

# When I Dream of Heaven

1889

John D. Rockefeller  
funds Hull  
House to aid  
the poor



1900

Amalgamated Clothing and Textile  
Workers (ACTWU) union founded



1914

World War I  
begins



# When I Dream of Heaven

**Angelina's Story**

“... it is just like what I see when I dream of heaven.”

—Young German woman at Coney Island

**Steven Kroll**

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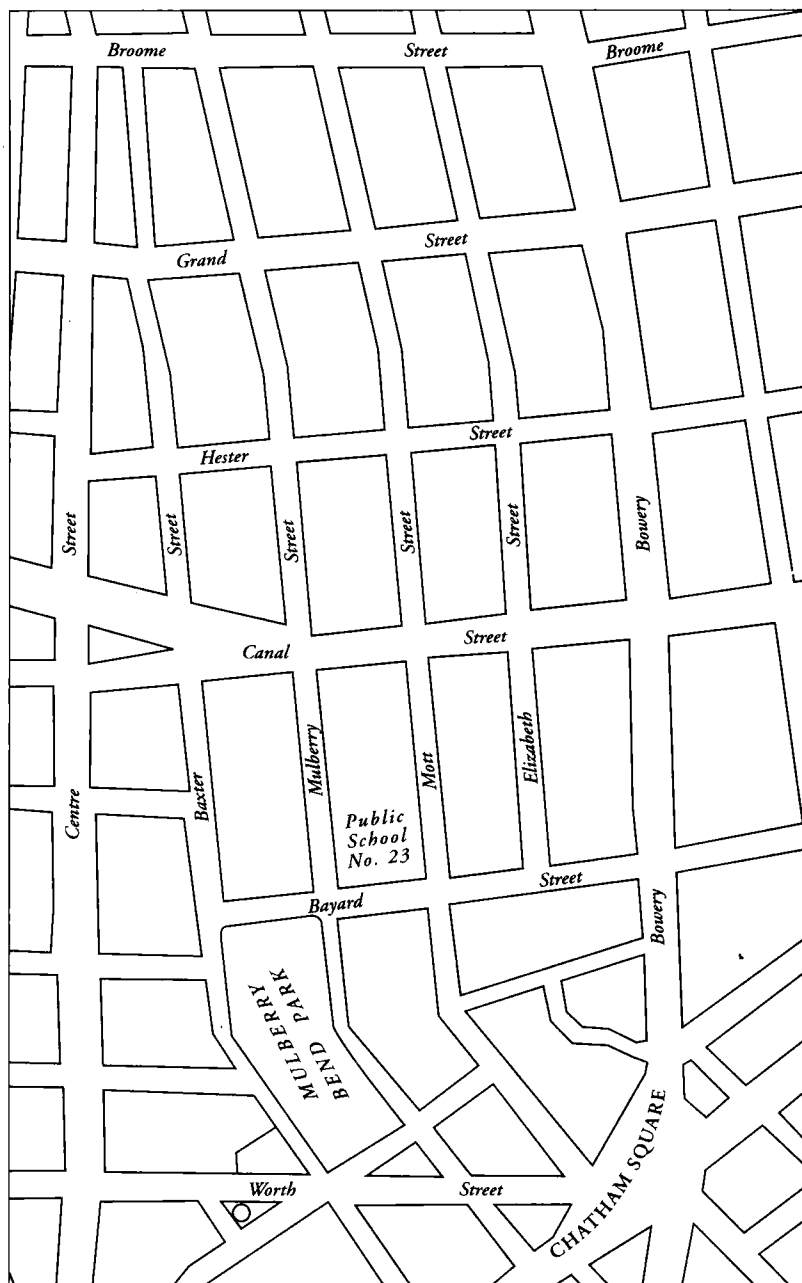
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# Manhattan's Lower East Side 1899



# Chapter 1

That first day, it rained. Gina didn't want to go. She lay huddled on the small sofa, her knees drawn up to her chest. Trying to keep her eyes tight shut, she couldn't help looking out at the cramped front room of the tiny tenement apartment on Mulberry Street.

The worn wooden planks of the floor. A round kitchen table, surrounded by its battered chairs. Pictures of the saints along the wall. A calendar from Mario's butcher shop. Dainty white doilies on the shelves. A blackened stove. A deep sink stained with the effects of so many twice-a-week sponge baths, so many clothes and dishes, washed and washed again.

Everything was clean, so clean in the dim light.

Mamma was moving around the sink now, finishing the breakfast dishes. Gina's papà, two brothers, and a new boarder had all gone to work.

"You'd better get ready, Little One," Mamma said in still heavily accented English. "We must be at Sidowski's by seven."

As if for emphasis, the rain suddenly came down harder, exploding off the roof in torrents.

Gina jumped. "Yes, Mamma," she said, but she didn't leave the sofa. At least not yet.

*Sidowski!* she thought. *Sidowski and his sweatshop!*

She knew this fifth-floor tenement room so well because she had spent so much time in it. Sometimes, it seemed that, apart from school, she had spent time nowhere else since she was six years old. That was when she had come to New York City from Teggiano, a small farming village outside Naples, Italy. She had come with her mamma and her three older brothers. Papà had sent for them after two years away.

That was in 1887. Now it was September 1895. Gina Petrosino was 14 years old, a slim girl with liquid eyes and a bright smile. Last June she had finished eighth grade, but every afternoon and evening, every weekend and every vacation during those years, she had sat at the kitchen table helping her mother work.

In the winter and spring, when there were no garments to sew, she and her mother made artificial flowers. Hour after hour, day after day, they put stems on roses, glued centers on daisies, pasted petals on anything at all for the Alpha Flower Company on East Houston Street. Sometimes Gina's brothers helped. Sometimes, when his job laying streets dried up in the colder months, Papà

tried. But mostly it was Mamma and Gina, and in the spring and fall, when there *was* garment work, it was, once again, Mamma and Gina. The boys trooped out, always out, to be newsboys, messengers, errand boys.

Once again, Mamma and Gina sat at the table; only now they were sewing pants or skirts for 10 cents apiece or coats or dresses for 15 cents apiece. Sometimes they were sewing linings or finishing buttonholes. Again they worked hour after hour, day after day. They worked, it seemed, endlessly, as the clothes piled up on the table and Gina's older brothers, Tony and Vinnie, scooped them up for delivery. And it was all for Sidowski, Sidowski and his sweatshop! Sometimes, it seemed to Gina, she would never, in her entire life, escape Sidowski.

And now she was going to work for him full-time.

She hadn't wanted to do that. She'd wanted to get more education. She'd been good in school and liked it, but Papà had said no, no more. Work for the family, work all the time. As if she hadn't always.

She remembered the day. It was just before graduation. She was making flowers at the table when Papà came home from work. He stamped up the narrow, dark stairs in his big, heavy shoes.

She asked her question as he came in the door.

Papà stopped in his tracks. "You!" he shouted, "just like your brother Tony! One Tony is enough!"

"But Papà—"

"No more, Gina. Girls do not need education. Work is good for them. Then they will become wives and mothers."

Mamma looked upset, as if something terrible was going to happen. Gina had no reply. After all, Papà had done the same thing with each of her three brothers. And she was, after all, a good Italian girl, a girl who would not disobey her father.

Tony, the eldest, had started it. Tony, dashing Tony, whom she'd loved and admired for as long as she could remember. Tony, who was always there to look after her: holding her hand, wiping her chin, making sure no one forgot about the little one. That first day of school in America, Tony came home Tony instead of Tonio, whereas she, so shy and small, remained Angelina for what seemed like forever. From that first moment, it was clear Tony was becoming an American fast.

He did well in school. Starting out as a 12-year-old third grader with no English, he kept getting promoted. Outside of school, he worked as a part-time newsboy and did errands and Mamma's marketing, but he still managed to finish eighth grade when he was 14. That was when his teacher, Miss O'Brien, told him, "I hope you will do something more with your education. Just because you *can* leave school now doesn't mean you should."

Gina remembered Tony repeating those words to her and Vinnie and Joey on the way home that day and how Vinnie had said eagerly, "I guess that means you can stop going to school."

Tony had recoiled at this. Inside, Gina had too, and then there was the terrible scene with Papà at the kitchen table.



Tony said he wanted more education. Papà said, "You will be a full-time newsboy!" And Tony ran out of the house, his "No!" so loud it practically shook the building.

He came back. He backed down. Papà forgave him. But then Papà brought in their first boarder, and Tony got pushed out of the back room he'd shared with Vinnie and Joey. He had to start sleeping on the small sofa in the front room, where she was sleeping now.

And that was when a lot of strange things started happening. She was really little still, so not all of it made sense, but Tony almost got himself killed by a gang named the Ragpickers. Jacob Riis, a police reporter and photographer for *The New York Tribune*, Tony's paper, had somehow saved him. Mr. Riis was an important man, interested in helping the poor, but soon afterward, Tony began dating a girl Papà hadn't approved. When Papà found out, he threw Tony out of the house.

Then Tony almost got himself killed by the Ragpickers again, and this time a man named Nicholas Dale came to his rescue. Mr. Dale worked for the Children's Aid Society and was from an old family in Jamestown, Virginia. Somehow he and Mr. Riis had convinced Papà that Tony should be allowed to attend the LaSalle Institute on Second Avenue so he could study to become a photographer. And Tony had gone. And Tony was a photographer now, making portraits in a shop on Broadway!

"Gina," said Mamma, "it's time."

Gina squeezed her pert features into a frown. "All right, Mamma, I'm coming."

She rolled off the sofa. The maroon velvet was threadbare now; the wood frame was chipped and cracking. But not even age and character could make it suitable for sleeping.

Gina didn't mind. As years passed, the Petrosino children had grown bigger, and the tiny Mulberry Street apartment had seemed to grow even smaller. Vinnie and Joey, now 18 and 16, barely fit into the back room bed they shared with the new boarder, Giorgio Paccharetti, also from Teggiano. And two years ago it was decided that Gina was too old to sleep in the little, boxlike middle bedroom with her mamma and her papà.

But where was she going to sleep?

As the question lingered, Tony arrived with an announcement. He had finished at LaSalle, had a good job now.

"Mamma, Papà, I'm going to be married!" he shouted.

"Tonio, *magnifico!*" Mamma cried and threw her arms around him.

"*Bellissimo,*" said Papà and hugged him.

And everyone really was happy. Josephina Carciofi was a Mulberry Street girl, the daughter of a bootblack. Josephina's father, Gino, shot pool with Gina and Tony's papà, and Papà had introduced Tony and Josephina. A wonderful wedding followed, with a big pink-and-white cake at a hall on Elizabeth Street. But even as Gina rejoiced in her brother's future, she rejoiced in the change that occurred at home.

Tony moved off the sofa to an apartment across the

street. And Gina moved onto the sofa. It was, she realized, the only shred of privacy she would ever be likely to have in her parents' apartment. And with so many people coming and going, with so much happening in that front room, it was only part-time privacy at that.

Wrapped in her worn bathrobe, Gina left the apartment now and hurried to the toilet on the landing. She held her breath as she went inside. The smell was terrible. The stall was dark and filthy. It was almost impossible not to flee.

When she got back, her mother was pinning on her black straw hat with the broad brim and pink rosebuds.

Gina was surprised. Mamma never wore that hat, except on feast days and holidays.

"You're certainly getting dressed up for Sidowski."

"I haven't seen the man in eight years. I wanted to look nice for you."

Gina smiled and hugged her. "Thanks, Mamma. I don't think it will make any difference, though."

Putting on a simple blue-and-white check shirtwaist dress and tying her hair back in a bow, Gina realized how nervous her mamma had to be to wear that hat. Her mamma, who almost never left the house. Her mamma, with whom she'd spent so much of every day her whole life. Now her mamma was going to take her to Sidowski's. Now her mamma was going to be alone every working day.

They hadn't just sat sewing garments and making artificial flowers either. Mamma had taught her how to

cook, and they had made countless dinners for their men. They had served plates filled with soup, sausage, pasta, and cacciatore. There were the special lasagna and manicotti for the holidays and the special looks she and Mamma had exchanged as the family dug in with relish!

And then there was the cleaning. Mamma was meticulous. Nothing could ever be clean enough. She started with the children. She scrubbed them in the sink until their skin turned red, making sure that none of them could ever be confused with “those greasy wops” she kept hearing about. Having taken care of the children, she went on to the apartment.

Gina learned the virtues of Bon Ami cleanser, buffing the kitchen sink until it gleamed. She dusted cabinets and furniture. She swept the floor and washed windows, and of course they had laundry soap for wash day. How vigorously she scrubbed the dirty clothes along the washboard! She rinsed them thoroughly and hung them on the line across the fire escape.

Gina didn't mind any of these things, though she would have liked to go bounding down the stairs to play as often as her older brothers did. Helping your mother was what you did if you were an Italian girl from Teggiano. And becoming so close to your mother, such good friends, was not a bad thing either.

But having done so much and become an American herself, she wanted more than just Sidowski's. Before the final “No more, Gina!” she had pestered Papà several times. Look how well Tony was doing, she said. If she had

some direction, she could do well too. Why shouldn't she learn to do something interesting before she got married?

But it was no use. She was a girl, and the truth was Tony's progress had somehow ruined possibilities for the rest of the family. No one else was going to be better than Papà! He'd make sure of that.

These were Old World views, Gina realized, but Vinnie and Joey hadn't helped much, either. Restless and headstrong, Vinnie had never liked school in the first place. He'd left at 12 to become a full-time messenger at the Stabile Bank down the block. Two years ago, he'd joined his papà, laying streets along Central Park West.

Papà was proud of that. Then Joey decided to leave school too. Every year, Papà had pressured him to do it, but when he reached the legal school-leaving age of 14, Joey didn't even have to be asked. He finished seventh grade at P.S. 23. Then he became a tailor's assistant at Heyman's Clothing Store on Grand Street.

Though she would never say, Gina found that frustrating. Of all the boys, Joey was the only one who took to sewing. On those long evenings by gaslight, he often helped with the coats and the jackets. But he, who left school early, got to be a tailor's assistant in a nice shop. And she, who wanted *more* than an eighth-grade education, got to go to Sidowski's.

"Are you ready?" Mamma asked.

"Yes," said Gina, "I am."

## Chapter 2

In one way, Gina just wanted to be there, to start work and stop thinking about it. In another way, something in her welcomed any opportunity to postpone the agony.

She had to be ready, but when Mamma said, "Come have your breakfast," her whole being seemed to draw her to that round table and put her in that chair.

"Thanks, Mamma," she said, holding her steaming coffee cup in both hands. She looked across the basket of sweet rolls into the face so like an older version of her own.

Teresa Petrosino was not yet 40, but she was tired. Years of hard work on the farm in Teggiano and more years struggling to stay alive in New York City had worn her down. So the face Gina saw before her had changed. The bright, laughing eyes had lines around them now. The cheeks had grown hollower, the nose and chin more pronounced.

But the face Gina saw was still her mamma's face, the face she had loved every day of her life and would always love. Her slim mamma with the broad smile and the golden laugh. How could she bear not to see her all day every day anymore?

Gina was reminded of this past summer, the hot, sticky New York summer they had just been through. When Gina had graduated from the eighth grade in June, it was decided by Papà that she would spend the summer before Sidowski's helping her mother at home. Gina had done the same thing every summer for as long as she could remember. But Papà had made this decision sound special. He had leaned back on the sofa and said firmly, "Gina, it is important for you to help your mamma this summer." His tone made the whole experience become special. It wasn't really, but Gina and Mamma made it so.

Oh, those long, sultry summer afternoons. The windows were open at the other end of the apartment, but there was no breeze. The air was so thick and heavy, it covered you like a blanket. The two of them sat at the table, pasting the petals, adding the stems, adding the centers. Hour after hour they pasted as the sweat made dark circles beneath their armpits, formed droplets over their upper lips, and ran down their foreheads.

How often during those hours did Gina dream of breaking free? How she wanted to run down those five flights of damp, dark, narrow, evil-smelling stairs and join the little children at an open fire hydrant. She imagined the churning water cooling her feet and ankles. She

imagined leaping about in the stream and laughing as someone sprayed her clothes.

Better still were thoughts of racing over to the East River piers and buying a ticket to one of those boats that had pools inside them. Gina imagined jumping in and holding onto the rail. The water would rise around her, cool her, make her feel fresh and alive. Maybe she could even learn to swim . . . .

She never did any of these things. She stayed with her mamma, but every so often, in the midst of the punishing heat, Mamma put down the flower she was working on. She walked over to her daughter, curtsied, and said, "Shall we dance, *bambina*?"

And Gina put down her flower, got up, and the two of them whirled around the room, doing a strange waltz of their own. They didn't know how to dance, but who could care when they were having so much fun?

And when they weren't dancing, at least some of the time they were singing. Their favorite was the popular "Little Brown Jug."

Gina began the first line. Then Mamma joined in, and they alternated.

Gina: *My wife and I lived all alone*

Mamma: *In a little log hut we called our own.*

Gina: *She loved gin, and I loved rum—*

Mamma: *I tell you what, we'd lots of fun.*

Then, smiling at each other, they shouted out the chorus together:

*Ha, ha, ha, you and me, Little Brown Jug, don't I love thee.*

*Ha, ha, ha, you and me, Little Brown Jug, don't I love thee.*



Sometimes they danced around while they were singing. And Mamma told Gina stories of growing up dirt poor and making all her own clothes and falling in love with Papà because he was the strongest boy in the village. And Gina told Mamma stories about school and how much she'd wanted to learn even though she was poor and Italian and no one wanted to take her seriously because she was a girl.

And so the summer passed. Would they ever have such a summer again? Would they ever—

“We have to go,” Mamma said.

Gina choked down a corner of sweet roll and took a last sip of coffee. “All right, Mamma.”

It was still raining. Gina had almost forgotten. She picked up the big black umbrella from behind the door. Then she opened the door for Mamma.

But Mamma didn't walk right through, in the usual way. She stood unsteadily in the doorway, rocking a little on her heels.

Looking at her mamma from behind, Gina saw all the uncertainties that went with wearing that best hat come together in her mother's hesitation. Mamma was afraid of going down those stairs. Mamma was afraid of going to Sidowski's. Mamma was afraid of losing her daughter. All those efforts that Mamma had made to get her ready had gone into reverse. *Gina* was going to have to lead *Mamma* out that door.

Gina took Mamma's arm. Gently she walked her through and closed the door behind them.