

# When I Lived There.

*by* Pia Ehrhardt

## When I Lived There

When I was six, my family and I sailed to Italy on a mammoth ocean liner. Our Italian relatives in New Jersey threw us a going-away party with confetti and gifts, and my grandmother's eleven brothers and sisters came dressed in their good clothes. A dozen cousins I barely knew ran around the lawn, playing tag. Aunt Vita came with her bachelor son, Tommaso, and I avoided her because she asked me questions like "Aren't you excited?" I was not. I didn't want to leave my grandmother. Aunt Vita kept saying we were going to Europe, and I corrected her, said, "We're moving to Italy," but she insisted they were the same. I knew she was wrong. I didn't understand what a continent was until we saw the Rock of Gibraltar from the bow of the ship.

When I was thirteen and we lived in Canada, my sister and I called our mom, Mum, and the boys called our butts, bums. Tennis shoes were runners, and people put "Eh?" at the end of every sentence, which invited agreement, or not, but made conversation feel friendlier and something like salesmanship. I sat on the steps of the bad-min-ton club with my boyfriend Rob, and he asked me questions about girls, their periods, how much blood. I told him what I knew and hoped he would ask about all body parts because I knew he really meant mine.

When I was fifteen and we were moving to Mississippi, my boyfriend in Canada told me I was going to live in the swamp with the alligators. I didn't understand why my father would pick such a hick place. Rob gave me his cricket bat to hang over my bed, and for the first year we wrote each other every day. I promised I'd go back up there to college if he could wait for me. He had his front teeth knocked out in a match and sent me a page spattered with blood. I mailed him fringe cut from the bottom of my jeans, Bonnie Bell

lipstick kisses, my eyelashes. I sprinkled violet talcum powder in his envelope to fall in his lap like snow.

When I was seventeen we moved back to New Jersey because my grandmother had Alzheimer's and couldn't be left alone with her gas stove, had to be reminded to take her medication and bathe. She was my father's mother, but my mom tended to her like a daughter would. I stopped by after school so my mom could go home and make my father dinner, and my grandmother and I sat under a crocheted quilt and watched the Home Shopping Network. We ordered the items that were undeniable: a spaghetti pot with a strainer that snapped on, a skirt that could be twisted into a shirt or a scarf or pants, eucalyptus-scented body lotion that promised to clear your sinuses and stimulate your memory.

When I was twenty-three I moved to New Orleans because I thought following my restaurant-manager lover was obeying the rush of my heart. We married. When he left me to go back to, Rochelle, the love of his life, I walked through the French Quarter and wondered where to go next. I had my choice of anywhere in the world, but for six weeks I couldn't leave that block of Decatur Street. I sat in an alcove and drank café au lait and watched tourists. I bought things from the street vendors - rubber bracelets, painted postcards of shot gun houses and wrought iron fences, and snacked on dark orange satsumas and shelled pecans.

When I was thirty-four and married to my second husband, I picked through fresh green mirlitons at Winn Dixie, also called alligator pears, and I remembered my boyfriend, Rob. I went back to our duplex in River Ridge and found Rob's address on the internet, sent an e mail to him at his law firm and asked about his teeth and, also, did he have any more questions I could answer? He sent a smiling photograph that showed me the caps, and he had his arm around a wife who had her arms around twin girls, but he was glad to hear from me, a lot of time had passed, eh? He wanted to know where I'd settled down.

