

# Socks, Sauce, and the Weirdness of Being 'Different'

By Annalisa Wilson

It was finally here! I had been waiting all summer for this very moment. The first day of school!! I was ready to roll out in the new poncho my mom had knitted for me, especially for this very day. I had on the new outfit my grandmother sent me from Canada. From the Peter Pan lace collar of my frilly blouse down to the white, lace, knit knee socks and fancy kitten-heeled Sunday shoes, I felt beautiful. I can remember thinking that all the girls would look at the way I was dressed and flock around me to shower me with compliments. They would all be fighting over who would be the first to invite me to their birthday parties or after-school play dates (neither of which I was allowed to participate in, but I would be as gorgeous as Gina Lollobrigida when I had to decline gracefully).

Boy, was I wrong!! I couldn't have been more wrong if I were Princess Leia falling in love with Luke. Everybody was talking about me, and they did circle around me, but it was because they all wanted a closer look. I can't remember all the names I was called that day or the jokes at the expense of my Vogue-ness (if that's even a real word), but the one word that really stuck with me and that I can still hear clear as day in my mind when I go back to that first day of school is the word 'different'. It was the first time I heard this word, and it cut through me like a sharp shard of ice.

The recess monitor, who was supposed to make things better and redirect the kids' attention elsewhere, pulled out her spotlight and megaphone and announced to the entire playground that '*we shouldn't make fun of people because they look different or talk differently*'. I looked and talked differently??? Who was this cow standing there with her greasy, stringy hair and slouchy t-shirt that looked like she had pulled it out from the bottom of her dirty clothes pile? And don't even get me started on her shoes!! What the hell were those foamy platforms with the plastic strap going in between her mangled toes? I swear, when I saw those dry, cracked, wrinkly bird claws, I wanted to throw up. I do remember full-on gagging and covering it up with a cough.

As I surveyed the crowd of kids gawking at me, I began to notice that most of the kids on that playground were dressed like this claw-footed cow lady. They all had those ridiculous-looking things on their feet, wearing shorts and t-shirts like they were getting ready to clean the bathroom or sweep the floor. Had my mom missed the memo about a school uniform? In that sea of milk mustaches and blond ponytailed hair styles, there was only one other person who looked as lost and out of place as I did. He was holding this overly stuffed briefcase thing that looked a lot like the one my parents' accountant carried when he came over to the house for the meetings that banished us to the basement with our *Kiss, The Originals*

cassette tape and roller skates. If my brother could fold himself up into an index card and jump into that ridiculous clutch he was carrying, he would. I looked at him with a pleading question in my eyes: was there enough room in there for both of us?

The previous year, when we dropped my big brother off at school, I cried so hard because I wanted to stay; he was crying because he wanted to go back home. I think he would have rather been sent off to war than go to school. If only my mom had let us switch places, I knew he would be more than happy to have me stay in his place so he could go home and watch Starsky and Hutch. He always hated school. His theatrical debut started at pre-school, Mrs. Lemon's class. From the time my mom woke him up, he started complaining about every imaginable sickness he could muster. I believe he suffered every illness, from malaria to decapitation. I never understood why he hated school so much - until that day, standing in the middle of the school playground like the Statue of David, on display for all to see - and that word, that cold, ugly word.

Growing up, my mom never worked outside of the home. Taking care of her family and the home was her career. We had chores and were expected to help with the everyday tasks of keeping the house clean and organized. Nobody would have ever guessed that three children lived in our home. There was no such thing as a playroom with toys littering the floor or shoes left at the door. We each had jobs, and there was no trading with our siblings or waiting until later to complete them. At dinner time, we all participated in setting the table. My brother was in charge of filling the wine bottle so my parents could have their glass of wine with dinner. On Sundays, he filled an extra small pitcher because we were allowed to have a little bit of wine and 7-Up. We ate what my mom cooked. Mamma cooked from scratch every day, and we were told that everything she cooked was our favorite dish. Italian families invented the disclaimer at the bottom of menus that states 'No Substitutions.' I never saw or ate a chicken nugget or frozen pizza, at least until the age of twelve. Corn dogs and macaroni and cheese were considered highly toxic. If you were feeling particularly dare-devilish, you could try asking for a hot dog with ketchup!! We knew better not to ask for fear of not living to tell of the consequences, besides the fact that I never saw a ketchup bottle in our refrigerator until my parents became grandparents. We washed and dressed for dinner every night. Sitting at the dinner table with the same clothes you had been wearing all day while you were outside cleaning the sidewalks or digging a tunnel to China in was considered grounds for capital punishment. In turn, wearing your dinner clothes to go outside to play after dinner granted you a trip to the electric chair for sure. What was so strange about any of this? Didn't everybody have these same rules?

Not until we finally learned how to speak English fluently did we understand what was being said about our family's lifestyle. That's when we discovered that we were different and that nobody in our neighborhood lived like us. Nobody made their own tomato sauce, sausage, or cured their own cheese. Not every house had a cantina in the basement where vats of homemade wine and vinegar were stored or where dried sausage and salami dangled from broom handles suspended from the ceiling. During the summer months, we had two curfews; the first was at 5.30 p.m. for dinner, and the second was at sundown with no exception. This lasted until Junior High, and then the curfews started to relax a little so that we could enjoy playing Ghosts in the Graveyard with the other neighborhood kids. It also helped that the evening's festivities began on our driveway with a 4-square tournament because we had the biggest driveway on the block. What good self-respecting Italian family didn't have an oversized concrete driveway the width of the street? But not even that made us normal or made us fit in. Growing up in our neighborhood was like being the only piece of Rye in a loaf of Wonder White Bread.

When I scroll through the posts on my Facebook feed and swipe through the pictures of all those seemingly perfect social media lives, I am struck by how many people are now discovering culture. Nowadays, who doesn't have a picture of their family standing in front of an Eataly sign or in the deli section amongst the forest of dangling sausages and sopressata? Or better yet, how many of you claim to be addicted to Nutella? Asking, '*Where have you been all my life?*' Well, if that jar of Nutella could speak, it would say, '*Right here, dummy! I've been here the whole time.*' The same kids that laughed and pointed at our chocolate bread sandwiches or meatball and pasta lunches now cannot seem to live without their gabbagol sandwich for lunch or a glass of boxed wine with dinner; which by the way, I have no idea what it is they are eating or drinking since there is no such food with that name in Italian cuisine. You sure as hell would never find any self-respecting liquid considering itself to be wine stored in a cardboard vessel. These are not representative of Italian culture. They are what we in the 'industry' call Jersey wannabe Italians. Nothing you see on the Housewives or Jersey Shore or whatever other trashy 'greaseball' show that finds the need to slap on the tricolor flag in its logo to advertise its 'Italian-ness' is remotely related to the beautiful culture from the motherland.

I have come to realize that what was once laughed at and mocked for being different is now considered to be trendy. It is normal for those pony-tailed little playground girls who laughed at my parents for drinking their homemade wine at dinner every night to have grown up into discerning sommeliers graduating from Binny's school for wine connoisseurs in Aisle 12. They are now so chic with their painted wine glasses and half-full bottles of Coopers Hawk Maderized Reserve. I may sound bitter, and maybe I am - just a little. Life would have been so much easier if everybody could see that my family wasn't as different as much as we were trailblazers. The clothes that we wore have become some of

the most fashion-forward pieces in world-renowned designers' collections. Those socks have built one of the most successful business investments on Shark Tank and are selling for upwards of \$30.00 per pair! Kitten Heels have made a comeback and can be seen in every Nordstrom shoe department, where some women are willing to give up a limb to purchase a pair. Ok, so maybe my brother's satchel is still not chic or vogue, but at least his pants fit around his waist properly and nobody knew that he wore BVD underwear (at least not until now - oops!). Cultural curiosity for Wonder Breaders has spawned an entire industry. The desire to experience what it means to be Italian and to live La Dolce Vita brings in billions of tourist dollars every year. That's great! Viva L'Italia and keep spending your money to bring forth that cultural awareness, but had you been just a little more open-minded and nicer to my family growing up, we would have gladly welcomed you into our home to experience firsthand what it means to be Italian, for free!



*Me, my brother, and his briefcase on our first day of school*