under the tree too, a few feet from both women, holding out his hand.

"I am Pepe Giovanni," he said. "I live on Ruckford Avenue in Gravesend."

The mother had a thick face with square bones, and she eyed Pepe carefully and then gave her daughter a handkerchief, so she could wipe the perspiration from her face.

The girl pressed the hankie against her cheek and smiled a weak smile at Pepe, and I knew my brother, he would not see any sickness in that moony look he got. He saw the shine in the girl's eyes and believed it was a twinkling for him.

"I am sorry my sister and me followed you," he said, putting his hands in his pockets. "But you looked like something good was in you. You looked so pretty, and I had to tell you."

The girl bowed her head like a dove, and the mother looked Pepe up and down and glanced harshly at the hospital.

"Thank you very much," she said. "But we have to go in."

She turned and led her daughter across the street and through all the coupes and sedans in the parking lot and into the doors of the white building.

Pepe watched from the trees, and his hands turned to fists inside the pockets of his pants.

"I'll pay the nickels to go downtown," I said.

"I want to buy a rose at Fulton Street," said Pepe. "I will come back and wait until they come out of the hospital."

"People get funny when they get followed," I said. "They begin to think they did something wrong."

"Not everyone," said Pepe, and then he and I went back to the subway and rode a train downtown.

In the tunnels his eyes turned dark, and he glared at the walls like they were a tick in an engine that went on for a long time after it was supposed to stop. But when we got to the Brooklyn post office, we went around back to a loading dock, and I began to feel less sad for Pepe. The way he started to work his business I began to believe that he could get the notice he was anxious for, and then he could go to stop Mussolini, to stop Hitler, and I could pray for him, and he would come home alive.

Men were throwing bags of mail out of trucks, so the doors behind the loading dock were wide open. Pepe walked up onto the dock and right into a big room with a polished, wood floor. A few men were sorting mail, and there were bags inside wooden carts with stenciled letters, saying Flatbush and Flatlands and Gravesend and all the other old places in Brooklyn.

Pepe went up to a blond man standing by the bags, and the man looked up sharply from a bundle of letters and scowled.

"We're closed," he said.

"We're sorry," said Pepe, and he gave the blond man a soft look but pushed his voice past him to an Italian man working next to him, dropping letters into the bags too.

"I'm Pepe Giovanni," he said, "and this is my sister, Estella. We live on Ruckford Avenue in Gravesend. We have a second cousin from Florence, Guido, and he is missing in France. I saw *The Angelina* today, and Estella, she thought maybe the boat had brought some news for us."

"This is domestic mail," said the blond man.

"Then you can help," said Pepe. "My induction notice is coming, and I am afraid I'll get it Monday, and that a letter about Guido will be with it. If my mother reads that Guido is still gone and then reads that I am going into the army the same day, it will be a terrible sign for her."

"I got a super, and he'd string me up," said the blond man.

"But my mama will take her worry to Mister Lana at Lana's Bakery," said Pepe, looking straight at the blond man, still pushing his voice past him. "Down on Ocean Street in Gravesend. She'll worry him while he is trying to sell bread to customers."

"I don't know Lana's Bakery," said the blond man.

"She'll take her worry to Anzio's Shoe Shop," said Pepe. "And to Father Dascenzo at Saint Lucia's and to Lazerri's Meats and Rignaldo's Smokes and Domenico's Fruits."

"Someone will let the word slip, and the boss will hang me," said the blond man.

"All right, I see," said Pepe, and he turned to walk toward the loading dock, and finally the Italian stopped dropping letters into the bags.

"Look, I can show you," he said. "Both of you. Come on."

He led us past the carts of mail to the other side of the big room and pointed down a dark hall where there was a door and a transom shining with a yellow light and a guard sitting in a chair outside the door, wearing a pistol on his belt.

"I don't know about your notice, but any mail from *The Angelina* is in that room," said the Italian. "They found a letter addressed to a Nazi this morning, a spy who has been hiding in a hotel in Coney Island all year."

Pepe started to wince and then stopped. He thanked the Italian, and then we went outside and sat down on the steps of the loading dock. Night had almost come, and the mail trucks had been emptied, and the big doors of the dock had been closed behind us. The alley past the dock was nearly dark, and the building on the other side was black.

Pepe hung his head, rubbing his neck and muttering curses, but my mind was stuck on the closed room in the post office. I imagined men with guns opening a letter that said Guido had been killed and then saw the letter tossed down onto a giant heap of mail on the floor.

I wanted to cry but did not. I stared at the dark ground below the steps, and then there was a movement across the alley—a man took one, slow step out of the shadow of the black building and then came to a stop.

The man had a slender face like Pepe, and he wore a long, soldier's coat and the kind of smooth, round helmet that men from Mussolini's army wore in Europe. His face was vague in the dark, and I did not see the shape of his nose, but the soldier opened his mouth, and I made out a dim circle in the center of his throat.

The soldier closed his mouth and opened his lips wide again, and the dim circle stayed whole, and I did not hear any sound. My mind was not old enough yet, not smart enough. My mind told me that the man was not a ghost, he was just imagination, and even though the hole in the throat looked as clean as a hole in a whistle, maybe it was not from a speeding bullet.

The soldier closed and opened his mouth again, and my mind told me all I had to do was call to him. If only I thought of the right name, Antonio or Franco or Luigi or Guiseppi, and only if I yelled it, the hole in the soldier's throat would be sealed, and the man would have a voice box again, and he would speak.

I had a name on my lips, and I shuffled close to Pepe, and then the soldier turned dark against the black building.

Pepe had stopped rubbing his neck and was gawking at the top of the black building, smiling a sudden, dreamy smile. The dots of his eyes glowed with the last bit of the twilight, and I knew he had seen none of the soldier. I knew the foolishness that was coming, and I had to hold my hand still, so I would not swat Pepe hard on the back of his neck.

"They're finished at the hospital," he said. "I can get a flower and go back to Ditmas Street."

"That girl is pregnant," I said, and Pepe's face straightened up with shock. His face wrinkled up in pain, and I wanted to cry for him, but he was my brother, and I had to talk with him.

"Did you see how heavy she was on her feet?" I said. "How she sweat? How her skin was pale?"

"The heat makes people look pale and sweaty," said Pepe. "It made her skin look nice."

"The girl is well past two months," I said. "It is a thing men don't see." She was beautiful, not pregnant!"

"Go to Ditmas Street yourself! Ask her!"

I pushed Pepe's shoulder with my hand, and then there was a stirring across the alley again, and now my tears would not stay back. I wanted to

say that there were a lot of things that men did not see, but Pepe groaned a harsh groan and hurried away from me, going down the steps and out the alley and onto a sidewalk.

I followed him and opened my mouth to call him, and my throat felt empty. Pepe stopped at a corner, and I came up behind him, sobbing, and he glared at me. I reached up, and he let me touch his temple with my fingertips, and then I thought I would speak, but I said nothing again.

Pepe spun away and walked another block and stopped at the top of a subway entrance and waited again. He took my purse from me and found a handkerchief and put the hankie in my hands, and then he slid his eyes sideways like he had not meant to be stubborn.

But he went down the subway steps glowering and on the train stared his dark stare at the walls rushing by. At Ditmas Street he held his head down and looked in a sullen way at his shoes, and the next day he was shining them, getting ready for Mass, and I told him I was sorry. He waved his rag at me as if the night before had meant nothing, and he never mentioned the girl and her mother again. I never told him about the soldier in the alley either, and Father Dascenzo told me it was wrong to make up sins for myself, but still I wish I had not said no to myself that Saturday at the post office.

I wish I had grabbed the straps of Pepe's tee shirt and had yanked at them instead of pushing Pepe's shoulder. I wish I had called out a name and had made Pepe see the soldier in the alley.

But I did not, and that Monday the letter came and said Guido was dead, and that Tuesday the other notice came, and a year more and it was Pepe and Tommy and Dominick too, and that was just the way. We accepted it, and we had our prayers and our faith. We had our strength, and we always kept it ready, and it was always inside me, beating as quiet as an empty nave.

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