

BIG AND UGLY ENOUGH – The Story of Linda Schector
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CHAPTER ONE

It was a Saturday morning when I first outran Pa. I was only 10 years old. Pa had sired 20 kids. Except for Mikey, I was the only one he couldn't intimidate. In 10 years, he'd never caused me to shed a tear; it made him furious.

"It's too hard! I'm not gonna! Bully!" I shouted over my shoulder. I crashed through the back screen door at a dead run and sent it flying against the clapboard house with a sharp crack.

"Come back here!" Pa yelled. I heard the rapid thudding of his shoes on the back steps. He was right behind me. I could count on a beating if he caught me, and I was still sore from the last one.

My bare, calloused feet pounded across bare earth and mowed weeds in the field behind the house. My yellow flowered dress, ingeniously sewn from a chicken feed sack, flew up to my hips as my browned knees pumped even more furiously. Pa was over 60 by this time and not quite the same man he was 20 years ago; if I could just outlast him. Finally, his footsteps faded behind me. When I reached the woods beyond the field, I felt brave enough to look back over my shoulder. He'd stopped, red-faced and gasping for air. It was over. I'd won. But there were no long-term victories around our house. I knew I'd have to answer for it sooner or later. Still, that fleeting moment of success whet my appetite for winning, and it would serve me well throughout my 72 years.

We'd moved to Long Island from the Italian neighborhood in Brooklyn in 1931. I was three months old, the 19th of 20 children. We settled in Elmont, an empty tract of land west of Franklin Square and north of Valley Stream and just beyond the line from Queens. Pa and my brothers build a two-story house in an open field that ten years later would be dotted with homes.

Pa opened a grocery store not a stone's throw away from the house. Behind the store, they threw up four whitewashed walls and called it a barn. We raised chickens. Every Saturday morning without fail all the little, old Italian women from the neighborhood would gather around the chicken coop to pick out the perfect hen for their Sunday dinners. They'd stand around the chicken-wire pen, resting their chipped enamel dishpans against the hips of calico housedresses, and point out the birds they wanted.

"That brown one there," one of them would shout to me.

"The fat one with the crooked feathers," another would call.

Now, I had 11 older siblings and one younger one, but for reasons known only to him, Pa made it *my* job to catch the chickens and haul them over to the fence so the women could pinch their breasts and study their thighs to see if they were suitable fare for their dinner table.

"Nope, not that one. Too skinny. Let me see that one over there. The feisty one." They barked out orders like jealous roosters and then cackled to each other in Italian under their breath.

I'd throw one chicken back and race around until I caught another one. Did you ever try to catch a chicken when it's scared or angry or both? In clouds of dung dust and feathers? In mud or slush? Or worse, in snow? There's only one word to describe it: Miserable.

For more of Big and Ugly Enough, please call or e-mail. I look forward to hearing from you.