

# **FAMILY PORTRAIT**

**Joanne Freeman**

inspired by

*Girl with a Violin*

Oil on Canvas

Mary Barnes Gingrich



## Family Portrait

*Please let it go okay this time,* prays Ellie as she parks the rented Corolla. She walks quickly through the early March dusk and mounts the concrete steps, noting the deepened dinginess of the bungalow's fake brick siding. Ellie hesitates before pushing the latch on the wooden door. Locked. She presses the doorbell and rubs her arms to ward off the chill as she waits for the sound of footsteps. They are slow in coming.

When the door finally opens, Sera stands there, looking stressed. "Sorry. The 'merry widows' and I were trying to calm Ma down. She started hissing when she heard the bell." She hugs her sister. "Glad you finally got here! I did what I could. But you're in for it."

Ellie nods. "Did you expect anything else?"

"Just be nice, okay? It's only a couple days." Sera looks down. "Where's your suitcase? And your coat? It's freezing!"

"In the car. I'll get them later."

Ellie and Sera walk through the small living room, dominated by an oversized TV cabinet at one end and a sofa covered neatly with a sheet and a multi-colored crocheted afghan at the other. At the table in the adjoining dining room sits Concetta Scuro, flanked by her best friends, Mrs. Bernardo and Mrs. Finnegan.

"Ellie, cara!" cries Mrs. Bernardo, as the sisters approach. "Come kiss your mother and me. And Helen," she says, beaming at Mrs. Finnegan.

Ellie sets her purse down, walks around the table to her mother, and bends down to kiss the rigid figure. "Wonderful

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news, Ma." Concetta, still striking despite the permanent scowl lines on her face and the shapeless black dress she's wearing, continues to stare straight ahead. *Beautiful and prickly*, thinks Ellie. *Like an exotic cactus*.

Mrs. Bernardo is on her feet, engulfing Ellie in her ample frame. "Sit! We make a party! I made taralli, your favorite."

"You make the best in the world!" Ellie hugs Mrs. Bernardo again and gives Mrs. Finnegan's shoulder a squeeze as she sits in the empty chair next to her sister.

"Mangia, mangia, cara. I get you coffee. Should I bring the pot out, Concetta?"

"Si, Katy," calls Concetta after Mrs. Bernardo, who is already in the kitchen. "You don't like my taralli?" She watches Ellie take one of the O-shaped cookies from the heaped tray.

"Yeah, sure, I like your taralli," says Ellie. "But Mrs. Bernardo was the one who always used to make them for me."

"What does that mean? You think I don't know how to bake good?" Concetta's voice is rough and low. *Bad sign*, thinks Ellie.

"It means I'm going to eat these because I'm hungry. It's been a long day."

"You couldn't even be here when I ask you to," pouts Concetta. "I wanted my children with me when the doctor tells me if I have a cancer growing inside."

"I really tried to make it this morning, Ma."

"You don't care what happens to me." Concetta purses her lips.

"Of course, I care. That's why I'm here."

"Come on, Ma," intervenes Sera. "Ellie got here as soon as she could. She came a long way."

"No one told her to move so far."

"I would move, too, if I could get Ellie's job," continues Sera. "In fact, it sounds so great I'm kind of jealous."

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"Nice try." Ellie smiles at her sister.

"She wants to be big shot," says Concetta. "Too good for us. Has to go to college and read big books and fool around with those computer machines." To Ellie, "You should have learned to make the taralli yourself instead of going off and living like a puttana."

"Maybe I should have." Ellie exchanges glances with Mrs. Bernardo.

"Is your job going well, dear?" inquires Mrs. Finnegan.

"Even better than I hoped," responds Ellie. She turns to Sera. "The company will pay for classes toward my doctorate. I'm so excited."

"Fantastic! Now I'm really jealous," says Sera.

Concetta speaks sullenly to Ellie. "You don't even ask me how I am."

"How are you, Ma?" asks Ellie.

"How you think I am? If it weren't for your sister and Katy and Helen, I don't know what I would do."

"I told you Ellie called three times, Ma," says Sera. "I let her know the biopsy turned out negative."

"My oldest daughter ignores her mother. At least Serafina comes to see me every other week."

"Sera lives three hours from here. I live half a continent away."

Concetta's reply is cut off by the renewed exclamations of Mrs. Bernardo, who puts the coffee pot and a plate in front of Ellie. "I make you a sandwich, too. You're so thin! Don't they feed you in Washington?"

"I eat plenty." Ellie smiles and bites into the bread. "Thanks. First food I've had today except for a Cinnabon at the airport."

"Did you use up all my ham, Katy?" Concetta asks.

"There's a little left." Mrs. Bernardo retrieves a cup and

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saucer from the ornate glass-doored cabinet behind Ellie and hands it to her. "I know you want to feed your skinny daughter. You don't see her so often."

"We just talk about how she doesn't care. She never comes home."

"I'm here now," says Ellie, filling her coffee cup. "You don't see Vincy around."

"Vincenzo could not be here."

"I know. He called me." Ellie takes another bite of the sandwich.

"Vincy called you from Japan?" Concetta is stunned.

Sera rises from her chair. "Do you want more coffee, Ma?"

"What Japan! He called me from New Jersey."

"How about you, Mrs. Finnegan? More coffee? Mrs. Bernardo?" Sera shoots a warning glance at Ellie.

"He goes to Japan for his business. I get a card from him last week with a picture of a fancy Japanese robe. He say he is sad not to be with me."

"I'm sure he'll be a big hit there." Ellie smiles.

"Don't act so smug, Miss Smarty Pants. He has to feed all those kids. That horrible wife of his. Always making babies."

"Vincy might have something to do with that. Ow!" Ellie scowls as Sera sits back down and pinches her under the table.

"She tricked him." Concetta's voice crescendoes. "I tell Vincy, 'Don't marry her.' That devil woman! She ..."

"Concetta, don't get yourself worked up. Bettina is not so bad. She's the mother of your grandsons. Be happy your daughters are here." Mrs. Bernardo touches her friend's arm.

"The daughter that really loved me is not here." One of Concetta's hands grabs the other. "Why does God give me such troubles?" She clutches the cupped hands to her breast.

"Raffaella is watching from heaven, Concetta. She prays for

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you." Mrs. Bernardo raises her hands in benediction.

"She was a good girl, my Raffaela. An obedient girl. Why does God take her? She was just a baby."

"Raffy would be almost 22 now," muses Ellie.

"How many times I tell you not to call her Raffy! Bad enough you and Serafina don't use the beautiful names I give you."

"Yeah, Gri-sel-da," chides Sera, drawing out each syllable of her sister's name.

"Ellie is just saying Raffaela would not want you to mourn so long, Concetta," said Mrs. Bernardo. "She would want you not to be sad."

Concetta turns on her friend, "So long! Twelve years is nothing to cry for my Raffaela. She was a saint. Don't talk to me about long! You don't know what I've lost. No one understands."

"I do," says Mrs. Finnegan. "Tom was only 20 when God took him."

Concetta seems slightly nonplussed for a moment, then takes Mrs. Finnegan's hand. Both women sigh heavily.

"Raffaela is playing her violin for the angels now," says Mrs. Bernardo. She turns to look at the portrait on the dining room wall. The other women follow her gaze. Raffaela's wan face stares out at them.

"That's all I have left of my beautiful girl. Your father give her violin to Stefano D'Arco's son because you girls and Vincy don't play," says Concetta peevishly. "Raffaela, she had all the talent. I beg him, keep the violin. He doesn't listen to me, her mother."

"Pa was heartbroken, too," says Sera.

"It was good someone else could play the violin," says Mrs. Bernardo. "It's not right to let it sit."

"Always thinking of other people," sulks Concetta. "Not his wife."

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"Jimmy was a good man, Concetta, God rest his soul." Mrs. Bernardo takes a sip of coffee.

"Auntie Anna did a nice job capturing Raffy—ela. She talked through that violin." Ellie stares up at the painting. "She never said much. Just played and looked wise, and rather sad, and scared." Ellie's voice trails off.

"I don't know why Annie make Raffaella look so serious," says Concetta.

"Raffy was serious." Sera and Ellie speak almost in chorus. Ellie adds, "She hardly ever smiled."

"What she have to smile about?" retorts Concetta.

"She made others smile with her music," says Mrs. Bernardo.

"Tom played the clarinet. Not so good maybe." Mrs. Finnegan looks at Ellie and Sera. "Remember how we teased him?"

"Tom didn't mind. He was always laughing." Ellie smiles at Mrs. Finnegan.

"He did not have trouble with his heart." Concetta's tone is cold.

"Did Anna paint you girls, too?" asks Mrs. Finnegan.

"She did. What happened to our portraits, Ma? Auntie Anna painted Sera and Vincy. And I remember she did one of me and Pa together," says Ellie. "Are they still up in the attic?"

"There's nothing there. Mr. Johnson help me clean the attic. Too much junk making dust."

"Everything's gone?" Ellie is incredulous. She looks at Sera. "You let her give away the old Singer sewing machine? And the trunk with the velvet drapes and lace curtains? We used to play dress-up with that stuff for hours when we were kids. What about our old toys and books? And the ..."

"I wasn't here when she gave it away," Sera says defensively.

Ellie confronts her mother. "I don't believe you did that! You didn't even ask us if we wanted anything!"



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"Believe it, missy. You could have gotten it any time. You don't even come home to see me this Christmas."

"I had the flu!"

Mrs. Bernardo looks sympathetically at Ellie, then rises. "I must leave now. I go with my sister to the church hall tonight to play bingo. I'm glad for your good news, Concetta." She bends to kiss her friend. "Enjoy your girls."

"I see you on Sunday," says Concetta.

"I'll walk home with you." Mrs. Finnegan stands. "I'm happy for you, too, Concetta."

Ellie and Sera are on their feet.

"I'll get your coats," says Sera.

Ellie walks with the women toward the front door, hugs Mrs. Finnegan, then embraces Mrs. Bernardo, who whispers, "I make ravioli tomorrow. Come if you want to talk."

"I may need to get away," smiles Ellie. "Thanks, both of you, for being there for our mother."

Sera and Ellie help the women with their coats and scarves then stand at the door, watching them walk arm in arm down the stairs and across the street.

"Thank God for those two," says Sera as she closes the door.

"You can say that again."

"I'm off to the store," announces Sera. "Ma needs stuff for breakfast, and I know you probably want ice cream." She makes a face at Ellie. "I don't know how you stay so thin. If I ate all the crap you do, I'd be huge."

"I'll go with you," says Ellie quickly.

"You stay here," commands the still-seated Concetta from the next room. "I don't want to be alone."

"Nothing wrong with her ears," mutters Ellie.

"I'll try not to be too long." In a louder voice, Sera calls out, "Do you need anything besides what's on the list, Ma?"

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"Get me more ham. And make sure the eggs aren't all broken like last time."

"There was one egg with a tiny crack," Sera explains to Ellie. The sisters smile at each other.

"Get some good bread for lunch tomorrow," Concetta instructs.

"I will, but I told you I have to leave by noon. I don't like being away from the baby for so long."

Ellie watches Sera put on her coat and go out the door, then walks back into the dining room. She begins to clear the table.

"I'm surprised you stay," says Concetta, as Ellie goes into the kitchen. "Always busy running here, running there. All the time excuses."

"I'll be here until Sunday morning. Sunday's John's birthday."

"You should be ashamed, living like a whore with that man. He will never marry you. Why pay for the milk when you get the cow for nothing."

"I think it's 'why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free.' Did you just call me a cow?!" Ellie giggles as she returns to the dining room, hoping this will be one of the rare moments when she can distract her mother with humor.

"You laugh now. But someday you get old, that man will leave you, and you will be alone. Used up. I don't raise you like that. It would kill your father to know what you do!"

"Guess that's something we don't have to worry about."

"Sure, Miss Smart Mouth, you make a joke. Everybody knows you live in sin. I ask the priest what to do. He tells me to pray."

"I'd say that's your best bet." Ellie gathers the last of the dishes from the table and walks back into the kitchen, trying to avoid the confrontation to come. As if that were possible.

"I'm ashamed in front of my friends."

"Mrs. Bernarndo's son Frankie lives with his girlfriend in

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New York.”

“She tell you that?”

“He called me and she wrote me.”

“You don’t write me.”

Ellie is exasperated. “I call you and you don’t talk to me.”

“I talk to you.” Concetta follows Ellie into the kitchen and sits at the small table.

“You yell at me. Everything I say or do is wrong. You don’t approve of where I live, how I live. You think my job is stupid.” Ellie starts doing the dishes, her back to her mother. “You don’t even know John and you don’t like him. You hate everything I do. It’s impossible to please you.”

“You come back to Chicago and stop living like a whore. You live with your mother like a good daughter.”

“We’ve been through this before. Be fair. You left Italy and your mother to come here with Pa. Mrs. Bernardo did the same thing. Sera and Vincy have left home, and you don’t complain about them.”

“I was married. They are married. They have families.”

“Does it mean anything to you that I’m happy? I love my work. I love John.”

“What do you know about love? You never loved anyone but yourself. I could be dying with cancer, and there would be no one to take care of me.”

“The great news is that you don’t have cancer, Ma! You have a house and nice friends who live near you and spend time with you. You can walk to church and the beauty parlor and to the little store down the block when someone doesn’t drive you to the supermarket ...”

“You were always selfish. You don’t want to help take care of Raffaella.”

“I was always watching Raffy! I was a kid myself, Ma! I was

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only four years older than she was.”

“Hanging around the Bernardos’ chasing Frankie. I should have known you’d be a whore.”

“I am NOT a whore!” Ellie touches her burning cheek with a wet hand. “Frankie was my best friend. He and Mr. and Mrs. Bernardo were like family.”

“You had a family! You busted it up with your selfishness.”

“I didn’t bust up anything! Why are you so mad at me? Is it because I was late getting here today? I’m sorry. I know you were scared, and I left my apartment at 5 a.m. so I could be with you. I can’t control the weather and the planes!”

“You could leave yesterday!” Concetta glares at Ellie. “I can get sick and die any time.”

“We all could. You and Mrs. Bernardo and Mrs. Finnegan are in better shape than most 50-year-olds! You should be grateful and enjoy life like they do.”

“You owe it to me to come home and take care of me. It’s your fault I am alone.”

“My fault?” Ellie turns to look at her mother.

“Your father, he was much older. I know he die before me. But Raffaella, she say she will always stay with me and cook and take me to the movies and drive me places. We were going to go with the train to California and visit my cousin Lena.”

“Raffy was 9 when she died,” says Ellie quietly. “She told you anything you wanted her to.”

“You think I don’t remember how old she was!”

“I know you loved her more than the rest of us. At least more than me.”

“You owe it to me to come home, Griselda,” repeats Concetta. “If it wasn’t for you, your sister would be alive.”

Ellie doesn’t move for a minute. Then she leaves the sink, wipes her hands, and sits down at the table facing her mother.

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She reaches for Concetta's hand. "She was born with a bad heart, Ma. You and Pa were always worried she could die."

Concetta pulls her hand away. "You left her that night by herself and went to meet Frankie Bernardo," she says accusingly.

"She was playing the violin! Frankie was walking Riley. I just went outside to talk to him for a few minutes."

"That stupid dog! An excuse to fool around with Frankie," snaps Concetta.

"We didn't fool around! And I went back in the house right after the violin stopped." Ellie closes her eyes. She can almost hear the abrupt last note. *Bach*, Ellie remembers. Her sister was playing Bach when she died. "Raffy was on the floor. I tried to wake her up. Then I called 911 like you always told me I should."

"If you stayed with her, she would not have died. You would have called quicker."

Ellie fights back tears. "How can you say that to me! There was nothing I could do! Why did you leave me alone with her that night anyway?"

"Raffaella had a headache. She don't want to go to Annie's."

"Why didn't you stay? Why did you go at all if you knew Raffaella felt sick?"

"We only go for a little while. I told you stay, not leave her."

A short silence, then Ellie asks, "How did you know I was with Frankie that night?"

"Mrs. Hughes saw you. You never tell me. You don't even feel bad."

"Of course, I felt bad! I felt guilty for years. Pa knew." Ellie is defeated. "You never said a word to me about how you felt."

Concetta rubs the table with the flat of her hand. "Your father would not let me. He says it is not anything you do. He says, 'Be good to her.' So I say nothing."

"But you blamed me, didn't you? I wasn't imagining it."

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"You don't do what I ask."

The tears spill onto Ellie's cheeks. "So you punished me by not being a mother to me anymore."

Concetta sits up straighter. "I took care of you, just like I did Vincy and Sera."

"But you never loved me. Pa and Sera loved me. Mrs. Bernardo and Frankie loved me. You didn't."

Concetta is silent.

"I don't know what to say, Ma. I'm sorry about everything. I'm sorry Raffy was sick. I'm sorry she died. I'm sorry we always end up fighting. I'm sorry you don't love me."

"So now you make it up to me. You stop being selfish. You come back home." Concetta stands.

"No way. I wouldn't want you to live with a murderer."

Concetta is livid. "Then keep going to hell, Miss Dramatic Queen."

"I'd rather do that than come back here!"

"You should have died instead of your sister!" Concetta spits the words at Ellie as she sails out of the room.

Ellie hears the bedroom door slam shut. After a moment, she gets up and goes into the dining room. She grabs her purse, fishes out the car key, then glances around. Ellie's eyes rest on the portrait of her dead sister. She walks up to it, raises her arm, and presses the point of the key to the canvas. She pulls it down slowly, then turns abruptly and walks to the front door. Ellie opens it and steps into the icy darkness.

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