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# SWEET HOPE

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*Prose Series 91*

MARY BUCCI BUSH

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*To my grandmother, Pasquina Fratini Galavotti.  
You gave me the stories.*

*My great-grandparents Nazzareno and Maddalena (Spaccarelli)  
Fratini and their four children: Marietta (Aunt Mary),  
Pasquina (Granny), Giuliana (Aunt Julia),  
and Guerino (Uncle Germany).*

*And all the inhabitants of Sunnyside Plantation, Italian and  
African American, whose voices were never heard  
and whose stories were never told.*

## PROLOGUE

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ITALY was a dried-up fig, all leather and seed, hard and bitter on your tongue.

No. Italy is a wall of stone, they told each other, and everywhere you turn you walk into stone, hit your head against a rock, knock yourself out.

Impossible to make a living anymore. You fish to put food on your table, but who buys the fish? If you have wood to build a cart, who has money to buy the cart? The tobacco factory is sending people away. The fishery, practically closed down. And things only getting worse. The children have no life to look forward to if they can't even get a decent meal, a dry roof, a suit of clothes to wear.

But we're not starving, some said. Not like in the south. And even if we're lean, we're not dying from hunger. Not yet.

But what about the Antonellis? Didn't they lose everything, and two of them dead besides?

What about the Gregantis losing their land? Their fishing boat? Sending a child here, another there to live?

They said many things. They had many ways of saying the same thing, but all the ways came back to a single meaning: the children.

It was for the children that they left Italy and came to this place.

## CHAPTER 1

### *Saving Tobe*

*October 1901*

THE wagon rattled along the rutted dirt road, churning clouds of yellow dust behind it. Serafin drove, with his friend Lazzaro beside him and their families hunched in back amidst rakes and pitchforks and baling wire and jugs of drinking water.

“You’re doing good,” Lazzaro told him. He’d rented the wagon and was letting Serafin get a feel for driving.

They passed a family of Italians close to the road, several adults and a brood of children, their faces gaunt and sallow.

“You kids be careful when you drink the water,” Serafin called to his children. “Amalia, make sure you run the water through the cloth first before you drink it.”

The cloth turned brown when they strained the water.

The two women and the children looked at the jugs of water sloshing next to them, silty-brown, something you would throw out if you were back home — on your tomato plants or chard maybe, or against a tree. Fiorenza’s old mother, La Vecchia, hummed to herself as she reached out to touch the cloud of dust trailing the wagon. Serafin’s youngest daughter Isola watched the cloud and the old lady’s hand and the space between the two that never grew smaller.

“If we had a damn barrel, we could haul water from the lake,” Lazzaro said. “The lake water’s not so bad.”

It was a horseshoe lake, west of the river and a mile from their homes, whose southern tip curved back toward the

river and dwindled into a little bayou not far from the company store and office. There was water everywhere, water you never saw. In the day the air smelled of dust, or the pungent, drying cotton plants and the stink of mule hides and dung. But at night the river and lake and swamps rose into the air, filling it with the smell of the ancient river mud and the swamp bottoms and the lush wet plants that grew tangled at the edge of the lapping lake.

They reached a crossroads, the levee rising ahead of them. On one corner stood a row of managers' houses with a big garden and a barn and fence for the mules and horses. They could hear the clanging of the gin mill near the two tall oak trees, and smell the wood burning for the boiler. Smoke puffed above the trees, mixing with the dust and the floating cotton lint stirred up by wagons on their way to the gin and back. Men shouted to each other above the noise of machines and mules and horses. Dozens of people worked here, the ragged black people and a few Italians, and now and then a pale clerk or ruddy overseer, well-fed and healthy and dressed in unsoiled clothes.

Lazzaro directed Serafin down the road that ran alongside the levee, past the mule yard and pigpen, beyond the hay barn and the lumber mill that was now silent. They passed the building that rumor said would be turned into a church for them — if the company ever sent for the Italian priest they had promised. So far the Italians had to settle for the *bianco americano* who came to say Sunday Mass from the village across the lake — that is, when he wasn't late or didn't forget altogether.

A dozen dairy and beef cows mingled in the tall lush grass along the levee. Some stood on the dirt road atop the levee while others paused on the banks, chewing with bored expressions or nuzzling through the grass that grew up to

their shoulders. All livestock for the company; not for tenants or sharecroppers.

Serafin steered them into a field of mowed grass between the road and levee where the Halls and another black family were raking hay into bundles.

The Pascala children stared at the Americans: two of the Hall children and a brood of scrawny *neri* children who looked like weather-beaten fence posts, the same as their parents. Fancy Hall wore a faded sack dress that hung below her knees. Her head was tied up in a rag that might have been blue at one time. They all wore wide brimmed hats against the sun.

Step Hall motioned for the Italians to get down, and the others cast sideways glances, looking them over without much interest. He hoped he wasn't making a mistake giving them work. The two men were all right — and the young one's wife and her old mother. They'd arrived early summer, too late to make a crop, but they worked hard.

Serafin's wife was another matter. She'd arrived on her own with the three children just a week before, and when Step dropped them off at their cabin, she screamed at Step to come back and get her, and at her husband to take her home. At least he figured that's what she was saying. The next day she dressed herself and the kids in their Sunday clothes and took them out in the middle of a dusty cotton field like that, refusing to pick, cursing her husband, humiliating him. And the man stood there with dog eyes, taking it. The children stupefied and frightened. The oldest girl, pretty and dressed in a flower-brimmed hat and spit-shined shoes, fell to the ground and wet herself when Horton and his sidekick rode by shooting their rifles at ducks. He'd seen a lot of things, but he'd never seen anything like the Pascala family. At least they'd finally put away their Sunday clothes.

him, which was fine with Step. He tried to convince himself, once again, that Calvin was big enough to take care of himself.

“Except ’round girls,” Fancy would say. “You see the way that Italian girl looked him over? An’ him turnin it right back on her.”

“Ain’t nothin,” he’d told Fancy. Just the same, he’d had a few words with Calvin: “Be careful who you lookin in the eye.”

“Aw, Pa, why you an’ Ma always thinkin somethin bad?” the boy had answered. “They just the same as we is.”

The boy had half a point. The Italians weren’t white, but they weren’t black either. He wasn’t sure what they were.

He pulled the mule up into the Modena lots. The land was lumpy, from where tree stumps had recently been pulled. There were already half a dozen farms in the section. The land was good, rich. The stand of trees meant the farmers would not have to go far for firewood, or to get out of the heat of the sun in the summer. He’d have to build a couple of storehouses here for the new tenants, for holding their cotton, and he wondered if the company was going to raise the Modena rents to cover the cost of a few planks of wood. He started planning his crew: Calvin and JoeJack, Serafin, and maybe his friend Lazzaro. The boy down on farm 38 whose father had just died, he’d give that boy some work.

He turned the mule back toward his own farm. If Sweet Hope were his, he’d do things differently. It would be a better plantation, more productive. Get rid of Horton, and the others like him, that would be one of the first things. Put some of the Italians in charge, but not the traitors like Rosconi. Dig more wells, put in filters. Get rid of the interest charges, and let them gin and sell their cotton where they wanted. Treat them fair, like human beings.

Yes, he knew all about it. But the plantation was not his.

## CHAPTER 4

### *Ceravone’s Visit*

*November 1901*

CERAVONE was the oldest Italian farmer on Sweet Hope and a member of the first colony, the one that had disbanded before Harlan Gates bought the property. He was happy to go to Lazzaro and Fiorenza’s house to talk. People usually didn’t invite him. Who would think to invite an old man when the company had eyes and ears that seemed to float in the very air they breathed?

Lazzaro had come right out and asked him. To hell with what people said, to hell with rumors. He wanted to get to the bottom of things. He’d been assigned as a day laborer on Ceravone’s farm, since he’d come too late to make his own crop. Most of the Italians came too late to start a crop. That was another thing they either learned or figured out on their own: the company deliberately brought them in too late. That way they could charge rent for the houses and land, charge outrageous prices for food and staples over the fall and winter and all the next year until the Italians made a crop. They would already be in debt before half a year was out. There’d be no way they could pay off their contract. They’d be stuck at Sweet Hope indefinitely in a never-ending cycle of debt. And with no letters allowed out, and travel off the plantation forbidden for Italians, it seemed they were doomed.

A truce, Serafin had begged of Amalia that first night. He had tried to get word out to her, to stop her from coming

with the children, to no avail. She was enraged when she realized that the shack she'd been taken to with the children after their long journey to America was their new home.

She had made him sleep on the floor. The children tried to make room for him in their bed across the room, but it was too cramped. He vowed to build another bed, so that the girls would not have to sleep with Osvaldo — and so that he would have a place to sleep as well if she did not relent. Finally after several nights of hard boards and splinters, he ventured in beside her like a thief in the night. She let him stay. They had signed a contract to come to Sweet Hope, after all.

Now, before going to Lazzaro's house, they sat on their floor around a board of polenta, sharing the three spoons from which they ate. Serafin's bare feet stuck out from the bottom of his pant legs. His feet were finally starting to feel normal again. His shoes and socks were propped on logs in front of the stove. Amalia had insisted on drying them for him, soaked as they were from working in the swamp all day. He could smell the stinking mud even though he'd washed himself outside, and she had taken the shoes and socks out to rinse as well.

Osvaldo poked the spoon in, then trailed a lump of polenta across the board toward himself. Angelina took the spoon from his hand. "We'll eat yours if you're not hungry. Right, mama?"

The boy grabbed the spoon back. "After we talk to the man tonight," he said, "can we go live in the nice village?"

"We're living in it, *scemo*," Isola berated him.

When his lower lip quivered, Isola laughed, and Amalia gave her a warning squint.

"Someday," Serafin told them, "we'll live in a beautiful village." He tousled Osvaldo's hair. "Don't you worry about that."

From where they sat they could see through the open doorway into the long, withered fields. The gin mill clanged, and it was like hammers banging against their chests, so that at times they found themselves breathing to the rhythm of the gin mill without even thinking of it.

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ONCE it was dark, they gathered at Lazzaro's house, making sure the windows were covered in case one of the company managers came snooping around. The men had been working for day wages anywhere they could on the plantation. The last couple days they'd been sent to the swamps to cut firewood for the gin mill and to clear stumps. Even the women and children worked, cutting the smaller branches or carrying wood. And the damn company made them rent the tools they used and charged them interest on top of it.

The children sat on the floor while the adults, even Fiorenza's old mother La Vecchia, gathered around the table. Fiorenza had pinned up the old lady's gray hair to keep it from falling in her face. She wore a baggy knitted sweater and kept winding a stray length of yarn from one of the sleeves around a knitting needle.

Lazzaro owned two chairs and a stool, and had brought in a stump of log that he stood on end, and Serafin had carried the chair from their house. Lazzaro sat on the big spaghetti pot that he had turned upside down. His shoulders barely reached the tabletop, and he leaned forward, arms folded on the table.

Serafin could feel his damp shoes through the dry socks he'd put on, and he smelled the swamp mud wafting up now and then. He wasn't sure if it was coming from him or from Lazzaro. At least they were done with the swamps for a while. Tomorrow they'd be picking cotton again with Step Hall,

## AFTERWORD

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IN 1907, a Federal investigation brought charges of peonage and violations of alien labor laws against the owners of the Arkansas plantation that inspired *Sweet Hope*. Although acquitted, the owners agreed to make some significant changes that resulted in a number of Italians paying their debts and leaving. By 1912, flood damage, a boll weevil infestation, and new restrictions on the recruitment of Italians by the company's Italian labor agents further reduced the number of immigrant farmers. Between 1910 and 1920, African Americans once again became the plantation's main source of labor, with only a handful of Italians remaining. The plantation changed hands several times, and fire destroyed a number of buildings, including the cotton gin and company store. In 1927, the Great Flood wiped out almost all remaining traces of the once-thriving "Italian Colony Experiment."

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## PUBLICATIONS

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THE following chapters from the novel *Sweet Hope* have been published in slightly different versions:

“Drowning” in the anthology *From the Margin: Writings in Italian Americana*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, eds. Tamburri, Gardaphè, Giordano. Purdue University Press, 2000.

Drowning in the anthology *Growing Up Ethnic in America*, eds. M. Mazziotti Gillan, J. Gillan. Penguin, 1999.

*Drowning*. Chapbook. Parentheses Writing Series, 1995.

“Planting” in the anthology *The Voices We Carry: Recent Italian American Women's Fiction*, ed. Mary Jo Bona. Guernica Editions, 1994 & 2000.

“Mule” in *VIA (Voices in Italian Americana)*. 1997.

“Love” in anthology *HERS 2: Brilliant New Fiction by Lesbian Writers*, eds. Terry Wolverton & Robert Drake. Faber & Faber, 1997.

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Mary Bucci Bush received her M.A. and D.A. from the graduate program in creative writing at Syracuse University, where she worked with George P. Elliott and Raymond Carver. Her short story collection *A Place of Light* was published by Guernica in 2006. She lives in Pasadena, California.