



Dirt Roads

By: Isabella Vitiello

As my childhood shifted from concrete sidewalks to dirt roads, expectations changed. The sidewalks I once played hopscotch on turned in to dirt roads with stray dogs. Two different places in such a short time. I was seven when my world shifted. We packed our bags and went to the place with the dirt roads, a place I had only been to for vacations. No more hopscotch, no more Sunday morning soccer games that my parents would come and cheer me on at.

I did not know what life would be like for me here on out. No child wonders these things. Where I went, girls did not play soccer on Sunday mornings, they crouched on their knees all

morning and scrubbed the grout in between the tiles with a toothbrush. No parents cheering from the sidelines. No time to be a little kid anymore. No more hopscotch and jump rope on the concrete sidewalk. These are crucial learning years for girls. Time spent being a child became time spent learning how to be a good wife for someone in the future.

One afternoon after lunch, I am told to clear the table and wash the dishes. I take the dishes to the tub that I will wash them in. A hose and a bucket as a sink was what I had here. My elder walks by and says "You missed a spot. Don't you want to learn these chores so you can make a good wife someday?" I shrug my shoulders and keep scrubbing. No child from where I came from was thinking of being a good wife someday.

My makeshift sink was on the top of a mountain. The only thing above me was the blue, cloudless sky. As I washed the dishes, I gazed to the bottom as people walked the dirt road. My eyes found the local soccer field. On that field little boys ran and kicked the soccer ball up and down the field. I wanted nothing more than to crawl out of my skin, to run up and down that field like I did in the past. Not a girl in sight. We were all busy washing dishes in our makeshift sinks.

There is no such thing as childhood at the place with the dirt roads. After many trips around the sun, I no longer think about Sunday morning soccer games and hopscotch. My thoughts are consumed by what to cook, what to iron and what needs to be cleaned. Time passes some more. I make a good wife. My husband is a fisherman. He travels for months on and as I am left here to raise the children. I cook, I clean, I iron and I take care of the children. Everything my elders taught me stuck with me.

There comes a time when the place with the dirt road robs you of your childhood. Then there comes a time where you have to rob your child of their childhood. My only daughter comes

to me one afternoon, she looks at me with those innocent eyes all children have. She says "Mama, can I go play at the soccer field?" I stop, just for a moment. I'm drifting back in time. Memories flashing before me. I saw myself running around the field, playing hopscotch on the concrete sidewalk. I think to myself, how do I rob my child of what was robbed from me? Do I let her live her childhood or do I begin to mold her into a good wife for someone in the future. She tugs my housedress, "well..." she says. I look down into those innocent eyes, "sure, go play". I crouch down to her at eye level and put my dry, tired hands on her shoulders and say "enjoy your childhood, you only get one".

I make my way to the makeshift sink with the dirty dishes from breakfast. My eyes follow the dirt road that leads to the soccer field. I watch in the distance as she skips all the way down. She runs up and down the field, free of judgment, free to skip, run and play. She has not a care in the world, like I did, when I lived at the place with the concrete sidewalks.

Reflection

First off, I would like to thank Professor K and all my classmates who always gave me great feedback. This story is written about me and what my life would/could have been like if my parents would have chosen to remain in Italy when we moved there for a short period of time when I was younger. I come from a small island where the presence of gender roles is still very evident today. Not many women continue their education and their main goal is to learn these duties for their future husband. This story was also inspired by the many women I know there that were once from New York and moved back to the island when they were children or teenagers. The vast differences between what they could have accomplished in America compared to what they have accomplished there are immeasurable. Throughout my life, I feel as though I am being tugged by my arms in two different directions. One direction is New York and the limitless possibilities it has to offer me. The other direction is the life of no worries or stress that I would have in Italy. While I wouldn't have to deal with pressures from work, I would have to deal with the pressures of complying to gender roles, and constantly having people judge and know your business because the island that I am from is so small. Luckily, my family came here for a better life which they created for themselves and generations that followed. Their courage to look for a better life is embedded in me and is a part of who I am. My family and their struggle is what inspired me to write this story. My grandmother's mother died when she was young and had to move to an orphanage, her 3 brothers lived on the streets. They later all got married and decided to move to America. My mother was born in Italy as well as my father. Most of my family still lives in Italy. Regardless of the traditional roles this island has and how it is stuck in the past it is a beautiful place. I feel extremely fortunate that I can call this place my second home. Attached are some pictures of my family and this beautiful island.









The soccer field I reference in my story. My father is at the bottom right of this photo.



My mother and I, when we lived in Italy. Circa 96-97



A photo I took from where I wash dishes at my home. October 2019



My Great-Grandmother and I.



My grandmother in the orphanage. She is in the top row, middle, girl with a bob hair-cut, black hair and her arms crossed. Bottom photo: Her wedding.



