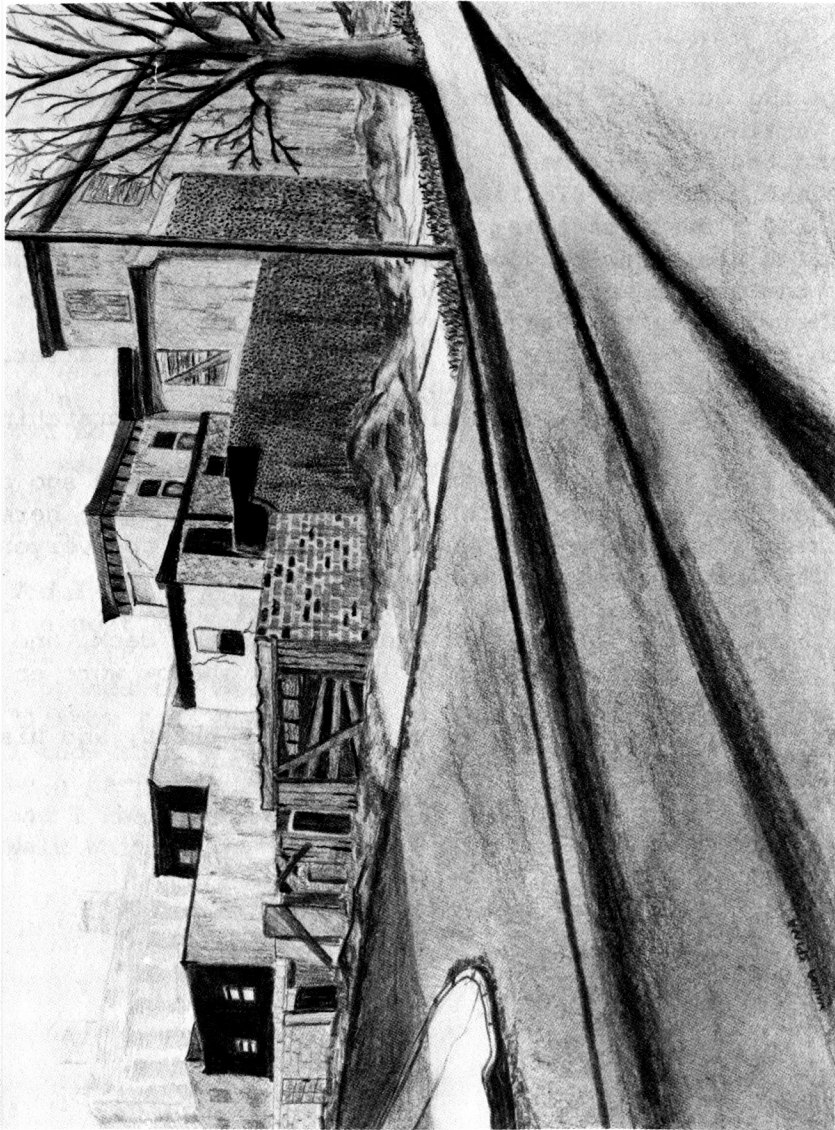


from *FIRST STREET*, a novel

Wanda Spina



*FIRST STREET* used to be cobblestoned, long ago, and lined with leafy shade trees and benches where the old men in the neighborhood used to sit for hours, smoking their pipes and talking quietly in Italian. The pavements back then were made of bricks, many of which came loose in the ground, ready to trip up the first passerby with his nose in the air. The houses matched the pavements and were fronted by white marble steps with little slidingboards in the middle, between neighbors. On summer mornings the clink of the milkman's bottles on the steps started each day on a bright, cheerful note, but in the dead of winter, strangely enough, that very same sound, heard from a warm-lit kitchen, sent chills up your spine. It was the last street before the railroad track, which ran parallel to it on top of an embankment about a hundred yards from the backs of the houses. From up on the track you could see the river, shining like a silver ribbon, and across the way the waterfront of Philadelphia. The sun set over the waterfront, reflecting in warehouse windows. In the springtime, when the weather was nice, the people on First Street liked to sit on their backsteps after dinner and watch the sun go down. If a train happened to pass up on the track, long shadows would sweep the ground and the red sun would flicker between boxcars.

Outside the backyards, across a dirt road wide enough for only one car and some open ground where the women hung clothes on Monday mornings, the old men planted vegetable gardens--roughly the size of small farms -- raising peppers and onions and cucumbers and radishes and a bewildering variety of greens for salads, not to mention sugar corn and Jersey tomatoes as big as a man's fist. The gardens were enclosed by six-foot-high fences on which blackberry vines grew

thick and wild, obscuring the dark wooden boards underneath. At night the old men dragged hoses out of their yards and pulled them across the road and into their gardens to water their vegetables. Between the gardens tall trees grew on ground that pitched and sloped erratically. In one spot, behind Mr. DelVecchio's house, the ground dropped three feet below the level of the road, creating a sunken bower. Mr. DelVecchio, who was a retired shipyard worker, made three steps out of railroad ties to lead down into the bower, and on summer evenings, before the mosquitoes started biting, his wife and some of the other old ladies on the block used to sit down there on lawn chairs with sweaters draped over their shoulders, their silver heads nodding gravely under the trees as they chatted in the gathering dusk.

A network of dirt roads wound around the gardens and trees and emptied onto a sandlot down by the railroad track with a backstop and bleachers behind home plate and a playground off to the first-base side. The third-base line ran parallel to the track, no more than fifteen feet from the foot of the embankment. During the first few weeks of summer the sandlot would swarm with boys playing baseball, cheering and screaming with each crack of the bat, going all out to win a pick-up game that would never be preserved in any record book. Even the persistent whine of the factory whistles on the far side of the track couldn't drown out the sound of their vigorous young voices. As the summer wore on, however, dragging the dog days down on the city, the players scattered early to shaded sidewalks and cool kitchens -- their interest in baseball fading fast -- to drink ice-cold sodas or just plain tapwater until their stomachs were ready to burst. Deserted, the lot would bake under the hot sun and turn rockhard; hours would pass without a soul in sight. Eventually a boy might return from a walk down the track to the river -- shirtless,

carrying a stick -- and as he would cross the empty lot he would appear tiny and lost in the midst of such a desolate scene.

On the corners of First Street stood saloons with pale green windows that shattered your reflection into a thousand splinters of colored glass. The more brightly you were dressed, the more spectacular the kaleidoscope in the window. Where there wasn't a saloon there was usually a corner store, like the truck stop at First and River Road, the northern boundary of the neighborhood, or the candy store down at the next corner, First and Diamond, run by a balding, moon-faced ex-fighter named Jimmy Giubelli -- nicknamed Jimmy Goobs -- who kept pictures from his days in the ring on the wall above his ice cream bins. Two blocks down from the candy store, under a mammoth weeping willow on the corner of First and Everett streets, was old Maggie Pietro's grocery store, virtually hidden in the shadows swirling on the corner, suggesting a cave more than a store. When you stepped inside, a bell tinkled overhead and immediately the smell of provolone cheese -- there were those who swore Maggie's provolone cheese dated back to the days of the Roman Empire -- assaulted your nostrils. Presently, from behind a curtain hanging over the doorway to a cluttered living room, old Maggie would appear, a lumpish figure with a hairy moustache and a raisin-wrinkled face, sad eyes watering behind thick glasses, wearing an ancient black cotton dress from which the overpowering cheese smell seemed to emanate -- more so than from the cheese itself -- rocking ponderously toward you over the wooden pallets covering the stone floor behind her counter with a slow, rhythmic, vaguely sinister clapping sound, reminiscent of Ahab walking the deck of the Pequod.

It would take Maggie a lifetime to get to you and forever to fill your order. Often she would have to

travel to the back of the store, which was raised six inches higher than the front part, and that could take the better part of an afternoon. Muttering painfully in Italian, she would emerge from behind the counter, swing her good leg onto the higher floor, then push herself up with both hands pressing down on her knee. Once having gained the upper floor, she would then proceed to simply stand there in a stooped position for what seemed like an eternity, breathing heavily all the while, as though she were trying to decide whether your order was worth this kind of punishment to her body. Finally she would straighten up with a tremendous sigh worthy of Bette Davis at the height of her career before slowly -- so slowly -- rocking back into the shadows on bowed, black-stockinged ankles, her rump shifting dramatically under the folds of that cheesy old black dress.

The next street up from First Street was Second Avenue, the main street in the city. One bright Saturday morning its sidewalks overflowed with people as practically the entire neighborhood turned out to greet Mamie Eisenhower riding by in the back seat of an open car, smiling her pixyish smile, on her way to christen a mighty new aircraft carrier that had been built down in the shipyard. On the corner of Second Avenue and Everett Street stood an American Legion Post -- No. 255 -- a two-story white stucco building with solemn green doors closed to all who could not show proof of membership. Inside was a bar backed by a hump-topped mirror across which flew an eagle carrying a banner in its beak. The doors to the restrooms said "Kings" and "Queens." Another door led out to a long sideyard with a tree-lined bocce court running down its middle, which was the scene, naturally, of many spirited contests between the young men and old men from the neighborhood. The young men, intent on proving youth superior to experience in a game where experience clearly meant everything, played with grim

determination, vigorously rubbing down the heavy black balls before rolling them downcourt, but they were no match for their fathers and uncles, who rolled their balls with deceptive nonchalance, often with acrid black stogies clenched between their teeth and a mug of beer sloshing around in their free hand.

Outside the yard, facing Second Avenue, was a monument to all the neighborhood men who had served in the First and Second World Wars. Their names were etched into the marble face of the monument, filling row after row, like names in a telephone book. The names of the men who had been killed in action -- much fewer in number, of course -- were chiselled into the very center of the monument in letters that were roughly twice the size of the letters in all the other names. On Memorial Day the Legionnaires used to parade down Second Avenue in crisp white shirts and navy blue ties, followed by their wives in the Women's Auxiliary, whose gloved hands would brush against their tight-skirted backsides as they marched. The parade ended at the monument, where, after speeches had been delivered into a whining microphone and a folded flag presented to a gold star mother, four neighborhood veterans -- representatives of the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines -- raised rifles over the heads of the hushed assembly standing humbly between rows of blondwood folding chairs, and for one crystal moment the only sound would be the snapping of flags in the wind, until the rifles, on command, shattered the green silence with sharp, cracking salutes.