

Mum and Subito Dopo

© 2006 Gail Grenier Sweet

When I was growing up, we had this elephant of a manual typewriter. My mother could type a gajillion words a minute. I swear I saw her do this a couple of times: she plunked down the typewriter with a thud, onto the kitchen table. Then she sat and started typing the funniest story, her fingers a blur, the keys going *thunk, thunk*. The words kept pouring out of her head, down her arms, into her fingers, onto the keys and the page. Mum laughed as she wrote them, and we laughed when we read them.

Honest to God, I think she just liked to type. Her brother, my Uncle Werner, had the same passion for typing. Uncle Werner lived in a veterans' mental hospital in Tomah, Wisconsin. Sometimes when he'd come visit us, he'd sit at the kitchen table with that hulking typewriter in front of him, lay out the morning newspaper on the top of the table, and start typing as if he were taking dictation off the news pages, word for word, fast.

Mum was like that, a sort of unchained typer. I'm positive she thought of herself as "just typing," not writing. She was a daughter, wife, mother of five, cook, cleaner, seamstress, volunteer, but not a writer....

.... Except rather than typing the newspaper or the phone book, she typed these incredible impromptu stories. The stories were fiction -- silly and full of puns. They were about people with funny names, doing outrageous things. I wish I had one copy of one story. I wish I could remember one thing she wrote. All I know is the stories were wildly imaginative, really funny, and short.

I had forgotten about Mum's stories until today when I sat down and looked at a little piece of paper on my desk. The piece of paper is something I dug out of my purse. It got into my purse because I had a goofy inspiration in the car the other day.

My husband, Mike, was driving. I must have been daydreaming and remembering Italian words from 35 years ago when I was a student in Italy.

"Mike," I said, "I have a funny idea for story character names. They're all Italian words."

He's used to outbursts like this. As usual, he said, "There's a notebook in the glove compartment." I quick grabbed it wrote down the names. They are:

Basta Cosi
Subito Dopo
Sempre Diritto
Molti Annifa

Wouldn't those be great names for people in a story set in Little Italy?

The "names" aren't names at all. In Italian they mean:

Enough Already
Soon After
Straight Ahead
Many Years Ago

But they sound like names to me, names no more exotic than Andrea Bocelli or Luciano Pavarotti. And it cracks me up that the names have meanings. When you think of it, lots of names have meanings – like Joe Carpenter or Mary Fisher or Gail Sweet. We're used to those. Why couldn't a name mean "Enough already?"

I'm not a fiction writer. But if I were a fiction writer, I'd try to be like Mum. I'd plunk myself down at the keyboard (thank God not manual typewriter elephant), throwing caution to the treetops. I'd laugh and I'd write a silly story with those four Italian characters, a real noir tale. Everyone would smoke cigarettes and wear hats. Dust motes would dance in light leaking through partially-open blinds. I see Subito Dopo as the main character, a detective longing for the old days....

.... Subito is tired of political correctness and search warrants and proper channels. He grew up reading Micky Spillane and wishes things could be the way they were, or maybe never were. Subito is a loner but dreams of finding Ms. Right (or in Little Italy, Ms. Destra). He keeps looking for love in all the wrong places – sometimes even with his own clients.

Sempre Diritto is Subito's secretary and sometimes sidekick. She's a tough-talking, good-looking woman who would be a perfect mate for Subito except she's a lesbian. You might say Subito and Sempre have a brother-sister relationship. When Subito gets too gloomy, Sempre perks him up with sarcasm. Her sass is the kick in the butt Subito needs. After she adjusts his attitude, they get back to the important business of detective work, or trying to get clients to pay their bills, or both.

Molti Annifa is the mysterious woman who brings a new challenge to Subito's office. Her long-ailing husband has died of Alzheimer's and Molti has inherited a cool mil, but she can't find her husband's last will and testament to prove it. Her stepchildren are challenging her right to inherit anything at all. She knows her husband divided his estate into equal shares of a million to her and to each of his children. She witnessed his signature on the will. But she can't find her copy, and the only other person who had a copy is his lawyer, whose office just burned down, computers, records and all. Where is Molti's copy of the will? How can she prove her right to her share of the estate?

In the process of finding answers to these questions, Molti and Subito explore many colorful places in Little Italy, sort of like the dogs in "Lady and the Tramp." Subito meets Molti's stepchildren and begins to develop a theory about the disappeared

document... but he lacks proof. Sempre joins her boss and his new client from time to time. There is a lot of wine and spaghetti, and some cannoli. Gradually, Molti and Subito realize they're falling in love. Sempre thinks Molti is okay, but she's suspicious of the romance between her employer and his latest client, and fears he'll get his heart broken again.

Just when Subito thinks he's going to break the case, Basta Cosi enters to slow his progress. Basta is an old classmate of Molti's who has read about the contested estate in the newspapers. Basta bumps into Subito and Molti in an Italian grocery store, where they're buying gnocchi. Basta asks for Subito's calling card and visits him later in his office, pumping him full of stories about Molti and how she has always been deceitful and manipulative. She says Molti uses men and discards them. Subito begins to doubt his instincts, his detective work, and worst of all, his own heart.

The truth is that Basta has described herself to Subito. Basta is the deceitful, manipulative user of men. She has been jealous of Molti ever since high school days when Molti was elected homecoming queen.

Eventually, Subito learns the truth about Basta. His heart is on the right track after all. However, his instinct about thieving stepchildren is off-kilter. He finds the missing will and testament – hidden in the piano by Molti's husband as a safeguard against selfish children, before Alzheimer's took over. Everyone gets their cool mil and even the stepchildren are grudgingly content. Subito and Molti marry.

The only bummer is that Subito loses his secretary. Sempre and Basta have taken a fancy to each other; in fact, they have moved in together. Molti and Subito will have nothing to do with Basta. This puts a great strain on the brother-sister relationship that Subito and Sempre had enjoyed.

Sempre has to choose between her job and her love, and she chooses love. She easily finds a new job, and she and Basta become wife and wife when their state legalizes gay marriage. They give up smoking.

Molti and Subito invest the cool mil wisely. Subito can finally retire from the detective job that has never matched his dreams. He and Molti spend the rest of their lives happily eating spaghetti, drinking wine, reading Mickey Spillane, and playing the piano that gave them their bankroll. They give up smoking.

So that's the outline for a story I'll never write, with character names that I love. I can't write the story because it's too damn boring for me to write fiction.

Much more interesting to me is writing about a mother who wrote hilarious stories in mad free-writes and thought of herself as just a typist when really, deep down, she was a writer.

###