

On balance, I didn't have much to recommend me – an \$80 a week job trying to sell cotton piece goods. Hopefully this was offset by the ringing endorsement from her mentor, Jen Gross.

Only later did I learn that my case had been championed by Ria's father. This came as a surprise to me since Mr. Renna had been a big Madison Avenue attorney, "a professional," just like Ria and her soon-to-be doctor.

But Sylvester Renna was a first-generation American like my father was. He arrived from Naples, Italy at the age of 1 in 1900.



His father owned a live poultry market in Queens. He and his whole family had worked there. Even Ria rang the cash registers on Saturdays, during the war.

She told me that some of the kids in junior high had called her Chicken Market Girl. And how she'd brought Mrs. Gross a bird every Monday, to spare her from the endless lines being caused by meat rationing.

Anyway, when Sylvester Renna (pictured here as a much younger man) heard of my "intentions," he said to his daughter, "You're better off with Ed. Joe is not of your world. Ed is of your world."

And Joe was Italian! But even on that score, I somehow won out! See, Mr. Renna wanted to see his daughter move beyond their insular enclave. He was eager for her to become part of "the great melting pot" – a modern American woman!

In the end, it would be Ria's decision. I couldn't possibly know what she'd do; I just knew her connection with Joe couldn't be as perfect as ours. And if it was, what was she doing in the backseat of Eddie Emmerich's car with me on the night I'd made my intentions so clear?

She called Joe the next day, long distance, and broke off their relationship. She told him she'd be marrying me! I understand, he wasn't a very good sport about it either.

And then, to many people's great surprise, we announced our engagement! Ria's mother, Frances said, she'd throw us a big engagement party in their backyard, come the spring. They had a handsome home in Rockville Center.

(pictured here
as a young
woman)



Frances Renna
(née Lupo)

Ria's mother was generous,
kind and meticulous,
with a noteworthy
memory which
made her one
of those rare
people who
could spell
any word,
rapid fire,
out loud!

Frances came
from a close-knit,
Sicilian family, which
meant that they were all now
my family too – the Lupos.

You should meet them all at once. I did!

Ria's cheering section:



Grandpa Lupo & Grandma Lupo
Aunt Tess & Uncle John

Uncle Jack – Ria (as a teen)

Aunt Mae & Uncle Pete
(Cousin Theresa's parents)

All new and important figures in my life. From now on, I would be witness to their memorable occasions and they to mine. Aunt Tess, in particular, would remain a beloved central character in my life for many years to come.

But it was the special closeness that Ria shared with her kid sister, Patricia, and her cousin Theresa, which created this new, loving, extended family which I was so fortunate to be a part of.





Patricia was in high school by the time I began dating Ria. Their 9-year age gap had already become unimportant, and they kept each other's secrets.

From the get-go, I could see that Pat was more than a quick wit, she was authentically funny, and a perfect foil for Ria. The two girls spoke on the phone most every night of their lives.

Naturally, she'd be our Maid of Honor.



By this point, some of the people I've just introduced, and certainly others, including Ria, wanted to know, "Eddie, what ever happened to going into the Seminary?"

I'm sure I offered the simple answer, "Well, I met Ria!"

But I think it was more specific than that. On recent reflection, I believe the only real calling I ever had was to be a good person or maybe even an exemplary person. And when picturing my life with Ria, I suddenly saw that I could be those things without having to become a missionary.

(With Jack O'Connell & Eddie Emmerich)

Ria was the first girl that I brought everywhere. This was a "dinner/dance" for the Christian Men's Bowling League. She was poised and articulate and easy to laughter. I always felt that it was an honor to introduce her.



Prior to Ria, I had always considered myself to be a free agent – no matter what Mary Keenan might have thought. In fact, it was only when Mary Keenan started pointing out pieces of furniture “we could buy” that I realized her misunderstanding! While I couldn’t imagine shopping for a home with Mary (or anyone else for that matter), I couldn’t wait to get started with Ria. But first, there was the matter of shopping for a ring.

Grandma Lupo guided me through the process of selecting Ria’s stone.



Initially, she brought me through Macy’s and Gimbels to gauge the latest fashions (and to shake out all of my beginner’s questions).

Next, she took me through both Diamond Districts, 46th Street, and then the Bowery, to study unset stones and understand their qualities.

Then, and only then, could she bring in her “family diamond man,” Moishe, who brought out

one folded wax paper envelope from his left pocket and a different one out of his right. When it was all said and done, the diamond we selected was “near-perfect.”

There wasn’t a budget, per se. It would all have to come from “extra earnings.” I went to Jimmy the Greek and he got me parking cars back at the Montefiore Cemetery, right away!

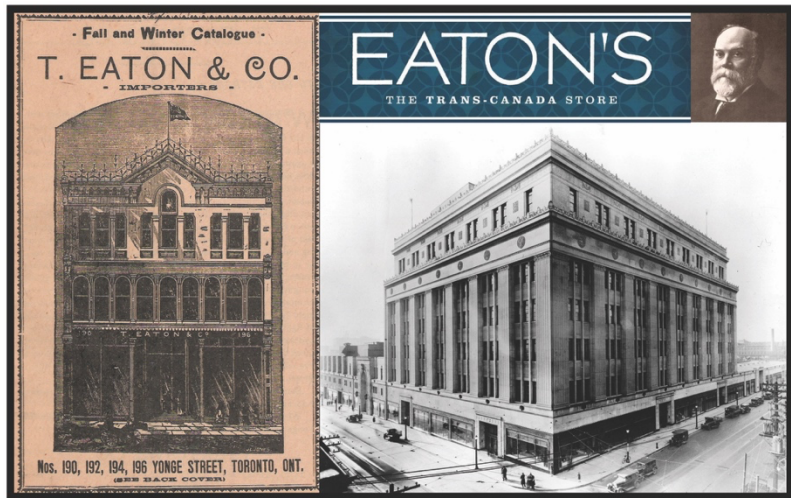
Meanwhile, over at Wm. Simpson, Sons & Co., they were starting to discover that I was short of customers...

every month.

I did stumble blindly into a few, but not nearly enough to cover my draw against commission. I remember thinking how kind they were being, not to fire or demote me. And how sometimes selling piece goods to the garment industry felt like selling ice cubes to the Eskimos. I think it's only fair to admit that I was failing in that job when luck came my way. And just in time too!

One of the other salesmen, Tom Reardon, told me that his brother-in-law, over at the T. Eaton Company, was looking to hire and train a young person to assist the Buyer for piece goods and home furnishings in their New York office.

Eaton's, as it was more commonly called, was a retail institution across Canada. Founded by Timothy Eaton in 1869, it followed a similar path to Macy's, from small dry goods shop to a chain of mammoth department stores.

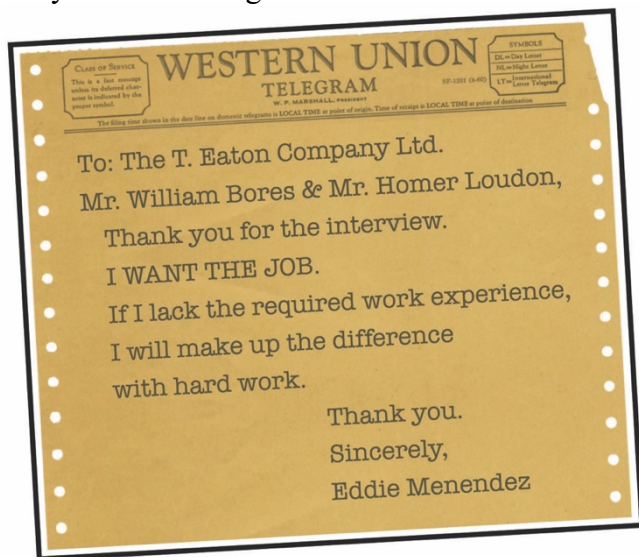


Tom Reardon warned me that he had sent a few candidates to his brother-in-law at Eaton's, but he didn't think any of them were being offered the job.

At my interview, I met with a Mr. Bores as well as others. The role was, Assistant to the Buyer to a Mr. Homer Loudon.

Everything seemed to go smoothly. But after a week, I received a letter from Mr. Bores asking me to return for a third meeting. They needed to “ascertain that I had the proper and sufficient experience for the position.” How much experience could they think they were buying for \$90 a week?

I immediately sent this Telegram:



When I returned to Eaton’s for that extra meeting, Mr. Bores left me sitting in his office while he wandered around searching for a Mr. Vincent, their Principal Piece Goods Buyer, so he could have him in to meet me.

Len Vincent finally walked in and introduced himself. Oddly, Mr. Bores never offered him my resume or my application. He just handed him the Telegram. Mr. Vincent read it very quickly and said, “Yes, this is the kind of person we need to hire!” And then he walked out again.

And just like that, I had the job. And the Telegram may have helped (I think it actually did) but still, it seemed clear to me that I'd been brought back for a visual inspection. It felt vaguely reminiscent of that incident at Fairchild Camera, when Marge Kessler couldn't see me – very plainly sitting there – because my name didn't seem to match my face.

I didn't let it bother me for too long. After all, I was now an Assistant Buyer for a giant department store chain (even if all their stores were in Canada). I was finally on a career path.

Mr. Loudon showed me how he bought linens and “domestics,” table clothes, sheets, pillowcases, and blankets for forty stores. And piece goods too, in hundreds and hundreds of styles. It was a vast department for Eaton's.

To give you a visual,
at their annual fabrics
Spotlight Sale, they had
four hundred & fifty
salesclerks out on the floor
cutting piece goods
for the customers.

“Thirty-six inches to the yard!”
the supervisor would scold.
(Lest they give away the store,
one inch at a time.)



Eaton's 1957 Summer Catalogue

Homer Loudon, I'd learned, was sort of a legend. During the war, he was the guy who could source the goods that were truly scarce. And he had a sixth sense for what the profitable 'going price' would be in a volatile market.

In less than a year, Homer Loudon retired, and I was promoted into his position as Buyer. I organized his retirement party!

Ria had already been doing great in her career! I had mentioned that she was an engineer. Well, she worked for the Telephone Company when AT&T was THE telephone company.



The Western Electric Model 500
was standard issue throughout the 1950s,
though many clung to their trusty Model 302's.

Ria was responsible for five telephone exchange buildings (or hubs). One of those buildings was dedicated just to Idlewild Airport. As you could imagine, the outages might range from someone not getting their dial tone to something more urgent.

She had a staff of four.

Very often, Ria would have to swap-in new equipment in the middle of the night when people were not using phones. There could be ten or fifteen men at these “cutovers” with her, up on poles or down through manholes. Ria didn’t have to climb up there, or go down there, but she did. I escorted her on a few of these to watch her work. She had everyone’s respect.

Ria was one of the first five female engineers hired by The New York Telephone Company as part of a pilot program. Navigating promotions in pay or responsibility over men took a unique combination of grace and steel, which Ria certainly possessed.

By this time, Ria's busiest customer, Idlewild Airport, had begun planning for their "Terminal City" expansion.



Ria was called on to chart out the trunk lines, capacities, and distribution. (It looked like a geometrical drawing!)

Ria had set out to be a math teacher, originally, not an engineer. Out of college, she'd taught as a Substitute in the high school where her sister Pat was still a student. But when they invited her to join the full-time staff – at a much lower hourly wage – she decided to 'revisit' her career counselors at Adelphi.

They told her about the new pilot program at AT&T and encouraged her to apply with her math degree (and to bring her portfolio of drawings).



Two of the other five engineers, Irene Wu, and Lynn Vogel (along with husbands, Jon and Bob), became lifelong friends.

By this point, I had Ria's ring, but I'd been waiting to present it to her – "officially" – to align with the timing of Mrs. Renna's springtime, backyard engagement party. And to be honest, it was kind of burning a hole in my top dresser drawer.

Just then, I got a call from Jerry Croteau. He said, "Menendez! Joan and I are coming to New York. We're eloping!"



We loved Joan for Jerry. She was strong, keenly intelligent, and fun loving. And they were totally aligned in what they wanted out of life and how they were going to get there.

(This is a photo from the following year with their first child, my godson, Jerry Jr.)

I suppose I got swept up in their excitement and decided to give Ria her ring that day!

I took the day off and, with Joan and Jerry, went to Ria's office to pick her up for lunch. I whispered my plan to one of her colleagues and asked if they'd decorate her desk for our return.

It just seemed like the perfect time to do it. I knew how excited Ria would be for the Croteaus, and that she'd be bursting to tell the world about us too. So right there, in a Kosher delicatessen by the beach in Far Rockaway, I formally proposed.

The only problem now – not for me, but for Mrs. Renna – was that it wasn't quite springtime yet and her backyard engagement extravaganza was giving way to a more casual basement affair.

In defending my decision to shift our timeline, I was perhaps uncharacteristically direct. “The what and the where of these plans will always be up to you,” I told them. “But I must insist that ‘the when’ of marrying your daughter remain up to me.”

They completely agreed. And I believe that conversation set a good-standing precedent for honesty and independence.

And sure, the ceilings were a little bit low
but with streamers around the plumbing,
everyone in attendance had
a wonderful time!

And our parents
got along just
famously.



From that day forward,
we were in full motion
as a duo.

And it seemed like
everybody was
on our side.

We felt free.

Still, there was no getting around it – in those days, an unmarried couple traveling together would need to have a chaperone along.

So, when Ria and I took a spontaneous road trip up through New England that spring, my mother served in the time-honored role.



June 1956



I was in one room.
Ria and my mother
were in the other.

My Mom always
made certain that
she claimed the bed
closest to the door!

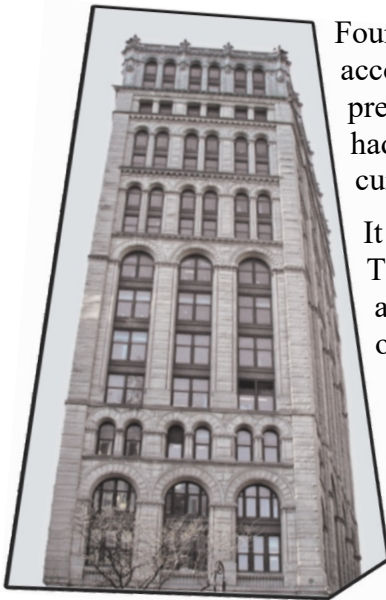
The big patterns of my life were changing. There was little time anymore for our basement parties or the Knights of Columbus.



Let alone the Elks Lodge which I had also joined after being discharged from the Army.



(Mostly I'd joined for their amazing clubhouse on Queens Boulevard which had a swimming pool.) However, by this time Ria was encouraging me to attend Pace College at night.



Founded by two brothers (partners in the accounting firm of Pace & Pace) to offer prep courses for the CPA Exam, Pace had now grown into a full and respected curriculum for business.

It was housed in the original New York Times Building on "Newspaper Row," across from City Hall, which had been one of the world's earliest skyscrapers.

I can only hope that, at the time, I applied some of what was taught because my prevailing memory of Pace College was of being tired after a long day.

And just when life was speeding up!



Five weeks before the wedding, Ria's sister Patricia and her cousin Theresa threw a surprise Bridal Shower for her!

Fortunately, all I had to do was get her there.



Wishing her well by the wishing well.

I don't mean to turn this into my wedding album, but if you're asking which single day most altered the arc of my journey, then yes, this would have to be amongst the biggest.

Also, these photos remain the clearest images we have of some of the characters you've met so far. Here, all looking their best!

Our wedding day was Saturday, April 27, 1957.



Jim & Jeanie's son, James Rupert (posed here with his namesake), was our ring bearer.

My sister Pat was in a cast from hip to toe or else would have joined our wedding party.

Seated across from Grandma Lupo is Grandma Renna, (the original Chicken Market Girl).

And of course, sister Patricia, Frances & Sylvester.

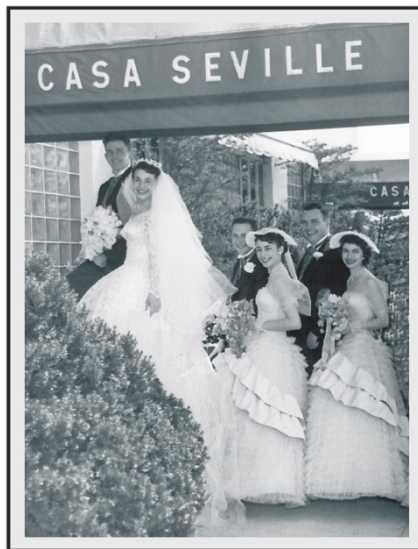


When the Rennas had tried to involve me in which of the elite country clubs or hotel ballrooms would be best for the reception, I said to them, "I'll marry Ria on the back of a tugboat."

Thankfully, that discussion led to the more interesting choice of a recently converted night club called Casa Seville.

Still, the Rennas spared no expense. Hors d'oeuvres of every kind flowed in every direction around cascading fountains of champagne.

Even Uncle Al mistook the cocktail hour for the dinner. Then he moved upstairs and heard the Big Band and saw all of the arrangements.



(Much better than my tugboat idea!)

Our Wedding Party:

Patricia Renna

Theresa Lupo

Jeanie Menendez

Irene Wu



Nick Moriates

Jack O'Connell

Jim Menendez

Bob Legendry

and
Jerry Croteau

The church service and ceremony had been held at the newly anointed Cathedral of St. Agnes, which only a few days earlier had been St. Agnes Church. In fact, we could say that we were the first couple to be married from that cathedral.

Nick was our best man. We'd already been through so much together. Little did I know, we were only getting started!



And Ria? Well, I didn't know if I was going on her adventure or she on mine, but I knew we had everything we needed!

“Just
Married!”

