

5-18-2007

## The New Orleans Grocery Man: Ferrara Supermarket's Mr. Merrill

Amy Marie Ferrara  
*University of New Orleans*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>

---

### Recommended Citation

Ferrara, Amy Marie, "The New Orleans Grocery Man: Ferrara Supermarket's Mr. Merrill" (2007). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 1059.

<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/1059>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uno.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uno.edu).

The New Orleans Grocery Man:  
Ferrara Supermarket's Mr. Merrill

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements of the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts  
in  
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing

by

Amy Marie Ferrara

B.A. Loyola University New Orleans, 2004

May, 2007

## *Acknowledgements*

This is a project that I could not have begun and completed without the encouragement of many family and friends. First, I would like to thank Marilyn O'Connor, my second grade teacher, who questioned whether I wrote or copied the Easter bunny story I had turned in for credit. She eventually trusted that it was, in fact, my own work, and I began filling my red notebook with stories after that day. Many thanks also to Kerrie Ann Frey who taught me, as a senior in high school, to “write how you talk.” I would also like to thank Professor Randy Bates for working with me for nearly a year as my thesis director. His patience with my writing and his interest in the subject inspired me to continuously edit and re-edit “overpacked” sentences and to reflect further on how specific memories shaped my life. He truly guided me as both a teacher and writing mentor, believing in me through the entire project. I would also like to acknowledge Professors Joanna Leake and Neil Thornton for taking the time to serve on my committee and to read about the people whom I consider a special part of my life. Outside of academia, I would like to thank Ferrara’s former customers and employees who shared with me their memories of both the grocery and my grandfather. Their respect for each made me never doubt my intentions for writing this story. I am also grateful to Justin Smith, whose overall support for this project and remarkable editing skills inspired me to keep writing and rewriting. And of course I would like to thank my family, and specifically my parents, who have read my stories for twenty years. It was Mom and Dad who bought me notebooks, encouraged me to write, and, with this project, edited my prose to help me keep the details true. Their support made me want to keep writing the story that needed to be written.

## *Table of Contents*

Preface.....	1
Chapter 1	
Talking Groceries.....	7
Chapter 2	
Tell Me You're a Ferrara .....	15
Chapter 3	
Atlantic Crossings.....	23
Chapter 4	
Breaking of Ties.....	33
Chapter 5	
A Packed Suitcase and a Boxed Roast.....	46
Chapter 6	
Our Stubborn Gentleman .....	60
Chapter 7	
My City, My Grandfather .....	78
Chapter 8	
Common Love .....	88
Chapter 9	
Peppermint Patties .....	99
Chapter 10	
Groceries and Grandpa .....	109
Pictures.....	114
Vita.....	119

## *Abstract*

Like many Sicilians who immigrated to Louisiana in the late 1800s, my family set up a corner grocery in New Orleans. From this small store grew a business that became New Orleans' oldest family-owned grocery. Ferrara Supermarket, however, eventually feuded my father and aunt, dividing our family. Grandpa didn't understand how a business, which had supported his family for nearly a century, had separated two of his children. He seemed to favor my aunt over my father, and I lost much of my respect for him. It wouldn't be until I evacuated with my grandparents during Hurricane Katrina that I would gain my faith back in Grandpa. A few weeks after the storm hit, Grandpa learned in a single day that his house had flooded, his grocery was ruined, and he had three months left to live. His sickness did, however, unify the two fighting sides of our family.

## *Preface*

On an afternoon when I visited Grandpa two months before his death, I told him I had met the reporter and nonfiction writer Rick Bragg at one of his local appearances. I had already started writing about my grandfather then, although it was mainly just notes, and Bragg's book about his own grandfather, *Ava's Man*, kept coming to my mind. I remember telling Grandpa about Bragg's book and how the author talked with family and friends in order to write about a man who had died before he was born.

"It's about his grandfather," I stressed. I was eager to see Grandpa's reaction. He knew I wrote, and it wasn't uncommon for me to ask him questions about our family's heritage. But I didn't dare admit to this modest man that I planned to write his story, to try to honor his name and his grocery. And he never did ask if I had written anything about him or Ferrara Supermarket. Instead he just nodded, turned his head, and looked out of the window. Across the room, I sat still and waited for him to say something, but he was quiet. Finally, he turned around, arched his back, and began talking to me about God and Heaven for the first time in my life. It was as if he wanted me to learn of his struggle with death as a dying man who wanted to tell his secrets.

After I left his house, I went to a nearby coffee shop, opened my laptop, and wrote.

\*\*\*\*\*

I have found that in writing about my grandfather, it has been both the hardest and the easiest task I have done in my young life. I began organizing my notes into chapters shortly after his death, and while I felt a persistent pull to put his story into words, my emotions stalled my

progress. The memories seemed so real, and I wanted to drive down the street to his grocery store, Ferrara Supermarket, and see him standing outside in the parking lot with a cigarette in his hand. But this was impossible. Grandpa had died, and the only way for me to make him come alive again, I determined, was to force the memories into words and the words into chapters and the chapters into a book. I needed this. My family needed this. His customers needed this.

So I wrote, and I discovered that it was easy to remember the sound of his deep voice and to see the way he reached across his chest and into his shirt pocket for a Winston. Even now, Grandpa's smell is present in my memory as if he is standing next to me, in this room, as I type, squinting behind glasses and saying with a chuckle, "Lord have mercy."

These are my memories of Merrill Ferrara as my grandfather. But, besides being a family man, Grandpa had been a grocer. Most of my remembrances of him take place at Ferrara's, and I learned from talking with others that it was the same for them too. I spoke with some of my grandfather's old customers, his two sons, my siblings, my mother, and the butcher who worked under him for forty years. I talked with his cousin Anthony who grew up with Grandpa near the first Ferrara's Food Store and who later worked as his manager at the Supermarket. I asked his niece and nephews what it was like to stock shelves and cashier for their uncle, and instead of immediately answering the question, they each first told me that my grandfather had been a wonderful man.

When he heard I was writing about his Uncle Merrill, Grandpa's nephew, Ronnie, gave me a folder of copied pages. His Aunt Lil, Grandpa's younger sister, had gone to the New Orleans public library years earlier and recorded births, deaths, marriages, and baptisms. She had typed the names of Grandpa's aunts, uncles, and father, Sicilian men and women who had immigrated to Louisiana with their parents in the late nineteenth century. I found a 1920 New

Orleans census online and checked the names again, repeating them out loud. “Salvatore.” I pronounced my great-grandfather’s name, stressing the “e” on the end as a long “a.” “Salvatore,” I said again, this time silencing the “e.”

Grandpa’s older son, Dennis, gave me a tape he had recorded of a conversation between him and Salvatore, and I heard for myself how Grandpa’s father pronounced his own name, with the silent “e.” Salvatore, or Tot, talked about his parents’ immigration from Alia, Sicily, to Litcher, Louisiana, where they worked in the sugar cane fields. He was three years old when he moved from Sicily, and by the time his parents bought a grocery in the Faubourg Marigny of New Orleans in 1906, he was eleven.

To learn more about the overall Italian immigration to Louisiana and, primarily, to New Orleans, I read sociologists A.V. Margavio’s and Jerome J. Salomone’s *Bread and Respect: The Italians of Louisiana*. By reading about other Italian families, I came to understand further why food and groceries have been so important in my own family. Whether it’s the French Market or the corner grocery, Italians seem to naturally surround themselves with a rich variety of fruits, vegetables, herbs, and breads. It’s no wonder that at every one of our family dinners or birthday parties, the topic of conversation is still the grocery store.

Elizabeth Mullener’s *Times-Picayune* April 3, 2005 article “Raised on Italian Food” helped me to imagine, through other families’ stories, what it must have been like for Grandpa to live with his sisters and parents above the corner grocery. Mullener mentions many local Italian groceries, including Ferrara’s, and how each has contributed significantly to our vivid New Orleans culture.

I also read Joseph Macaluso’s *Italian Immigrant Families: Grocers, Proprietors, and Entrepreneurs*. Although I didn’t cite any specific information from this book, the stories about



individual Italian families helped me further to see how connected my family still is to Italian customs, even one hundred years after my great-great grandparents' immigration.

Thinking back to the recorded tape, I realized that Salvatore talked only about the grocery and his family. In typical Italian fashion, they had become interchangeable to him, just as they had been for his son, my grandfather.

Around the time of my high school graduation, I saw how connected our family and Ferrara Supermarket were for Grandpa. There had been a rift between my father and aunt over the business, and through this conflict, I thought I perceived a weakness in my grandfather's character that I hadn't known existed. It initially seemed to me that in this dispute, he had favored his daughter over his son, appearing to love one more than the other. Up until this point, he had always seemed strong to me, almost invincible, and in my seventeen years of life, I had never before doubted him.

It took our evacuation together from Hurricane Katrina six years later to make me understand that this connection between family and business was a reflection of the way Grandpa had grown up on the second story of the small corner grocery in the Faubourg Marigny. In this rift, he hadn't favored his daughter over his son as I had thought. He had acted as a traditionally protective father of his only daughter against a competent son with grocery store talent. He just couldn't accept the fact that his grocery store, which had always brought his family together, had separated two of his children. My grandfather was caught in a web of love for his younger son, daughter, and grocery.

I realized at the end of Grandpa's life that I had misunderstood his love for his children and business. While we were evacuated for the hurricane, I listened as his coughing became stronger and I watched as his body grew weaker, just as the storm's flood had taken the strength

out of New Orleans hundreds of miles away. On a single day, my grandfather learned that he had three months left to live, that his house had flooded, and that Ferrara Supermarket, New Orleans' oldest family-owned grocery, was ruined. But he smiled many more times in those last three months. One day, I saw my uncle, aunt, father, and grandmother sitting in a semi-circle around Grandpa. I remember there was laughter, and much of it was from Grandpa. It was as if there had never been a family dispute.

When Grandpa died, Grandma left pinned to the wall the white poster board that he had used to display two photographic images: one pictured a man and several small children, one of whom was my grandfather, outside of the first Ferrara's Food store; the other showed a jet ski creating a wake in the flood water reaching the Ferrara Supermarket nameplate eight feet from the ground. I realized by observing Grandpa's composition, this board, and its images that he had been ready to leave what he had accomplished in this world in order to discover what lay ahead in the next.

In writing this nonfiction story about my grandfather, I have discovered a deeper appreciation for my Italian heritage, him, and Ferrara Supermarket. And while both Grandpa and the grocery are gone, my Italian heritage will never cease to remain a part of my family's life and my own. Now more than ever, I am aware of my family's traditions and of the dedication my grandfather had to his ancestors' businesses and livelihood.



The grocery man

## *Chapter 1*

### *Talking Groceries*

The bald spot on top of Grandpa's head rotate slowly to the right as his large hands turned the car to the curb.

"There," Grandpa said, his grip still on the wheel. The car jerked to a stop, and he pointed to a two-story wooden building that hugged the corner of Spain and Chartres Streets. "That there's the first store."

I rolled down my window and felt the thick New Orleans heat pour into the car, the humidity melting into my skin as I sat on my legs and held my head out of the open window. During the twenty-minute drive from my house near Lake Pontchartrain toward the Faubourg Marigny, a neighborhood immediately downriver from the French Quarter, I had pictured my grandfather as a thin gangly teenager, not much older than myself at the time, with a newsboy hat cocked on his head as he stood among the crowd in his parents' grocery. A chesty man behind a wooden counter handed him a grocery bag and in one quick motion, my grandfather turned to face a pair of double screen doors as he swung the groceries down from the counter to his side. He smiled and tipped his hat to a woman as she walked past him through the doorway, and he pressed his back against the screen a few seconds longer so that the hem of her skirt didn't catch between the tile floor and the bottom of the door as it slammed into place. In my mind I could hear the clamor of customers in the family's small corner grocery as Grandpa left with a delivery in his hand. I had rolled the window down when the car stopped to see if I could hear those same sounds outside, near the store.

“Roll that window up, Amy,” Grandma said with a sigh from the passenger seat. “It’s getting hot in here.” I was lost in my own expanding imagination, and as the glass moved up, I continued to study the peeling white-paint exterior of the vacant building. I imagined four white columns reaching down from the wooden gallery to the sidewalk, and I pictured my grandfather as a boy resting his back against one of those columns while he talked with customers outside the grocery. I thought about whether one of the three large windows on the second story would have been pushed up to catch a breeze from the Mississippi River a few blocks away if my grandfather and his family had still been living there, above the store. I wondered, too, if there had been a sign over the front door advertising that this was Ferrara’s or if the neighbors even needed to be told who sold groceries on this particular corner in New Orleans.

\*\*\*\*\*

Several years later, my grandfather leaned forward and rested his forearms on the edge of our dining room table while Dad placed pieces of lemon and chocolate layered Doberge cake onto paper plates. It was someone’s birthday, though I can’t remember whose, and high-pitched voices filled the small room.

“Brian,” Grandpa said to my dad, stretching the first syllable of his younger son’s name out a second longer than anyone else did. “How ‘bout that refrigerator? Hussman fix it yet?” He spoke in a rough, yet friendly tone, often dropping syllables from words. It was the quintessential New Orleans accent. If my grandfather had traveled to New Jersey, they would have mistaken him for a local.

“Yeah,” Dad answered in a similar, though softer voice. “They fixed it, but we had to buy a new compressah.” Grandpa shook his head and began to wipe the ends of the colored candles off with a paper napkin.

There are five children in my family, and for each birthday it was always the same. Grocery talk, my older sister and I used to call it. This type of conversation also circled from the store’s aisles to our dinner table every day, often with an announcement of the deep red coat of recently delivered Louisiana strawberries, the fresh smell of tied parsley sprigs, or the firm feel of French Bread loaves. I was well into my teens before I realized that the daily milk delivery wasn’t a typical topic of conversation at other families’ daily meals and special gatherings.

“The difference between cucumbers and zucchinis,” Grandpa projected from his kitchen table while I visited with him between college courses one afternoon, “is that cucumbers are usually eaten raw.” He twisted a piece of paper towel in his left hand, dipped a spoon into his bowl of Neapolitan ice cream with his right, and continued talking. “At the store cucumbers cost, I’d say, about seventy-nine cents a pound. Zucchinis, well you can get ‘em for a bit more, say, eighty-nine cents a pound.” I nodded and kept quiet, knowing there was more to follow. “You can do a lot with those fruits.” He stopped then and looked at my half-empty bowl of dessert.

“Get yourself some whipped cream to put on that,” he suggested. “Look,” he said and pointed after I opened the refrigerator door. “It’s next to the pickle jar.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Grandpa was an old man then, and he had long since moved and settled his grocery business from the Faubourg Marigny to the New Orleans neighborhood of Gentilly, about five miles from where the first Ferrara’s Food Store stood on the corner of Spain and Chartres.

Whenever I think of my grandfather, I think of this building in Gentilly. Built in the 1940s, it was a simple tan one-story square structure made of concrete. It displayed red letters about three feet above the door noting that this was Ferrara Supermarket. Eventually red, white, and green stripes would string their way from the beginning and end of the sign, running to the edge and wrapping around the sides of the walls.

Even with the banners of Italian colors extended around its exterior, the building was about as non-descript as Grandpa, a tall, thin man who wore a white button-down shirt and gray cotton pants nearly every day, with a newsboy hat covering the bald spot in his white hair. But just as much as my grandfather and his grocery store seemed to blend in with the daily happenings at the corner of Elysian Fields Avenue and Robert E. Lee Boulevard, they were both equally noticeable in the New Orleans community. Grandpa was known as the grocer, and when I entered high school, classmates often asked me if, because of my last name, I was related to the friendly old man who was always at the corner grocery store in Gentilly. My grandfather had become the New Orleans grocery man.

“I’m Merrill Ferrara, the grocery man,” Grandpa would say, his fingers on the brim of his hat, as he introduced himself to strangers. When he answered the phone at Ferrara’s, it was the same. “This is Merrill Ferrara,” he’d say, “the grocery man.”

I can still see my grandfather standing with his brown shoes planted a few inches apart on the grocery’s lot, as he often stood, and with his hands on either side of his narrow waist. Each arm created a triangle, and when I was a child I had the idea that these triangles were like angel wings. I believed they would lift him to the roof of the building so that he could get a better view than from where he stood on the ground.

Of course I never told my grandfather this; he would have laughed his characteristic Grandpa laugh that sounded much like the traditional Santa Claus “Ho, ho, ho!” Most of my grandfather’s customers knew that laugh, and many maneuvered across the orange vinyl tile at the grocery in search of Mr. Merrill, to give him a kiss on the cheek or a firm handshake.

Even though by the time I was a child the traditional friendly neighborhood grocery had become more a New Orleans icon than a daily necessity, my grandfather still knew most of his customers by name or by the products they bought each week. He knew that when Ms. Theresa came in the store, she planned to go crabbing. She always bought turkey necks on her way to Lake Pontchartrain. When Ms. Bertha shopped, she often asked Grandpa where she could find the can that pictured a girl in a garden on the front. My grandfather knew she wanted Contadina tomato sauce. Mickey Williams, whose family lived near Ferrara Supermarket when she was a child, remembered an afternoon she spent with Grandpa after she wandered away from home. She was about three years old, and while her mother tended to her baby siblings, she left the house. In her wanderings around the neighborhood, the mailman found the little girl and brought her to Ferrara’s on the corner since Mickey was too young to explain where she lived. My grandfather called her mother, hoisted her small body up onto one of the white checkout counters, and fed her grapes until Mrs. Williams was able to walk down the street to retrieve her daughter.

Even with customers he met for the first time, my grandfather acted as if they had always been neighborhood friends. When Anna Bonomo and her husband moved near the grocery store in the 1950s, the young couple met my grandfather the first time they walked into Ferrara’s. The Bonomos had a newborn baby, and money, Anna admitted, was scarce.



“Your grandfather told us to take what we needed,” she reminisced. “He said to pay whenever we were able.” You can’t live without groceries, Grandpa told his new neighbors. You can’t live without groceries.

With other customers, Grandpa played games. When a shopper would ask him where a product was located in the store, and if they happened to be standing just a few inches away from the item, Grandpa would say, “Put your left arm out.” The local would instinctively oblige this old man with the easy smile. “And your right arm back.” While still looking at my grandfather, the customer would reach toward the stacked items behind him or her. “And shake ‘em all about. You’re doing the Hokey Pokey now, so turn yourself around,” he’d sing as if it was one of his grandchildren he was entertaining. “That’s what it’s all a-bout.” Grandpa never met a sour customer who didn’t enjoy performing the Hokey Pokey for him. Aisle five would suddenly become a tunnel of laughter.

\*\*\*\*\*

When Grandpa eventually passed his business down to his children, he moved most of his own work from inside to outside the building, bringing his tools to Ferrara’s early in the morning rather than produce from the French Market. The grocery’s parking lot, where I often saw him poised in his angel wings stance, became my grandfather’s playground as he spent much of his time patching and painting this part of grocery’s property.

Sometimes he gathered loose shopping carts from across his wide concrete block, locking one into the other and engineering back toward the front door a long train of rattling metal that he quickly dismembered again, one by one, to entering customers. Other times Grandpa patched bumps and holes around the grocery’s property, pouring wet cement over the uneven areas and,

with a stick, writing the names of his ten grandchildren into it before it dried. But what truly impassioned my grandfather as he busied himself outside his grocery was rolling yellow lines onto the cement. Grandpa found pleasure in kneeling on the ground and pushing his thin body forward and backward in rhythm with the turning of a small roller that he used to brush paint over the lines and bumpers in his lot. He took pride in seeing the pale yellow lines grow darker with each stroke and in watching as his painted block of concrete – his parking lot – filled with the cars of Ferrara Supermarket customers.

One afternoon when I was a teenager, I saw my grandfather bent over a bumper near the back corner of the building, close to the dumpsters. It was a regular business day at Ferrara's, and Grandpa had sectioned off a square of the parking lot with cones so that customers wouldn't drive over the wet paint. I noticed that one half of the bumper was pale, and the other half, the side my grandfather hovered over, was a bold yellow that appeared shiny, even as I parked ten feet away. As I slid out of my car, I called to Grandpa. He turned, smiled, and waved the roller in the air to signal hello. Within a few seconds, he was bent over the bumper again and stroking the block of concrete with another layer of yellow paint.

Each time he began the painting process, Grandpa used a broom to sweep away the debris from the cement so that leaves and cigarette butts wouldn't stick to his paint. "Sweep each line and bumper first like this," Gregory, my oldest brother, remembered Grandpa said as he demonstrated the process to his grandson. I imagine my grandfather had his shirtsleeves rolled up to his tan elbows as he often did when I saw him working outside the store.

But Gregory knew he didn't have to sweep or paint each line perfectly when he helped Grandpa. For our grandfather, it was the activity of working at his grocery store with his grandson that he enjoyed more than the fact that he had outlined his parking lot with fresh coats

of yellow paint. It had been that way for years. When he painted food signs for products, my grandfather occasionally misspelled words, telling customers, for example, that Ferrara's sold jars of *maonaise* rather than *mayonnaise*. But Grandpa just smiled at the error and said he did it to attract attention; He wanted to see who would notice. So it's no surprise that by the end of the line-painting morning, he had yellow on his gray pants and white shirt, on his hands, and even on his truck.

On the days Grandpa set aside to paint his parking lot, he collected his supplies in a worn brown box. He then placed his materials in the back of his rusted white pickup truck and drove half a mile from his house to Ferrara's at an hour when most people are still tucked in bed. Less than a year before Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans on August 29, 2005, Gregory, then the vice-president of operations in the family business, hired someone to resurface the parking lot and to repaint the yellow lines in one production. But after a few months the yellow lines began to fade, which Grandpa pointed out to his grandson several times, hinting that his lines would have lasted longer. The paint was still visible and the customers still respected the designated spaces, but my grandfather couldn't look at the faded lines in his parking lot any longer. So he petitioned Gregory to help him one Saturday morning. My twenty-six-year-old brother drove thirty minutes from his house to Ferrara Supermarket to meet Grandpa at the designated time, 6:30. When Gregory arrived fifteen minutes early, our eighty-seven-year-old grandfather was already there, sweeping debris from the faded lines. A can of yellow paint was open at his feet.

## *Chapter 2*

### *Tell Me You're a Ferrara*

When I climbed out of bed on that hot, humid May morning and saw Grandpa talking with Grandma in the kitchen, I knew something was wrong. Gregory, who was sixteen at the time, was in the living room, staring out of the large picture window that looked onto Leon C. Simon Drive, a street just five minutes from my own. His bulky body bounced awkwardly up and down on the carpet when he saw me, and he pointed his right hand toward the window. I remember he said something about a trashcan floating down the street, but his words became lost in the excitement of his cracking voice. My fourteen-year-old sister, Elizabeth, followed Gregory's hand to the window, and when she saw the water, she ran into the back hallway to wake our two youngest brothers. There was a swift stream of brown water in the street, and the current was pushing an empty black trashcan from one end of the two-lane residential road to the other. The street was flooded. That meant one thing: School was cancelled.

"Y'all come sit down now and eat some of this here breakfast," Grandpa said loudly. As he stood on the terrazzo floor that separated the blue carpet in the living room from the purple and orange deco rug in the den, he crossed his right arm to his left shirt pocket and patted it with his hand. When he felt his pack of Winstons, he nodded and then dropped his arm back down to his side. "There's water in that street. There's been a flood." The bottom of his faded gray pants appeared black. I knew then that he had already been to the grocery and waded in the water that had drifted into the building.

"Oh Lord have mercy," he said as he often did, shaking his head while he walked to the kitchen table. He pushed his black-framed George Burns glasses higher up on his nose.

Although we didn't know it then, the May 1995 Southeast Louisiana and Southern Mississippi flood, as it would come to be called, filled the New Orleans metropolitan area with twenty inches of water. Even though the city of New Orleans is shaped like a bowl with the majority of the landscape below sea level, it doesn't flood every time it rains. Like the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe that would occur ten years later, the May 8 disaster was a rare event for locals; it took forty hours of heavy rainfall for water to build in the streets.

Normally, Dad would have been the first responder at the flooded grocery, pulling on various plugs and punching different switches to try to get the scanners to work again. But he wasn't in town. He and my mother had gone on a business trip to the Food Marketing Institute's Food Show in Chicago, and my grandparents had agreed to watch the five of us for several days. We were at their house and under their control from Thursday until the following Monday, and that meant four mornings of sugar-loaded coffee that Grandma made especially for sleepovers. We knew Grandpa, who was managing the store in Dad's absence, would already be at work by the time we woke up, so we didn't expect to see him until our grandmother set the table for dinner in the evening.

After a quick breakfast Grandpa told Gregory to get dressed. He needed him at the store. My oldest brother rushed out of his seat and ran toward the hallway while Grandma called after him to put on shoes, not sandals.

I remember my younger brother, Michael, looked at Grandpa then from across the round kitchen table, but when my grandfather met his glance, my brother quickly reached for his black coffee cup and took a sip. I knew he wanted Grandpa to ask him to go, too. I knew Michael wanted to wade through the three inches of water to help mop the store's floor. I knew he wanted to work next to our grandfather in the same quiet way he had always preferred to sit on

Grandpa's lap rather than anyone else's when he was a toddler. But he was too shy to ask him if he could help, knowing the answer could possibly be "no." On the other hand, Hunter, the youngest, didn't worry about anything, except keeping his behavior clip daily on the yellow smiley face in his fourth grade classroom.

"Can we go too, Grandpa?" Hunter was just curious to hear what the answer would be.

"No. Just Gregory." Grandpa said, and the abruptness of his voice sounded strange. He fumbled through a drawer in the kitchen and then picked up his set of keys from the counter. He looked at my little brothers before he turned to reach for the knob of the door that led from the kitchen to the garage. There seemed to be a wrinkle over Grandpa's brow that hadn't been there when he told us goodnight the evening before. "Ya'll are too young. I don't want anyone getting hurt in that mess the water made." He paused to pick up his hat from the counter. "There's broken glass in places."

I remember now that Michael had that same look of helplessness that I saw on Grandpa's face ten years later as my grandfather sat in front of the TV at our Hurricane Katrina evacuation spot and watched his city, his New Orleans, flood on national television. That day in 1995 he may have only been eleven years old, but Michael was still a Ferrara. As a young boy he knew how important that store was to our family, and to our grandfather. He just wanted to help. He wanted to work, like Grandpa.

\*\*\*\*\*

My grandfather and Gregory left a few minutes later in Grandpa's rusted white truck. Already distracted, Hunter ran into the den and jumped on the couch to watch cartoons while Elizabeth and I went back to the window to stare at the flooded street. I was relieved that

Grandpa hadn't asked me to fetch shoes and climb into his truck. Even though I was thirteen at the time, I didn't yet understand how important the grocery was to our family.

For me, the store had just always been there. While I was a young girl it had often been my playground and, most memorably, my personal snack machine. By the time I was six years old, I knew exactly what aisle to run down to find the most sugarcoated box of cereal. I knew that on aisle eight I could find cookie boxes – Chips A'Hoy, M&M, Sandies and Vanilla Wafers – and rows of Zapps and Pringles potato chips. I knew that there were two candy displays, one in the front of the store near the cash registers and the other near the meat department in the back of the store. I followed the family rule, "Don't let the customers see you taking the candy," and I often left with chocolate stuffed in my mouth, pants pockets, jacket pockets, and clenched in my hands. Ferrara Supermarket was as routine to me as the uniform I wore every day to school.

One Saturday afternoon when we were children, I even stood with Elizabeth behind a table that Grandpa set up across from the meat counter to help her sell Girl Scout cookies, and I thought nothing of the fact that we were selling a product five feet from a grocery aisle that had three stacked rows of cookie boxes, organized by brand. But we sold a lot of cookie boxes that day, thanks to my grandfather. Every so often he appeared in front of the table, handed Elizabeth a few dollars, and picked up a box.

"I think I'm hungry for some cookies," he said loudly, and my sister shoved the dollar bills into an envelope. Grandpa then walked down one of the aisles and handed the box of Girl Scout cookies to a customer as a gift. A little while later, he appeared again at the table and said that he was hungry for some more cookies, this time maybe Thin Mints. And another customer got lucky.

I have no memory from childhood of ever wanting to wait on customers or to rip open brown boxes that contained smaller boxes of cereal in order to organize them onto shelves. But I have always liked to meet new people. So when Dad came home from work and laughed about Ms. Johnson, a regular customer who bought a basketful of cat food once a week, I wanted to know her too. When I first heard the story about the schoolgirl who went on a field trip to Bunny Bread and refused to take a souvenir loaf home because she “only got her bread from Ferrara’s,” I wanted to find out why that little girl had such a loyalty to a place that seemed so ordinary to me. On May 8, 1995, I would learn, for myself, what all this grocery talk was about.

\*\*\*\*\*

When my grandfather opened Ferrara Supermarket on that morning, he handed his customers a pencil and piece of paper as they walked through the automatic sliding glass door. “Write down the prices,” he told them as he greeted many people by name and with a slight tip of his hat.

Moments before, my brother Gregory and my grandfather had worked together with other Ferrara Supermarket employees to dry the water that had snaked its way into the grocery at 6166 Elysian Fields Avenue. Fortunately for Ferrara’s, several employees had been able to navigate the city’s flooded roads to reach the store. So while Gregory spent the morning tearing out wet carpet on the grocery’s office floor, Grandpa and the workers mopped up water from the vinyl. It was mid-day by the time Grandpa and his crew finally got the store cleaned, and it was around the same time that they discovered that water had also soaked the grocery’s computer. The price scanners didn’t work.



Eventually, Grandpa *did* recruit Elizabeth and me to help at Ferrara's on that flooded Monday morning in May. Many of his employees had stayed home to clean up their own houses that had been affected by the heavy rainfall, so he needed us to assist customers in locating prices to write down on their pieces of paper.

It wasn't long after we arrived at the store that Grandpa unlocked the glass door to let customers in. He had told Ms. Mary and Ms. Dot to stand behind their cash registers to get ready for business. He would invite customers in whether the scanners worked or not. Gregory remembered laughing as he saw Ms. Mary, a petite white-haired lady who, like Ms. Dot, watched my grandfather's grandchildren grow into adults, continually step out from her place behind the register once Grandpa opened the door for business that morning. She wanted to help customers search for products they needed, but Grandpa kept chasing her back to her register. He didn't want Ms. Mary to slip and fall on the recently mopped floor.

At first the customers seemed confused as to why a business would trust them to record prices for items they planned to purchase. It was 1995 and New Orleans was notorious for active, widespread crime. The neighborhood of Gentilly, where Ferrara Supermarket thrived, was no exception. While the middle-class suburban area was lined with modest bungalow houses and many respected schools, including the University of New Orleans, it experienced its own challenges with theft. Like most businesses, Ferrara's became victim to some of these crimes. Sometimes cigarette cartons disappeared. Other times people stole liquor. My father laughed, telling how a man once stole a six pack of beer, ran out the store, and hollered, "Free beer!" before jumping on the back of his get-away vehicle, a waiting motorcycle.

But the shock of shopping with a pencil and paper eventually lessened. Customers began to realize that our grocery had to overcome the same problems they did. Just as my brother,

grandfather, and his employees had cleaned up the store in the morning, so did these locals need bleach, buckets, and brooms to clean up the water that had also seeped into their houses.

\*\*\*\*\*

For three days, the cashiers took the customers' hand-written bills and punched numbers into hand-held calculators while Gregory, Elizabeth, and I ran from the registers to the ten various aisles in search of prices for items that customers had forgotten to write down. I never got tired. No matter how much we ran, reached, or wrote, my body kept moving in rhythm with the punching of the calculators, the calls to price rolls of paper towels, the echoes of my grandfather's laugh as it carried through building over the rattle of the moving shopping carts. He maneuvered his seventy-six-year-old frame effortlessly back and forth across the orange floor from the registers to the aisles to fetch requested items for customers. He tipped his hat to short, plump women who called him "Mr. Ferrara" in soft voices and who looked fondly and even with innocent flirtatiousness at this slim, white-haired man as if he might be their own husband. Sometime over the course of the day, Grandpa's brow straightened.

The simple idea of using a pencil and slips of paper was a reflection of the way Grandpa grew up in the New Orleans grocery business. My grandfather learned how to be a grocer from his own father, Salvatore, a man who allowed customers to store their meat and fish packages from other markets in his grocery's icebox until they needed them at a later time. Salvatore raised my grandfather in the same grocery store that his father, Rosolino, established in 1906. Merrill, with his two sisters, Gloria and Librolia (Lil), lived above the same space that served customers throughout the day, without any boundaries between work and home. He grew up around stacks of canned goods and cuts of meat and he soon became the grocery's constant

delivery boy. Even when he was in his fifties, Mr. Merrill still occasionally delivered groceries to neighborhood customers who weren't physically able to do their own shopping. If there was a way to serve customers, my grandfather, like his own father, would find it. And do it with a smile and tip of his hat.

\*\*\*\*\*

Several times over those few days, gray-haired women grabbed my thin arm and gently turned me around as I attempted to maneuver in and out of the throngs of customers shopping the aisles. The conversations were always the same.

“Oh, honey,” they exclaimed. “You must be a Ferrara. Tell me you're a Ferrara.”

I'd nodded, smiled, and ran through a list of names in my head, trying to remember if this was some relative I was supposed to know.

“You look just like your father,” it seemed they always somehow decided once they scanned my round nose and brunette hair. I knew I looked more like my mother's Irish side of the family, but I nodded anyway. “And your brother too, honey.” Even though he's over a foot taller, there is a resemblance between Gregory and me in the round shapes of our faces and in our light brown eyes.

“Then you must be Merrill's granddaughter.” The ladies' cheeks blushed red at this realization and their painted lips stretched farther across their faces. I nodded and smiled again, and just as I started to turn around, they squeezed me against their soft bosoms. “I've known your grandfather for ages, dawlin'.” The notorious New Orleans accent always became thicker as the ladies continued to press me against them. “We've shopped in this store forehvah,” they said. “He's family.”

### *Chapter 3*

#### *Atlantic Crossings*

Grandma placed the brittle picture in my lap.

“Your grandfather,” she said with a smile. “Which one do you think he is?”

Across the room Grandpa chuckled in his chair as I scanned the black and white photograph that had, with age, turned gray. It showed three rows of uniformed men – kneeling, sitting, and standing – nearly all wearing expressionless faces. If it hadn’t been for my grandfather’s presence in that picture, I would have wondered if these men had just watched a government vehicle carry a friend’s coffin past the cameraman. Yet there was Grandpa, standing in the back row, his feet spread apart on the dirt, smiling. His hair was dark, his body was lean, and his mouth was set in a grin that made me curious to know if a comrade to either his right or his left had just whispered a joke in his ear. In every war picture that Grandma placed in my lap through the years, I learned to look for the one soldier who beamed like a child on the candy aisle.

But these were all taken before the Battle of Normandy on June 6, 1944, when my grandfather charged onto Omaha Beach in a fury of army fatigues and thick military boots, his young body dripping wet from the waters of the English Channel. He was part of the forward observer team, the soldiers in the artillery who clamored ahead of the infantry to direct gunfire into the enemy line.

For whatever reason on that day in 1944, as Grandpa plowed ahead on Omaha Beach, a commanding officer selected him to take Lieutenant Colonel Alfred A. Alvarez to the Normandy bluff, where he would radio coordinates back to the field artillery units.

With Grandpa in the lead and Alvarez in command, they charged across the beach with several other men and seventy-five pounds of equipment among them, dodging enemy fire until they reached the wooden steps that led to the Omaha bluff. As they hurried to the top, they bounded over slain American soldiers, men who had, for a reason I haven't been able to learn, preceded the forward observer team. When they reached the bluff, they provided the first land-based artillery support in the Battle of Normandy.

Alvarez later wrote of this event in *Field Artillery's* "7<sup>th</sup> FA on D-Day at Omaha Beach: First to Fire," mentioning Lieutenant Merrill Ferrara several times in his article.<sup>1</sup>

"This officer," Alvarez wrote, "earned his second Silver Star as he led us up the beach and up the bluff that day."

The stars were displayed in a framed glass case hanging on the wall in the hallway near my grandparents' bedroom, but I never understood their significance. Now I know the Silver Star is awarded to an Army man who has acted gallantly during enemy combat. If I had asked Grandpa why the Army had granted him such an honor, he would have laughed and said, "They must have just liked me."

But the trek up to the bluff during the Battle of Normandy hadn't been entirely successful. Once the men arrived at the top, Alvarez noticed that a dark red wetness soaked the crotch of my grandfather's fatigues. He had been shot. On the bluff, Grandpa dropped his trousers to let Alvarez apply a battle dressing.

The bullet remained lodged in my grandfather's leg for the rest of his life. It wasn't until I reached the WWII chapter in my fifth grade history textbook that my father told me, matter-of-factly, about the bullet in his father's leg. He may have thought he had already mentioned it earlier in my childhood. I am the middle of five children, and often information passes from my

two older siblings to my two youngest brothers without my even hearing it. It's for this reason that I sometimes need to ask questions. So, curious to know more, I later questioned Grandma about the event. In response, she fetched the Purple Heart medal that her husband had earned for his wound.

I remember looking across the room with awe at my grandfather, the old man with white hair who sat in his favorite worn chair, his nose in a book.

"Grandpa?" I asked. "The bullet. It's there?" From the couch, I pointed at his crossed legs.

He nodded.

"Why didn't you get it out?" I began to massage my own leg.

"There was worse out there," he said, closing his book and placing it in his lap. "No sense in troublin' anybody with me."

"But doesn't it...?"

"It doesn't hurt no more." He stood, walked toward the kitchen, and turned. "Now," he said with a smile. "How 'bout some ice cream?"

\*\*\*\*\*

Rather than scare me, the memory of the bullet in Grandpa's leg has always confused me. He had been shot near the end of a war that, I learned in elementary school, had nearly divided the world into two factions: the allied and axis powers. Over and over through the years, I had to memorize and list on history tests which countries served on the allied side and which served as axis powers. America was an ally. Italy was an axis.

Because of our last name, I always knew Grandpa's Italian heritage connected him somehow to those painted red, green, and white stripes on the side of Ferrara Supermarket. So it worried me to think that in World War II, my grandfather could have possibly shot distant relatives who had still lived in Italy. Even if he felt it, Grandpa never confessed to me the same fear. In fact, he rarely talked about the war, and when I asked him questions, he answered without elaborating.

But whenever I asked about the history of our family's grocery, my grandfather always stressed proudly that it began in the hands of Italian immigrants, that it began in the hands of his grandfather.

"Rosolino," he'd say loudly, carefully pronouncing each of the four syllables. And then, staring straight ahead as if in a trance, Grandpa would add more softly, "It's Eye-talian."

As I grew older, I wanted to know how distinct those Italian genes had been in Grandpa's life and how much they had inspired Mr. Merrill as the New Orleans grocery man.

So, after Grandpa's death, when I was in my early twenties, I talked with Anthony Ferrara and his wife, Dot, at their house. Anthony was my grandfather's cousin and long-term grocery manager, but they considered each other brothers.

As soon as I sat down at their kitchen table, I found myself instinctively leaning my forearms against the edge, just as Grandpa would have done. Anthony's red hair had turned as white as Grandpa's, and his accent sounded as familiar as if I was listening to my grandfather talk about the grocery store. I missed Grandpa, so I had gone to see Anthony.

"When did Grandpa become a grocer?" I asked Anthony. I wanted him to talk. I wanted to hear the way he said "God," just as Grandpa would have done: "Gawd." I wanted to hear the way his voice grew louder as he described the trips he and his cousin Merrill would

take to the French Market a few times a week early in the morning. I wanted to hear grocery talk again. Anthony leaned back in the wooden chair and shook his head. “Your grandfather was born in the grocery store, honey,” he said. “He’s always been a grocer.”

\*\*\*\*\*

I’m listening to Salvatore Ferrara through headphones as I write this, and I’m constantly having to remind myself that this is Great-Grandpa’s, not Grandpa’s, voice that Uncle Dennis recorded onto a tape when I was just a newborn, one year before Salvatore died in 1982. Salvatore, or Tot, as he was called, speaks slowly of the first day his parents spent at the Chartres Street grocery, explaining that they slept on the bottom level of the store the night before so that they could be ready to open for business the following morning. It was summer in New Orleans, and I imagine that the wooden floor felt cooler than the mattresses they would load into the second story of the building days later.

“My father’s name was Rosolino,” Tot says, his voice growing louder by the last syllable. “That’s a beautiful name in Italian,” he continues, articulating *Italian* the same way Grandpa always did. “But in America, it sounds more like a lady’s name.”

America, however, is where Rosolino Vincenzo Ferrara, Tot’s father, had chosen to seek his fortune. It was the late 1800s, when horticultural diseases and a lack of rainfall stripped the Sicilian agricultural industry bare. The dark-haired, thick-mustached Italian left Alia, a small town perched on the southern hills of Palermo, with his eldest son. Together they set sail across the Atlantic for Rochester, New York, and together they found that work on an American railroad wasn’t as profitable as they had envisioned. Grouped with other immigrants, the two Ferrara men lifted, pushed, hammered, and pulled railroad equipment until they finally ended



their workday with sweat-stained clothes and aching muscles. They experienced little rest until they boarded the boat to return home to Sicily within the year.

During this second failed attempt at financial success in Italy, Rosolino increased his debt as he tried to maintain a sheep herding business and dry goods store in a part of the world that seemed to yield little.

There is a stubborn streak that runs through the male genes in my family, and I attribute this significantly to Rosolino. Several years after he had moved back to Sicily from New York, he tempted fortune again by returning to America, this time to Louisiana with several more members of his family. Like so many of his Sicilian countrymen, Rosolino became captivated by the propaganda presented in Sicily to poor laborers by the Louisiana Association of Sugar Planters.<sup>2</sup> In 1866, a year after the Civil War's end and Lincoln's emancipation of the slaves, this private lobbying group successfully encouraged the Louisiana legislature to develop the Louisiana Bureau of Immigration, which published pamphlets in both the United States and Europe that glorified plantation labor.<sup>3</sup> Of the various groups of Europeans whom this organization convinced to work in Louisiana, the Sicilians were the most willing. They agreed to attempt a new life where the promise of opportunity was sometimes called the American Dream.

So, with nothing behind him but debt and nothing ahead of him but possibility, Rosolino left his blue-eyed, blonde-haired wife, Librolia Cardinali, with the three youngest of their seven children in Sicily. It took more than two years of hard work in Louisiana before Rosolino could purchase their tickets to America. When the entire family reunited in Louisiana in 1900, the men labored in sugar cane fields on a plantation in Feitel, a small agricultural town along the Mississippi River. They cut cane from morning until night, their tired bodies constantly bent over the sweet plant so that their knives could slice the water-rich stalks just above the ground. It was

a job that paid fifty cents a day. Eventually, when they agreed to take on the additional task of loading the cane into a cart and driving it to the refinery, the immigrants made a dollar a day, a salary that earned Western cowboys the title of “well-paid” during the same period in American history. They were Italian immigrants trying to assimilate into a new culture, trying to become American.

A few years later, in an attempt to earn a higher salary, my ancestors migrated to the east bank of the Mississippi River to Lutchter, Louisiana, a town that was based on the sawmill industry. Employment at the sawmill, however, proved to be a sometimes-fatal job. One of Rosolino’s brothers, who had also immigrated to America, fell off a piece of equipment and died, a kind of accident that wasn’t uncommon among the laborers in the mill. Perhaps after the accident Rosolino thought the job was too dangerous for him and his sons, or it’s possible that he just became restless in the working-class town of Lutchter. Whatever the reason, shortly after his brother’s death, he migrated with his family farther south to New Orleans.

\*\*\*\*\*

On August 7, 1906, Rosolino used \$600 of his family’s laborer savings to purchase a two-story, wood-planked grocery store fully stocked, including even a few items in a small kitchen icebox – ham, cheese, bologna, sausage, and butter. The building is on the corner of Spain and Chartres Streets in the Faubourg Marigny of New Orleans, just to the east of the French Quarter. The idea to move into the heart of the city was a natural progression for immigrant Sicilian families like my own. Many preceding Italian immigrants had already established businesses and church congregations near the French Quarter, creating an Italian microcosm in a southern city that gave new immigrants security.

Since many Italians have great respect for good food, another attraction of the city's old Quarter for these immigrant workers was the French Market, an outdoor vending area that has historically boasted a large Italian-American operating and shopping base.<sup>4</sup> With its displays of ripe red tomatoes, green tinted watermelons, soft fragile blueberries, and other fruits and vegetables, this outdoor marketplace was like a vast productive farm that stretched across the state to places where the rich, dark soil yielded a variety of foods, from juicy oranges to tart okra. It smelled sweet and seasoned all at once, much like my mother's kitchen on Thanksgiving morning, and still today when I pass through the crowded French Market from one display to another, my nose tickles as it adjusts to new smells. I think of my grandfather then and of his grocery store that, at times, seemed like an outdoor market itself, with brown crates of strawberries and artichokes stacked up from the floor, releasing pockets of different aromas as I walked down the aisles. I can still see Grandpa's box of green okra near aisle one, next to the banana display. He had decided to grow several different kinds of vegetables in his backyard, and while others didn't take to the New Orleans soil, his okra plant yielded more than enough for his wife's kitchen. Ferrara's soon sold Mr. Merrill's homegrown okra.

The French Market for the Italians was more than just a financial necessity; it was a common meeting place for their own immigrant society. Even into the middle of the twentieth century, Grandpa still traveled to the French Market at 4:30 in the morning several times a week to gather fresh produce for his grocery store, just as his grandfather, Rosolino, had done many years earlier when he first settled in New Orleans. I always imagined that Grandpa didn't mind making that trip early in the morning. The streets were quiet, and my grandfather could drive through the city undisturbed, as if taking a deep breath to sooth his senses with everything

familiar. Perhaps it was the same for Rosolino, whose foreign accent undoubtedly blended with other Italian dialects as he bargained with different vendors for produce.

By the end of the 1890s, Italian immigration to Louisiana had increased. More than two thousand Italians were moving to New Orleans each year and about ninety percent of them were Sicilian. These immigrants switched from picking food in the fields to selling it on shelves in corner groceries. Rosolino followed the majority of his native immigrant countrymen by surrounding himself with two Italian staples: family and food.

\*\*\*\*\*

In 1920, at the age of twenty-two, Tot began expanding Rosolino's grocery business, a business that would, over the next twenty years, include five stores in and around the New Orleans French Quarter. He had been a grocer since the age of nine, when he began translating customers' English requests into Italian for Rosolino, and at fourteen, Tot quit school to work as a full-time grocer at his family's store. By the time his brother-in-law Anselmo approached him eight years later, Tot was a veteran grocer.

As the tape continued, Tot began to mimic Anselmo's voice, explaining the first effort to expand Ferrara's Food Store.

““Why don't you buy me out?”” Anselmo had said to Tot nearly sixty years earlier. ““I'm going broke here anyway. Go ahead. Buy me out.””

Even as he reminisced on the tape, Tot's voice sounded uneasy. At the time that he talked business with Anselmo, he had been married to Theresa “Tresa” Howell for four years, ever since he had borrowed \$10 from Rosolino to marry the fair-skinned Ferrara's customer of Irish descent. The couple already had a three-year-old son – my grandfather – and an infant daughter.

As if he was having a conversation with himself, Tot continued talking quickly for both him and Anselmo. “I got no money,” Tot insisted as he maneuvered back into his own character. “I don’t want to go into no debt.”

But Tot said Anselmo persisted. “Don’t worry about that,” the brother-in-law assured him. “You’ll find money somewhere.”

Tot went to Rosolino for advice. Without hesitation, his father told his son to buy Anselmo’s grocery store so that Tot’s younger sister, Julia, could get into the business.

Therefore, in order to continue supporting his growing family in addition to his own grocery, Tot mortgaged his house, paid his brother-in-law, and watched over his sixteen-year-old sister while she managed his new store on Spain and Decatur Streets and he managed the original Ferrara’s Food Store on Chartres Street for his father. He was the brother, and he would have to use his grocery to take care of his sister. Even though Tot and Julia may have been agreeable business partners, I later witnessed through difficulties between my own father and aunt that such sibling involvement would become a Ferrara tradition that wouldn’t always end without conflict.

## *Chapter 4*

### *Breaking Ties*

The door to the kitchen slammed, and everyone in my grandparents' house fell silent. Elizabeth, staring at an illustrated Christmas tree on her plate, clenched the napkin in her lap. It was so quiet that I heard my cousin sip water from his glass and his sister drive her fork into her salad, stabbing at a piece of carrot that rolled around in small circles over the mixed greens.

“Mom,” Dad demanded from the kitchen table, where five adults sat with uneaten food on their plates. I was in an adjacent room, sitting at the “kids’ table” with Uncle Dennis’s three children and my own brothers and sister, though it should have been called the “young adult” table, since none of us resembled children anymore. It was an L-shaped construction in the center of my grandparents’ den that Grandpa put together each Christmas by combining two long tables that looked like they belonged in a school cafeteria. As she did every year, Grandma had covered them with white tablecloths and folded place cards at the top of each setting. I had always made it my personal duty to scan the names while my cousins and siblings lined up in the kitchen for the potatoes and dressing. I’d linger around the L, saying in the sweetest voice I could conjecture that everyone in the entire family could fill their plates with food first; I wasn’t starving. And then I’d carefully rearrange the cards to suit my own social circle. If Elizabeth was at the top of my “good” list for that week, I’d move her card to the place setting next to my own. If I wanted to sit near my cousin Erin, I’d discretely slide her card down the table. But when I walked into my grandparents’ house that Christmas, the tension felt as heavy as the plate of turkey in the kitchen. I knew then that the seating arrangements weren’t important.

“What did you say to her?” Dad asked, straining his voice.

“I don’t know,” Grandma whined. “I didn’t say a thing. Honest.” Her voice rose to the high pitch that had become familiar over the past three years. She blew her nose into her napkin, waited a few seconds, and then blew again.

I saw Michael knock Hunter’s arm and then point to the basket of rolls. Gregory reached over my plate for the butter.

The door slammed again. From the kitchen, my grandmother let out a loud cry that gradually descended in an uneven pattern to a quiet whimper.

I broke the silence at our table. “I can’t take this anymore,” I directed to Elizabeth, who sat to my left. “Grandma’s done it again.” I stood and pushed my chair back into the piano bench that was crowded behind me.

“Amy, sit down. Don’t worry about it,” Elizabeth pleaded as my three cousins and brothers stared at their half-eaten plates of food.

I sucked in my stomach and squeezed between her chair and the television.

“Just don’t get into it,” she said again.

My face burned, and I knew my skin was blushed. “I’ve been into it for two and a half years.”

I walked quickly into the kitchen and saw Aunt June and Uncle Dennis bent over their plates, pushing the food around with their forks like children do when they want their parents to think they’re eating the vegetables. Sitting at the head of the table, Grandpa slowly buttered a roll, and Grandma sat to his left with her red napkin to her nose, her eyes wet and swollen.

It took one glance to see all of this, and another to spot the van keys on the kitchen counter. I pushed open the door that led to the garage with the keys growing warm in my clenched hand and shut the door behind me. I found Dad standing on the sidewalk in front of his

parents' house, looking blankly down the street toward the Shell station at the corner of the nearest intersection.

“Where’d Mom go?” I demanded from under the raised garage door, fingering the keys in my sweaty palm.

“I don’t know.” I saw the back of his shoulders rise and then fall. “She probably walked home.” Dad turned and looked at me from the bottom of the driveway with a weariness about him that made it seem as if he had just returned from a funeral. “This is all so ridiculous,” he mumbled.

I nodded when he asked if those were his keys in my hand. “Give them to me,” he said, making a tired effort to hold out his hand when he reached the top of the driveway. “I’m going to look for her. Go ahead and finish your lunch.”

I thought about the uneaten oyster dressing and turkey on my plate, and I lost my appetite.

When the cool air pushed through my sweater as Dad drove away, I retraced my steps up the driveway, through the garage, and to the closed door that led to the kitchen. I took a deep breath before I opened it. As the door slammed shut behind me, I noticed that the flame on the candle in the center of the table leaned toward Grandpa. He puckered his lips and blew it out. Wax dripped and settled in small green balls on the gold holder.

I squeezed past Elizabeth again, my back brushing the dust off the face of the TV, and slid onto my chair. My stomach still felt tight and my throat felt heavy, as if someone had clasped his hands around my neck, preventing me from breathing. I sensed everyone at the kids’ table was looking at me, and I wished they would all continue eating instead of watching the



circular movement I made with my fork in a spoonful of mashed potatoes. I let my face fall into my hands then, and I thought about how nice it would be to just get up and walk out.

“All right. Let’s pick up, Caps,” Gregory finally said, trying to make the mood light by using a nickname he sometimes called our younger brothers. He picked up his plate and pushed his chair out in an exaggerated effort. “This whole family mess is ridiculous.”

“I know,” Hunter said casually. “I’m ready to get out of here.” My seventeen-year-old brother slouched farther down his chair. “We should’ve eaten left over party trays from the store like I told y’all.” He stood suddenly and pulled his red checked shirt out of his pants so that it hung loosely over his skinny, six-foot frame.

A shy smile fell across Michael’s face as he laughed nervously. The breath from his nose blew the bread crumbs that covered his square of the tablecloth into his lap, and when he stood to brush the flakes off his legs, his blue pants sat low on his thin waist.

I was turning around in my chair in the direction of the kitchen with my plate when I heard Grandma’s quick steps rush into the den. “Amy. Elizabeth. Come with me.” My father’s mother motioned with her right hand for us to follow her through the door that led from the den into the carpeted hallway. I was scared. Never before had my grandmother singled me out in the middle of such family tension.

Walking between Grandma and me, Elizabeth looked like a giant at five feet and seven inches, a few inches taller than Grandma and several more than me. Our grandmother turned into the study and sat down in the dark on a white recliner. Then, with her index finger pointing to a switch on the wall closest to the door, she said, “Turn it on.” I reached up to flip the lever and watched as the light flickered three times before brightening the room. The only thing that had changed in the study in twenty-one years was the pile of *National Geographic* magazines on the

bookcase that layered the right wall of the room. Every year, the pile grew a few inches thicker so that the whole stack leaned dangerously.

“I called you two back here to say I’m sorry I spoiled your Christmas.” She blew her pale nose into her Kleenex. “I know y’all are more emotional than your brothers, so they’re all right.” She turned in the direction of the den. “Now. I dunno why your mother walked out of my house. She must’ve thought I said something I didn’t.” She blew a second time.

“Come on, Grandma,” I urged. I knew she was lying by the way she guiltily looked down into the ball of damp Kleenex crumpled in her hands when she spoke. “What’d you say to her? She wouldn’t just leave for no reason.” I surprised myself by speaking to my grandmother in this way. We had an uncontroversial relationship, Grandma and I. If I heard from my parents of something she had done that they didn’t like, I didn’t mention it the next time I saw her. And she had done the same with me. But I sensed this tension between my mother and grandmother growing for several years, ever since Dad bought his sister out of Ferrara Supermarket. I finally was ready to break our unspoken agreement.

“I didn’t say a thing, I tell you. This family’s fallen apart and it’s your father’s fault.” She looked back and forth between Elizabeth and me as we stood in front of her. She settled on my face. Elizabeth had been away at college for three years, almost the amount of time it had taken our family to separate. But I had stayed in New Orleans for college, and nearly every evening, knowing that either his mother or father had berated him in the grocery office earlier that day, I had to watch Dad force a smile as he walked into our house after work. “Your mother, I know, had something to do with it because she could’ve stopped him. The wife can always stop the husband.” She paused and changed targets. “How could he do this to me? How could he do this to his own sister? Do you know how much she’s hurting?”

“Grandma.” I heard Elizabeth carefully say as I walked into the bathroom across the hall to get tissue. “You’ve got to stop blaming Dad for everything that’s happened. Out of your three children, he’s the one that kept the grocery going. You know that.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Three years earlier, at the end of my high school years, Dad decided he couldn’t work with his sister any longer. Around the same time I was born, Grandpa retired, leaving the grocery to his three children. Beryl and her family moved to Kentucky; Dennis and his family moved to Virginia years later; and my father, with a new law degree, stayed in New Orleans to run Ferrara’s.

Several years before Beryl moved to Kentucky, my grandmother began a dress shop in the space adjacent to Ferrara’s. Grandma had a knack for coordinating colors; her paintings hang throughout every room in each of her children’s houses. The idea of outfitting women and girls in dresses and purses must have seemed like a game to her at the time, and my grandfather encouraged her talent and ambition by helping to establish the business. She took letters from each of her three children’s names, had a sign made for the door, and opened Deberians.

Not long after she divorced her husband and moved back to New Orleans, my aunt Beryl worked with her mother in the clothing store until it closed after twenty years of business. At this point Beryl needed another job. So my father offered his sister a position in the grocery, many years after he had already assumed management of the store. They worked together every day, trying to develop some kind of common ground on the daily procedures of running a supermarket. But what my father established, my aunt often changed. What he told one employee, she contradicted. I don’t know who was right or who was wrong in this situation. But

what I do know is that my father is more like my grandfather than in just his figure. There is an inherent honesty in Dad's character that reminds me of Grandpa, and there is the quality of a good-natured businessman that made it known to customers that Brian was Merrill's son.

My father always seemed relaxed at Ferrara's, but Beryl was tense. Her fashionable clothes and strikingly attractive face were out of place in the simple corner grocery. If Deberians hadn't closed, maybe Beryl would have been content. I've always thought that she could have had an impressive career in the fashion industry. Ferrara's and Beryl weren't a perfect match, yet my aunt stayed at the grocery, where the money was good, instead of using her college degree to do something that would complement her personality.

Dad finally realized Ferrara Supermarket just wasn't large enough for two owners. And so one day in the small office his patience waned, and my father gave his sister two options: "Either you buy me out, or I buy you out." It could have been a rhetorical question. I think Beryl knew she couldn't run Ferrara Supermarket without the help of her younger brother. Like Grandpa, he began working in a grocery when he was barely tall enough to see over the checkout counter. And while Beryl could be just as personable with the customers, my dad had that Ferrara male instinct of knowing how to run the entirety of a grocery store, a trait that seems as hereditary as the bald spot in their hair. He was his father's son, and she knew it. Not long after, Dad wrote his sister a check and sealed the deal. He became the sole owner of Ferrara Supermarket. Beryl hadn't spoken to him since.

My grandfather couldn't hide his disappointment in his son for causing the grocery to divide his family, even if it was unintentional. Ferrara's was a business that linked a family's heritage, his family's heritage. It was there to feed and clothe. It was there to remind us all of

where we came from. Grandpa couldn't accept that Ferrara's had created a rift between two of his children.

With my father as sole owner of the grocery, and with Gregory as his right hand man, Ferrara's drew a consistent stream of customers as the two men continued to modernize the business. And they quickly learned that my father had been right. As it had when Grandpa was the boss, Ferrara Supermarket thrived under one owner. Mr. Merrill, as he watched his parking lot fill with cars daily, knew my father had made the best decision for Ferrara's. But while his son profited from the inherited grocery talent, his daughter had to start a new life of her own without the family business. So in his frustration, my grandfather, who still owned the building that housed the grocery, raised rent on Dad and often questioned him about sales, quickly figuring calculations in his head. I know my grandfather didn't take the rent money for himself. He was so generous with his finances that when my uncle Dennis, as a teenager, earned a scholarship to Tulane University, Grandpa told the school to give it to another student who needed it. He could pay for his son's college education. It would have been more typical of him, as a protective father, to give the rent money to his daughter after her unemployment. In a similar situation, maybe my father would have done the same if I had been his only daughter. There's no doubt that many fathers feel they need to protect their daughters more than their sons, and Grandpa wasn't any different. Even as his granddaughter, I felt his innate quality to shelter me from harm. When I would tell him in conversation of a certain restaurant or bar I had been to recently with friends, he would quiz me on its location and whether or not I had driven there alone. When he was satisfied with the details, he would lean forward in his chair, look me in the eye, and tell me to be careful. It wasn't good, he would say, to be out late at night, and certainly never by myself.

Grandma was even more resentful of the conflict between her son and daughter. She cried often, fussed at my father, and, with her complaining, encouraged my grandfather to further scold his son. Maybe she thought that if she treated her youngest child as a lesser family member than the rest, events would be erased and Brian and Beryl would work together again at Ferrara's, as if nothing happened. But the fact is that my father did try to rebuild bridges on his own. He offered to pay my aunt to work again, if she agreed to do the job from her house. She refused. He sent her letters of apology, birthday cards, and left messages. She didn't respond. From the moment she took that check from Dad, he, his wife, and his children were dead to her.

Through all of this my grandparents took a side, and that side was Beryl's. Beryl had lost her job, and she had lost her identity to a place that for all of us was as visible in our lives as food. In years to come, we, as a family, would all know what it would feel like to lose Ferrara Supermarket. After I experienced it myself, I could understand the root of Beryl's anger, but at that moment in my young life, I thought I hated her for not being a respectful business partner with my father and for, I thought, splitting our family in two.

But even so, my grandparents had two children involved in the fight. While they sympathized with Beryl, they didn't call to mind that the little cowboy who used to sit on top of a grocery shelf, six feet from the ground, with his hand shaped like a pistol was their son, fully grown. Ferrara's had been his playground too.

Around the same time that my father and aunt became strangers, I remember, at the age of seventeen, looking at red rows of Campbell's soup cans stacked neatly behind me. I had turned around to hide tears from my father after he asked if I had gotten an acceptance letter to my first-choice college destination. If it hadn't been for the customers dodging Dad and me on aisle eight, I would have screamed "no." But instead all I could do was turn my face toward the

cans and ask him to please go away. I begged him to let me tell him at home that it was a rejection rather than an acceptance. He stayed next to me, though, seemingly oblivious to the fact that customers stared at my wet face, and he insisted that I explain to him the content of the letter.

At that moment in my teenage life, it seemed as if my father had forgotten that we were not in the privacy of our home. But now, years later, I know that Dad saw no boundary between aisle eight and our house on Snipe Street. To him, those Campbell soup cans might as well have been black and white photographs of our Ferrara ancestors stacked neatly into a pyramid, like a family tree. Like Grandpa, Dad had become a grocery man.

To Grandma, Mom had been Dad's accomplice. Even though my mother had nothing to do with Ferrara Supermarket except to shop for groceries several times a week, my grandmother accused her of encouraging my father toward sole ownership for monetary reasons. For my grandmother, it was easier to vent some of her anger on her daughter-in-law rather than direct all of it to her son. This is what she had done that Christmas before my mother walked out of the house.

I thought about this as Elizabeth continued to talk calmly with our grandmother in the next room, choosing her words as an artist chooses paint color, trying to create the most appropriate, respectful scene. This patience was more than I could handle. Even though Elizabeth is less dominant than I am, she was more in control of her emotions that Christmas. While she was away at college, I heard through a crack in the kitchen door the hurt in my father's voice as he relayed to my mother a conversation he'd had with Grandma, a conversation that made me wonder about a mother's ability to love unconditionally. I couldn't understand it. A stranger, I

was convinced, could sense my father's good and honest nature at the first shake of his hand, traits I knew he inherited from Grandpa. How could his parents not know their own son?

But Elizabeth had been removed from it all, hearing pieces of stories every now and again over phone conversations. She liked to pretend, in her own quiet away, that there weren't any family problems while she lived in Texas. She liked to pretend what we couldn't. So I was surprised to hear the unrelenting strain in her voice as she insisted to my grandmother that our father is a good man, that he is the best man we know.

"Kept the grocery going?" Grandma slammed her hand against her leg as I walked back into the room. "He threw his own sister out of the business. Now she has no income and no way to make a living." A rough New Orleans accent slipped into her refined voice as Grandma pointed the conversation toward me. I was still standing in the doorway with my black shoes sinking into the thick white carpet. I rested my head against the wooden doorframe. I had peeled the tissue in my hands to threads, and as I wiped my eyes with the collar of my sweater, Grandma talked to me as if I was a toddler. She told me that my aunt loved the grocery with her whole heart, and now she had no money to support herself.

I just stood in the doorway and stared down at my feet.

Elizabeth's voice continued to grow frustrated. "If you'll say it's not my dad's fault, we'll end this," she said slowly.

"I can't say that," Grandma said without hesitation. "It's his fault."

"Look, just say it's not his fault." I added.

"I can't say that."

"Grandma," Elizabeth pleaded, "please say it. I know you know it's true."

"It's not true. It's your father's fault."



I blew my nose again into a fresh tissue and then felt the familiar touch of Grandpa's hand on my shoulder. His breath smelled like cigarettes, and his voice quivered in an effort to hold back tears. I had never before seen him cry.

"Okay, that's enough of this back here." From the tired sadness in his voice, Grandpa could have been giving a eulogy. "Y'all come out into the den now with the rest of this family."

Grandma squeezed a ball of tissue in her hand, pointed a finger, and moved it quickly from Elizabeth's face to my own. "But Merrill, the rest of the family isn't here 'cause of their father."

"Okay, Lena," he said sternly. "Enough."

Grandpa's hand felt light as we stood in the doorway together, and if I hadn't smelled his breath or heard his tired voice, I wouldn't have believed the man who stood behind me was my grandfather. As my sister and I stood defending his son, he sat in the next room with the rest of the family, listening to our voices rise and fall through the closed door. As we stood there defending the man who had taken over his business after his retirement to keep the grocery running, he did nothing. As we defended the man who continued to carry on the respected name Rosolino had established in 1906, using the same traditions my grandfather had passed down to him, he was silent. He didn't have the courage to say what, I am convinced, he truly thought of this man who had played and worked in his grocery store since boyhood. I brushed his hand off my shoulder and turned sharply toward the den.

\*\*\*\*\*

I visited my grandparents less after that Christmas, claiming, when they asked, that I was busy with college activities, schoolwork, and friends. When we did see each other, though,

Grandma and I fell back into our usual relationship of avoiding any topic that might be controversial. And with our family split into two, that was hard to do. I decided that if I saw my grandparents less often, there would be less of a opportunity to talk about the feud, less of a chance that I would have to witness, again, my grandfather's weakness.

## *Chapter 5*

### *A Packed Suitcase and a Boxed Roast*

We found Grandma and Grandpa waiting for us in their garage, standing under the raised door. Grandpa shifted his feet. His faded gray pants looked as old as he did, worn and held up by a tan belt with a navy blue line sewn through the center. Propped on his head was his newsboy hat, under which thin white strands of hair reached to his neck. If someone had taken a black and white photograph of my grandparents as they stood in front of their house in New Orleans with one piece of luggage and two sullen faces at that moment on August 28, 2005, it would have looked natural in a book depicting immigrants from the early 1900s – Rosolino and Librolia, perhaps – as they left their own country for an uncertain world in America. I took the one bag they had between them and the brown box that felt warm and smelled like roast, and put them both in the back of Mom’s Explorer.

This is how it began. Rather, this is how it ended.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mom and I had been at Ferrara’s not long before we picked up my grandparents at their house. Vehicles and grocery carts filled the lot. Customers moved frantically between their cars and the automatic glass door, where Gregory leaned down to pick up a newspaper page that bounced with the wind in front of the store. When he straightened back up, Gregory towered over a middle-aged man who grabbed my brother’s hand and shook it vigorously. As the man walked inside, a young woman tapped Gregory’s thick back just as he lifted his arm to wave to a white-haired local who rounded the corner on his bicycle. Situated on the tan gallery five feet

above my brother's head was the red Ferrara Supermarket nameplate that lit up with green letters after dusk. There was a polished luster to it, a virgin quality that reminded passersby it was a recent addition to the sixty-year-old building.

I opened the back door of the Explorer, climbed inside, and waited with our two Labrador retrievers for Mom. From the parking lot, I watched her talk briefly with Gregory on her way into the store to tell Dad goodbye. A hot pocket of air floated up, and my dogs dropped their tongues. As I wiped sweat from my forehead, I saw blue plastic tips of water gallons peeping out of brown paper bags as customers lugged them to their cars. I heard a honk, and I watched as a young man nearby dropped his bag, startled. He hurled his arms into the air and knelt on the concrete to pick up the cans that had rolled over the yellow line and against another car's tire. Even from where I sat two hundred feet away, I saw spots of yellow paint sprinkled around the line that divided the black asphalt into two parking spaces, and I smiled, remembering when my grandfather painted those lines. I felt guilty then, sitting and smiling while people moved quickly past me with cell phones pressed to their ears. But now I'm glad I did. I'm glad I saw those spots, and I'm glad I smiled.

I know my grandfather would have rather been at Ferrara Supermarket that morning helping his customers load bags with non-perishable food and batteries as a precaution for the oncoming hurricane. Instead, after Mom and I reached his house, Grandpa walked slowly down his driveway and climbed into the backseat after his wife so that we could take him away from everything familiar, evacuating New Orleans for the first time in all of our lives.

\*\*\*\*\*

As we drove out of New Orleans to my parents' vacation house on Pensacola Beach, Florida, it felt surreal that Grandpa sat in the backseat. It felt natural to have Grandma there as we drove out of the city; she had taken trips to visit her son Dennis and his family in Virginia and traveled with friends to small Gulf Coast towns for performances at casinos. But with the exception of his surprising trip to Houston, Texas, to see Elizabeth graduate from college four years earlier, the farthest I remember my grandfather traveling in over twenty years was to Baton Rouge for family funerals. My grandmother had often asked him to take her to Europe during his retirement, but he repeatedly told her no. He had seen Europe during World War II, he used to say, and that was enough. He would tell his wife to just take the money and go if she wanted to, but he would stay home.

Mr. Merrill was a neighborhood man who rarely drove out of a five-mile radius that included his house, my parents' house, his daughter's house, and Ferrara Supermarket. For their anniversaries, my grandfather took Grandma to Galatoire's restaurant on Bourbon Street in the French Quarter, and for her birthday he drove farther down Elysian Fields to pick up a Doberge cake at Gambino's Bakery. But rarely did he venture beyond his neighborhood, and even more rarely did he travel outside of the city.

That's why I wasn't surprised when Grandpa refused to leave New Orleans, even when forecasters warned that a category five hurricane was just a day away. Earlier that morning when Beryl asked her parents to evacuate with her to Baton Rouge, Grandpa told her no, but thank you. They would stay. They had always stayed, even though he had vivid memories of the devastation Hurricane Betsy had caused New Orleans in 1965. I know this because during our evacuation for the current hurricane, I asked my grandfather about the damage to the city from that earlier storm. He described the dark water in the streets, the boats used as cars, and the

rancid smell of spoiled groceries that he and Uncle Dennis cleaned from a second Ferrara Supermarket he owned in the 3000 block of Elysian Fields, before he sold the ruined property.

“That was a mess,” he said, nodding. He chuckled and arched his back in the chair as he often did in his old age. “Oh Lord have mercy, that was a mess.”

Several months after this conversation with Grandpa, I learned more from Uncle Dennis about the damage to Ferrara’s from Hurricane Betsy. When the hurricane caused heavy flooding in New Orleans, my grandfather waded through several feet of water in his grocery store to get to the safe. Dennis was a freshman at Tulane University in Uptown New Orleans, and while he attended Greek rush parties in a part of the city that provided electricity in at least the bars, his family waited for five days without electricity and air-conditioning in their house just a few miles away. It was the same at both of my grandfather’s groceries. Ferrara’s in the 3000 block of Elysian Fields, however, took in more water from the hurricane than its counterpart down the street did.

When the water receded, Grandpa, as Dennis remembered, went back into Ferrara’s with his oldest son and a crew of employees. Together, the men shoveled the ruined products and threw them into a dumpster.

“I remember Dad saying that they had loaded the dumpster up with wet paper towels and toilet paper,” Uncle Dennis reminisced. “When the truck came to haul it away, it couldn't lift the dumpster. So they had to get in the dumpster and unload it until the truck could lift it.”

I remember my grandfather telling me the same story.

“We got all those paper towels in there and it was too heavy.” He stared at the wall opposite his chair, intent on remembering. “I had to climb in and unload them. Oh Lord have mercy,” he laughed. “It was too heavy.”

But that was only the beginning. At the age of forty-nine, my grandfather and his nineteen-year-old son also walked into the meat cooler and carried out spoiled sides and quarters of veal, hanging beef, boxes of fresh chickens, hams, and various sandwich meats. Without power to the cooler, the meat had quickly rotted in the five days the building was without electricity.

“When it came to the meat cooler,” remembered Uncle Dennis, “he decided that he and I should do it.”

Of the entire clean-up at Ferrara’s, it was the worst, most unsanitary job that had to be done. My grandfather reserved it for himself and his son. Together, they wrapped the spoiled meat in butchers’ aprons and hauled each huge parcel into the back of Grandpa’s pick-up, which they eventually used to drive the load to a designated city dump. As my grandfather and uncle walked in and out of the cooler, other employees tried to help. But Grandpa told them no. It was his grocery store and as the owner, it was his job to clean up the worst part of the mess. Grandpa didn’t want his employees to take the same risk he and his son were of getting sick from handling the rotten meat.

He passed down this same mindset to my father and older brother. Employees like Ms. Mary and Ms. Dot wanted to stay to work for the Ferrara men, and they did for nearly twenty years. Mr. Dominic, one of the most sought-after butchers in the city, stayed at the store for forty, working with Tot, Grandpa, Dad, and Gregory.

\*\*\*\*\*

Maybe when Hurricane Katrina threatened four decades later Grandpa thought he could summon some of the strength he had in 1965 when he cleaned up after Hurricane Betsy. Maybe

he didn't see what my grandmother and the rest of the family saw: a man whose legs moved more slowly in those faded gray pants and who had, for some reason, lost twenty pounds in just a few months. Maybe he thought no one noticed when he massaged his right shoulder, as if trying to rub some ever-present soreness away.

But my grandfather had to have known he had finally succumbed to old age after working for most of his life around buildings in New Orleans that bore the name Ferrara's. A month before Katrina hit, he couldn't climb the ladder as easily to meet Michael on the roof of the grocery so that he could show his twenty-one-year-old grandson how to replace the shingles correctly, or Grandpa's way. And whenever he wandered out of his house with his tools and into his backyard, Grandma canceled her outings and watched him from the kitchen window, just a few steps away from the telephone.

Whether he accepted the fact that he was an old man now, my grandfather believed he could take care of his wife and himself if Hurricane Katrina left them in a challenging situation. He trusted his experience, and he trusted the security of a city he had known all of his life. If water turned the streets and parks into one large lake, he could maneuver his way anywhere he needed to go. He knew every turn and intersection in New Orleans, it seemed. He was determined, like the city itself, to wait out the storm.

But Dad convinced him otherwise. It was early in the morning when he told my mother to call her in-laws to ask them to evacuate with us to Florida. After he heard that Grandpa had refused her invitation, Dad got in his car and drove to his parents' house on his way to the work at the grocery.

"I think you need to leave," he said sternly. "I think you should go this time."

My grandfather thought about it for a few seconds and then turned to my grandmother.



“You want to leave?”

“Yes,” she pleaded. “Yes. I want to leave.”

Grandpa finally agreed. He wouldn't listen to Dennis when his oldest child called from Virginia to warn his parents against Hurricane Katrina. He wouldn't accept the invitation from Beryl to evacuate ninety miles northwest toward Baton Rouge, and he ignored the pleas from his wife that the two of them go somewhere, just anywhere other than the city of New Orleans. Instead he trusted Dad. He knew that my father was like him, and he knew that my father would only leave New Orleans and Ferrara's if there was little chance of saving either.

So Grandpa nodded yes, and Grandma packed a small suitcase and boxed the roast she had cooked the night before.

\*\*\*\*\*

After five hours of Gulf Coast evacuation traffic, we crossed the bridge from the city of Gulf Breeze, Florida, to Pensacola Beach. Here we saw a man leaning against a piece of plywood as he nailed it over a restaurant window.

“Oh Lord have mercy.” Grandpa laughed nervously from the backseat. “They're boarding up here too.”

On Pensacola Beach, it was difficult to tell which houses and buildings locals had recently secured for the possibility of an assault from Hurricane Katrina. There was still evidence of residents trying to protect their homes from the two most recent storms that swept over the island and carried away boats and houses and flattened sections of condominiums. Pieces of destroyed structures from Hurricanes Dennis and Ivan had been pushed into mounds on the side of the street, waiting to be rebuilt like a pile of Legos. Grandma gasped when we passed a home

with only three sides, as if we were looking into a large dollhouse with soiled furniture still in place.

Grandpa was quiet again until I pulled into the driveway and opened the back door so that he and my grandmother could climb out.

“Okay, Amy,” he said loudly. “I’m going to grab this roast, and you get the suitcase.” He smiled faintly and shrugged his shoulders, as if he was apologizing for not offering to carry the larger item. Trying to reach the ground, he slowly slid his legs from the floor of the Explorer to the concrete driveway while he held onto the handle of the open door. My grandmother waited patiently behind him as Grandpa gripped the handle and moved his body from the seat. I shifted my weight from one leg to the other. I thought that maybe I should help him, but I had never considered helping Grandpa before. I never imagined that he would become old enough or feeble enough to need help from anyone. As I watched my grandfather slowly climb out of the car, it seemed strange that just a few days before Dad announced that his father had bought a new lawnmower. It was as if Grandpa had lost the remainder of his strength in the five hours it took us to travel from New Orleans to Pensacola Beach.

Grandma noticed it too. She pressed her hand lightly against the bones in Grandpa’s back as he slid his flat bottom off the seat. When my grandfather finally stood up straight, Grandma slowly climbed out of the car and shook her head when she saw her husband’s right hand reach into his left shirt pocket.

“How do we get inside?” Grandpa asked with a cigarette stuck to his bottom lip. I had parked at the side of the house where the nearest staircase was hidden under the raised yellow cottage.

Mom opened the back hatch for the dogs. “Under the house, Mr. Ferrara,” she said quickly. She always thought it was an impersonal form of address to call her parents-in-law by their last name. But when she joined the family twenty-five years earlier, the precedent had already been set, and she never tried to change it.

Grandpa took a few puffs on his cigarette before he dropped it on the concrete, stepped on it, and bent over as if in slow motion to pick up the butt. He was a clean smoker, my grandfather. I saw him pick up the butts often, but I never saw him throw them away. My grandmother must have found his pants pockets full of them by the end of the day. It’s possible that this cleanliness habit can be traced back to his army days, but I suspect that he learned to smoke at a much earlier age. I took my grandparents’ suitcase from the backseat and turned toward the stairs.

“I’m following you, kid,” he said as he leaned into the Explorer and shoved the box that contained Grandma’s roast under his right arm. And then he was Grandpa again. Holding the brown box with his gray hat on his head, he looked like the same invincible man I always knew. He can do anything, I told myself. He just tires more easily, but he’s strong. If I asked him to, he could still pick me up as he did when I was little and lift me into the bed of his white pick-up to play in the piles of leaves he had dumped from his front yard. I repeated this to myself as I walked up the staircase with my grandparents’ luggage until I heard a heavy, pleading cough that sounded as if water was stuck inside my grandfather’s lungs.

“Merrill,” my grandmother begged. She turned around to face Grandpa, who had insisted on walking up after his wife in case she slipped, even though my grandfather gripped the handrail more tightly than Grandma. “Merrill,” she said again. But my grandfather waved her

away. A few seconds later he stopped coughing, arched his back, tucked the box under his arm, and said, "Go on now. I'm all right, Lena."

Mom unpacked Grandma's roast minutes later, sliced it into thin pieces, and offered each of us sandwiches before we even had a chance to unpack. My grandfather, whose appetite in his old age was now near that of a small child's, ate the entire sandwich. He had probably eaten breakfast at five that morning.

While I brought up loose objects from under the house in preparation for the storm, as I had seen my father do for previous threats, Mom set out to ask the neighbors why beach locals were boarding up for the hurricane that was predicted to hit two-hundred and fifty miles west in New Orleans. By the time she returned, beads of sweat had formed on my forehead and back, dampening my t-shirt. I had carried up water skis and leaned them against the piano, placed loose rafts and inner tubes near the staircase, and set several of the more-importing looking of my father's tools on the table. I hurried in a haste that could have made a passerby wonder if the hurricane was churning at that moment, across the street, in the Gulf of Mexico.

It was difficult not to hurry. Every time I pushed through the back door with another armload of beach toys and tools, Grandpa turned his head in my direction and smiled. Yet, it wasn't a smile of contentment, but rather, it seemed more like an apology. Even though he never said it, I knew he was just too weak to help. I hurried because I wanted to impress him with my speed and efficiency. But, more importantly, I hurried to finish the job that seemed to make him feel useless.

My grandfather had always worked. When he was retired and still painting lines or patching Ferrara's roof, grocery customers and even his family saw that working was his hobby, his favorite past time.

I remember sometimes seeing my grandparents walking near our house as my siblings and I rushed toward the schoolyard to beat the morning bell. I'll never forget how strange it looked. Grandpa, wearing his newsboy hat, was walking with Grandma for exercise. His hands dangled at his sides as if they didn't have a wall to paint, a shed to build, a parking lot to sweep. They looked awkward, loose and free. Grandpa, to me, was out playing.

With few exceptions, my memories of my grandfather at my house always include work. Sometimes I would walk outside to find him cutting our grass while Dad was managing Ferrara's. Nobody in our family would have even known he was there if we hadn't heard the lawnmower. Other times I would spot him unloading firewood from his truck and walking, with his arms cradling several logs, to the side of our house. Here he would deposit the wood. When he'd turn and see me standing behind him, he'd call out my name and laugh. He must have been happy. One day I came home from a Brownie meeting to find he and my father building a play set in our yard. The nails were big, I remember, but still, we weren't to touch them for fear that we would lose them in the grass. I remember everybody appeared happy – Grandpa and Dad working together, Mom setting snacks on the patio table, and the five of us imagining out loud what the finished project would look like.

When Mom returned to the beach house, she whispered to me in the kitchen while my grandparents rested on the couches a few feet away.

“People are leaving the beach,” she said breathlessly. “I think we should go.” Her voice rose so that it sounded as if she were asking a question. I turned around and looked at my grandparents, who were fidgeting on the couch, trying to adjust the cushions.

“Well, then,” I whispered. “I guess we'll have to go.” Even though meteorologists predicted that Hurricane Katrina would hit near New Orleans, the forecast of a large tidal surge

along the Gulf Coast terrified beach locals. Our neighbors had picked up recently constructed white picket fences from the sand in their front yards and caravanned out to hotels and relatives' houses in neighboring towns. But we were already at our refuge spot. We had come to the beach house for safety.

Mom rubbed her hands over her face and took a deep breath, nodding in the direction of my grandparents. When I followed her nod, I saw that Grandpa was holding the television remote in one hand and using his other to tap at various buttons. As he did this, Grandma leaned her shoulder into his right arm, and the two sat touching as if by instinct. My grandparents had been married for nearly sixty years. Their families had been friends for years, two groups of Sicilians who came from the same province of Alia outside of Palermo. They even shared a common relative – my grandfather's aunt had married my grandmother's mother's half-brother – and they shared a common understanding of the family grocery business, since my grandmother had been the daughter of a Baton Rouge grocer.

“I wish your father was here,” Mom said, and I understood from her tired eyes and flushed face that much of her anxiety about the hurricane came from the fact that she was in charge of the well-being of her in-laws. She had taken them from their home in New Orleans and brought them someplace where she thought they would be safe, only to have to evacuate them again.

While Gregory had decided to wait out the hurricane at his house in Mandeville, which is thirty miles north of Lake Pontchartrain from New Orleans, we expected Dad and Michael to travel to the beach several hours after us on Sunday afternoon, once they boarded Ferrara's in preparation for the storm. Michael could have traveled earlier with Mom and me, but like Gregory, he had become an important figure at the grocery store. When, as a college student, he

stood in front of that office door just as I had always seen Grandpa, Dad, and Gregory do, there was no doubt that Michael was in control as a manager of the grocery. He was forceful and attentive, and he looked people in the eye. He wasn't an extrovert like Gregory or sociable like Dad and Grandpa, but it was obvious that he was passionate about Ferrara Supermarket, even if it was a quiet passion. With Hurricane Katrina approaching, Michael needed to help his father and brother.

Hunter, we knew, was safe at his university in Hammond, Louisiana, fifty miles north of New Orleans, and Elizabeth, we later learned, sat oblivious behind her desk at the architecture firm in New York City where she worked, unaware that we had even evacuated the city.

But just after we heard of people on Pensacola Beach leaving, we got a call from Dad. He and Michael had decided to turn around and drive to Mandeville to wait out the storm with Gregory. They were in heavy traffic on their way to the beach, and they were losing gasoline quickly. It was too difficult, they decided, to try to make it to Florida before Hurricane Katrina landed the next morning.

So Mom and I realized we had to devise a plan on our own to get my grandparents to safety in a region of the country where evacuees already occupied most of the hotels.

“How about Drucilla?” Mom suggested in a fluster as she leaned over to pet the dogs. Nearly as old as my grandfather, Drucilla had moved from the New Orleans area to Tallahassee six months earlier to live near her niece. She was Grandpa's cousin, and the closest relative around the Gulf Coast we could call upon. Drucilla, Mom knew, was one of the few family members that Grandpa would feel comfortable staying with. She was from his old neighborhood in New Orleans, and she spent much of her childhood playing with her cousin Merrill and his two sisters at the Chartres Street grocery.

I nodded and listened as Mom explained to my grandparents that we would have to evacuate again.

“We’d probably be safe here.” She projected her voice loudly toward the couches. “But all the neighbors are leaving. Just in case, we should go.”

“Well then, let’s go,” Grandpa said and stood up slowly from the couch.

“Wait, Mr. Ferrara,” Mom said hurriedly. “We need a destination. How about Drucilla?”

“Yeah, that’s fine.” My grandfather seemed restless. “Call Dru. That’ll be fine. Tell Dru we’re coming to see her.”

I watched Grandma dial the number and after a quick conversation, she shoved her phone back into her purse. “She’s living at Gayle’s,” Grandma said, “but we can go.”

Mom smiled and Grandpa reached for his hat on the kitchen table.

“Gayle can’t take the dogs though,” Grandma added.

My mother’s mouth dropped. In the anxiety of an oncoming hurricane, her family was split and she was responsible for her in-laws’ safety. She needed those dogs with her for security. She needed our Labs for comfort and a sense of normalcy in her chaotic life.

“Well, then, I won’t go. I can’t go without my dogs.” My mother seemed to be talking to herself now, and her voice was frantic. And then after a short pause, she placed her hands on the kitchen counter and explained in a confident tone that she would accept an invitation she had received earlier from a beach neighbor to take refuge with the dogs in Fairhope, Alabama, a small city about sixty miles west of the beach. “Amy, you take your grandparents to Tallahassee. We can all meet up when this is over.”

Ten minutes later, we separated.



## *Chapter 6*

### *Our Stubborn Gentleman*

The traffic flowed easily toward Tallahassee, contradicting the frantic voice of the reporter on 870 AM who urged New Orleans residents to take their last chance to leave the city before Hurricane Katrina made landfall the following morning.

Every so often, Grandpa leaned forward from the back so that he could hear the radio more clearly, and Grandma turned around from the passenger seat when she heard her husband's cough. Halfway through the drive, my grandmother pulled her cell phone from her purse.

"Beryl?" she said loudly. I cringed from behind the wheel. "Can you hear me, Beryl?" My grandmother paused before she continued loudly. "We're going to Tallahassee now. To stay with Drucilla. The beach might flood." She spoke in a rhythm that made me think she was answering her daughter's questions. "Yeah, Daddy's with us. And Amy. Amy's driving." I wondered how my aunt had responded to the mention of my name after so many years of ignoring my father's family. "We'll call you when we can," Grandma said before she pressed power. She turned to me. "That was Beryl."

I nodded and pretended to concentrate on the road in front of me. It was dark outside, but I didn't want to chance my grandmother seeing how my face had suddenly turned red.

"She's safe in Baton Rouge," Grandma sighed. "I told her we'd be at Dru's."

I nodded again.

\*\*\*\*\*

Three hours later we arrived at Drucilla's niece, Gayle's, house.

I thought my grandfather's cousin was going to cry. Drucilla was like a child on her birthday, offering us cake, water, milk, Coke, a sandwich, anything that we wanted. Gayle, a tall thin woman whom I now wouldn't recognize unless she was smiling, watched Drucilla sit with her cousins, as Dru affectionately called my grandparents, at a table that linked the den and the kitchen, sipping coffee that she later blamed for keeping her up half the night. Gayle's husband, Chuck, and her son, Jeremy, sat on the couch near the table and responded to questions whenever my grandparents wanted answers.

"Jeremy," Grandpa said, pronouncing the name carefully. "You in school?"

Jeremy cupped the red rim of his baseball cap. "No sir. Taking a semester off."

"That's okay," Grandpa said, crossing his legs and placing his arms on the back of the chair. "You take a break and then you'll be ready to go back." Jeremy nodded. I smiled when I heard this, thinking of the time when Grandpa watched Michael push himself around an oak tree on the high school cross country course with one mile to go.

"Slow down, Michael," Grandpa had yelled from the edge of the course. "You've got plenty of time. Don't kill yourself now."

When I came out of my daze, I realized that Drucilla was looking at me. "And what are you doing?" she asked. She had a contagious smile, like Grandpa's.

"I'm in graduate school. Just started, actually. At the University of New Orleans." When I said this out loud, I wondered for the first time if I would ever be able to go back to finish my studies.

"At what?" she asked, unaware that she was yelling.

"University." Grandpa coughed. "Of. New. Orleans." After another short cough, Grandpa put his fork down and thanked our hosts for their hospitality. He announced that tomorrow we

would find a hotel. He didn't want to be a burden. But Drucilla seemed pleased with the idea of finally getting to take care of her cousin who, she later insisted, had always taken care of her.

"I love my cousin," she said, reaching across the table to put her hand on Grandpa's arm. "But he sure is stubborn."

"Oh Lordy," Grandpa chuckled, staring down at the table and shaking his head.

\*\*\*\*\*

That night I slept in a double bed between a pile of fishing poles that leaned against the wall and my eighty-five-year-old cousin Dru in a silky green nightie.

The next morning I woke to the sound of Hurricane Katrina on the television slamming her force against the Gulf Coast nearly four hundred miles away. I felt exhausted, and I tried to rub away the dryness from my eyes as I walked into the den. Gayle and Chuck had already left for work. I didn't see Jeremy anywhere, so I assumed he had gone to a friend's house to sleep for the night, since Drucilla and I had taken over his room.

"Is that the storm?" I asked my grandparents, pointing to a reporter in a blue windbreaker who screamed into a microphone on the TV. I wasn't surprised to see that she held the hood of her jacket over her head, or that the trees behind her moved like a seesaw. It was a familiar image. Whenever the threat of a hurricane or tropical storm broadcast over New Orleans news stations, I had immediately thought of school holidays. In fact, my siblings and I looked forward to hurricane season. When the winds started to howl in the trees and the rain whipped through the air like a whirlpool, we put on raincoats and waded in several inches of water outside our house to reach the levee that separated Lake Pontchartrain from our neighborhood of Lake Vista.

Sometimes we lost electricity, and the five of us would run around the house fumbling for the flashlights and candles Mom and Dad had placed in several of the rooms. We learned to go to the bathroom in the dark, where we ran our hands along the wall looking for the toilet paper, and for dinner, our parents cooked canned red beans and rice or meat sauce and pasta on a green camp stove powered by Propane. Until Katrina, no storm had ever seemed large enough to convince my father that New Orleans wasn't a safe place for his family to stay while others evacuated.

\*\*\*\*\*

Sitting in Gayle's den in Tallahassee, we heard the reporter say that the eye had passed over the city of Slidell, northeast of New Orleans, and we all took a deep breath.

"Well," Grandpa said, sitting back against the sofa. "That's good news for us." The reporter still screamed against violent winds and rain, but it would be over soon. The storm would pass, loose branches would fall, and the reporter would climb into her van and dry off. We would have evacuated for nothing.

But even so, since we *had* left New Orleans, we knew we wouldn't be able to get back into the city for days. The streets would have to be cleared of debris first. We had heard about such post-hurricane cleanup before on battery-operated radios as we sat in our house without electricity. And while the city spent several days clearing debris, we enjoyed several more holidays from school. It was always a productive vacation, we thought. We spent most of our afternoons splashing each other with floodwater from streets in our neighborhood that had taken in only small amounts of water, sometimes simply because of clogged drains.

When these storms passed, our neighbor often slid on a pair of knee-high boots and trudged down to the corner of our street. He'd work for an hour to pull pine needles, branches, spilled garbage, and other debris from the drains. And then, when we saw him walk back inside his house, the five of us would run to that same drain and clog it up again with debris. If our street stayed flooded for a few more days, we thought, we couldn't get to school. We never considered the fact that we walked. St. Pius X Catholic School was only a few blocks away.

Eventually the drain unclogged itself, the city restored power, and television broadcasters announced that all public, parochial, and private schools in Orleans Parish would reopen.

Back at school, I bragged to my friends that I had stayed during the hurricane, that I had seen the waves crashing over the levee and felt the wind nearly knock my small body to the ground. I told them the water in our street had risen five feet, eight feet, ten feet – it got deeper each time I told of our survival. I made fun of them for evacuating and silently called them silly for waiting in a six-hour traffic jam to drive to Baton Rouge, a trip that usually takes a little over an one hour.

But there was something about the oncoming Katrina that made even the stubborn locals like us leave New Orleans and the surrounding parishes. This was the real thing, reporters told us repeatedly. This was the storm that would put New Orleans under.

I remember watching a documentary on a local television channel when I was about twelve. There was an image of a reporter standing near a French Quarter building; he held a large white measuring stick that was about twenty-five feet long. The stick would be under water, the reporter said, if either a category four or five storm swept New Orleans up in its outer bands and flooded her like Venice, Italy. I had always wanted to go to Venice, and when I watched this documentary, I secretly hoped that New Orleans would one day be under water. How romantic to

live in a city where people traveled around in brightly painted boats under red and white striped awnings with the help of a guide pushing a long, thin pole far enough into the water to reach a solid surface – perhaps a slab of concrete that used to be Decatur Street – for momentum.

And then an hour later in Gayle’s house when we turned the television back on, the reporter on the screen seemed to still be fighting gravity in a maelstrom of wind, rain, and debris flying around her body. There was something unfamiliar about the way the storm kept thrashing over her head and how the wind and rain churned together. It was as if the hurricane was a bull, running toward a flag only to miss it before running back again. Katrina wanted something from my city and wasn’t going to leave until she got it. I thought about that tall white measuring stick, about the reference to a North American Venice, and I winced. Nearly twelve years later, I wasn’t thinking about brightly colored gondolas floating down Canal Street as if it was a scene from *Mary Poppins*, but instead I thought about stagnant water, about lost houses and lost lives, about first floor French Quarter art galleries and souvenir shops that would be forgotten as boats passed by overhead.

I started to try to rub away the pain that had settled in my stomach. Jeremy walked into the den and shoved his cap over a disheveled mess of black hair. He lifted his mouth into a half smile and then turned right toward the bathroom.

“Where’d he come from?” Grandpa asked.

“He must’ve slept on the couch, Merrill,” Grandma said from across the room.

“What couch? Not this couch because I was out here by six.”

“There’s one in the living room, Grandpa, by the front door.” I pointed toward the entrance hallway.

“Oh Lord have mercy,” Grandpa said with his hands on his thighs. “You mean that boy gave up his bed for us? Oh Lord have mercy,” he repeated. “I didn’t realize that.”

“Merrill,” Drucilla squeaked. “No such thing. Amy and I slept in Jeremy’s bed. You know you slept in my room,” she smiled.

“Yeah. But I thought that boy had a bed somewhere,” he coughed, “in this house to sleep in. That does it,” he said, grabbing his hat from the coffee table. “We’re going to look for hotels right now. That boy needs his own bed tonight. He can’t go on sleeping on the couch like that.”

“Now, Merrill...”

“No. Now wait a minute, Dru.” Grandpa raised his voice and Drucilla slumped back in her chair, still smiling, as if watching her favorite movie that she’d seen over and over again. “We’re imposin’ here. We’ll go find us a hotel....”

“Okay, cousin,” she said, somehow successfully interrupting him mid-sentence. When Grandpa started to talk, no one could interrupt him, and if they tried he simply raised his voice. “But first come see my house.” While she had been living with Gayle, Drucilla’s own home was being constructed a mile down the street. She seemed to need Grandpa’s approval.

“Okay, Drucilla, but after that we go look for hotels.”

“I know, Merrill,” Drucilla said as if humoring a child. She looked at my grandmother, who smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

Minutes later when we reached Drucilla’s unfinished house, she placed her hand in the crook of Grandpa’s arm and as I followed behind them, I thought again how much they resembled each other. From under his hat, Grandpa’s white hair matched the color of his cousin’s. Even the way they walked made me wonder if the same person had taught them. Behind me, Grandma placed her feet where I left imprints in the mud.

“Oh, Dru, this is nice,” Grandpa said, meaning it. We were standing on a concrete slab in the middle of a room framed with long blocks of wood. “Yeah. Sure. This is real nice. Like your old house in Louisiana, eh, Dru?” Grandpa followed Drucilla’s lead from what would be the dining room to the unfinished den.

“Yes, Drucilla, just like your old one,” Grandma added.

“Thank you. I was hoping you would like it.” Drucilla was like a schoolgirl, presenting artwork to her teacher and waiting nervously for the grade. She had never married, and by the way she looked up into his face to see his reactions as we toured the shell of her house, I understood that to her my grandfather had been the man in her life, and he played the role like a gentleman.

We walked back outside, where Grandpa bent his arm again for Drucilla to link with her own.

\*\*\*\*\*

After we visited Drucilla’s house, we stopped at Gayle’s again before going on our hotel search. As soon as we opened the front door, we heard the wind and rain from Hurricane Katrina broadcast from the television.

“Where’s the Industrial Canal?” Jeremy was facing the television.

“In the Ninth Ward,” Grandma said, sitting next to Grandpa on the sofa. Drucilla had gone into the kitchen, and as she turned away from the sink she saw the written message at the bottom of the television screen.

“Merrill, it overflowed.” Drucilla put her hand to her mouth. The Industrial Canal is a five and a half mile narrow waterway that connects the Mississippi River to Lake Pontchartrain.



As it does this, it passes through the Ninth Ward. Drucilla knew the canal had already flooded her old neighborhood in St. Bernard Parish, which borders the Lower Ninth Ward on the eastern side of the parish.

We switched the television to CNN. Rows of rooftops floated by on the screen, as if they were toy boats in a bathtub. Katrina was on her way north toward Jackson, Mississippi, we learned. She took the wind and rain with her, but left these houses in this low-lying parish to rot in the brown, murky water surrounding each on all four sides, as if they were small private islands. I remember watching on the screen as a man sat waving his hands in the air at the tip of his roof, a place that must have seemed like the end of the earth. We could see his mouth moving as he shouted for his life toward the helicopter circling above him that created ripples in the water over what had been his front yard. Attached to the copter by a cable was a large crate. The man grabbed at its edges as the crate swayed in the air, and he pulled himself inside it as if he were throwing a sack of potatoes into a grocery cart. This man was lucky: he had been rescued.

I silently thanked God that our house was far away from this levee breach.

Seeing the flooded streets on TV made Grandpa want to look for a hotel even more.

“Let’s go find us a hotel, Amy.” He tugged on the waist of his pants.

“Sure, Grandpa,” I said. “I don’t know if we’ll have any luck, but we’ll give it a shot.”

Like I feared, all of the hotels and motels that we visited in Tallahassee were full. Nearly defeated, we drove back to Gayle’s house thirty minutes later.

“What we’re going to do,” Grandpa said loudly as he walked into the house, “is open the phone book and call different hotels and motels.” He sat next to me at the kitchen table, close enough that I could smell cigarette smoke on his breath. A few minutes later when I said the Holiday Inn had a vacancy, he patted my back.

“That’s just fine. That’s just fine,” he smiled. “You hear that, Lena?” he called to his wife. “We can give these here people some space now and Jerry,” he continued, stumbling over Jeremy’s name, “can have his bed back. Oh Lord have mercy, that’s great.”

Then, as if the television called his name, he moved to the couch and stared forward as CNN cameras scanned the Ninth Ward, which now looked like an extension of the overflowed Canal. We all sat quietly, and I knew it wasn’t the water that had us so mesmerized, but the thought of friends who lived in that area. I thought of the handful of girls who drove thirty minutes from the small town of Chalmette to attend our Catholic high school; their houses were undoubtedly under water. I had seen some of these classmates at my five-year reunion just one month earlier, and I prayed that they left before the floodwaters came and the tide rose to their roofs.

And then it was enough, and we all felt it. “Okay,” Grandpa said, turning off the TV. “Don’t you ladies have some shopping to do?”

“We do, Merrill,” Grandma said.

“Well. Let’s go ahead and do it then. We’ll get a bite while we’re out,” he said, “and find where our hotel is to make sure you ladies like the looks of it.”

Grandma’s mouth dropped.” You’re going shopping with us, Merrill?” Drucilla laughed, and I held back a smile. I didn’t know if my grandfather had ever even been inside a mall before. In fact, when my grandmother bought him a new shirt or a pair of pants from one of her shopping trips, he told her he didn’t need them, that he already had shirts and pants.

“Yeah. I’ll go along. Let’s go,” he said and scooted us out of the house.

Even though he seemed willing, I knew that Grandpa had no idea what shopping entailed. So I decided that the only shopping we would do would be at a drugstore, at least while Grandpa

was with us. My packed bag of clothes had been in my father's car, which was now in Mandeville. I needed underwear, but not badly enough for Grandpa to shop with me. We would go later, after we dropped Grandpa off at Gayle's house to rest.

I hadn't been with my grandfather for this length of time since I was a child and shared sleepovers at my grandparents' house with my brothers and sister. But now as far as I knew this man was here with me indefinitely, and the more I heard him talk and the more I watched him walk up and down the driveway with a cigarette in his hand, the closer I felt to my city that had begun to flood hundreds of miles away. The more I watched my grandfather, the more secure I felt in our evacuation, and the more I wanted to be near him.

\*\*\*\*\*

Later that afternoon when I drove the car into Gayle's driveway after Grandma, Drucilla, and I had returned from shopping, I saw Grandpa standing near the garage lifting a cigarette to and from his mouth. If it had been his house in New Orleans that he was standing in front of, he wouldn't have looked any different than if I drove down his street and saw him standing and smoking on his own driveway. But that afternoon he was different.

"Where've y'all been?" he demanded.

"Shopping. You know that, Merrill," Grandma said as she walked in front of me toward her husband. He threw his cigarette down, stepped on it, and then slowly picked it back up.

"What's the matter, Merrill?" Grandma continued.

"The matter is y'all been gone a long time and I didn't know where you were and now we've got to go and check into our hotel." He talked fast, waving his arms in the air. The way his voice sounded, I thought he might cry.

“Oh, Merrill,” Drucilla said as she touched her cousin’s arm. “There’s plenty of time to go to the hotel.”

“I need to get organized, Dru.” Grandpa said sternly.

“Get what organized?”

“Things. I just need time. To get organized, y’know.”

“Well then. Y’all go to the hotel and we’ll see you for dinner,” Drucilla said, making the decision for us.

“No. No dinner tonight. I need time to get organized, and we’ll see you people tomorrow.” My grandfather needed to make the decisions. At one point in his life, like Tot, Grandpa had been president of the Louisiana Grocers’ Cooperative at the same time he ran his grocery and watched over his family. He was used to being in control.

Grandpa turned from his cousin and walked toward the front door. I was still standing stiffly in the driveway when Grandma pulled my arm forward.

“It’s all right, Amy. He’s just worried.” And then I understood. My grandmother, Drucilla, and I were the only family that he could see were in his life at that moment. Although we didn’t talk about it, I know he shared the same fear that I had that a tree had fallen on Gregory’s house, that my dad and two brothers were crushed inside. Ever since we’d heard on the news that Katrina forced her way into Mobile and the surrounding towns, the area where my mother had evacuated, Grandpa asked me often if I had heard from Mom. He couldn’t talk to his daughter in Baton Rouge because of the poor cell phone connections, and he didn’t know if his grandson in Hammond was in danger because of the storm.

I saw again that for my grandfather, his family was his life, and in my memories of him at Ferrara Supermarket, the grocery had been a symbol of his family. When he berated my father

for taking sole ownership of the business, Grandpa didn't love Dad any less. He just didn't want to see his son and daughter split over a business that had always served to bring people together. I felt sorry for my grandfather then, and I felt sorry that I had missed opportunities to visit with him in the years following the feud. I was suddenly ashamed that I had not talked with him more, before his coughing broke the steadiness of his voice in nearly every conversation.

\*\*\*\*\*

Grandpa sat up on his bed when I walked into the Holiday Inn motel room, and he made no effort to mat down the white wisps of hair standing up on his head. Grandma lifted her forehead from her hand and slid farther up in the chair. The TV was common background noise now, like the humming of my bedroom fan.

Grandpa and I saw it at the same time. "Oh Lord have mercy," he said, and I found myself saying the same thing, silently.

"That's by Sidmar's, right?" I asked as I read the breaking news bulletin at the bottom of the screen. "That's by the bridge they just finished expanding."

Grandma nodded while I shook my head in disbelief. The water now poured freely on national television as if mocking the tears that were stuck behind my eyes, trying to push themselves out past the hard lines of confidence I set in place for my grandparents. There had been a breach in the Seventeenth Street Canal, a narrow waterway that runs between lake cottages and seafood restaurants near Lake Pontchartrain to the pumping station on Orleans Avenue. Always decorated with faded shrimp boats, the canal seemed invincible, an image of tranquility for diners to look onto from the local restaurants, or for cyclists to ride across on a thin red brick bridge that connected Orleans and Jefferson Parishes.

But now the water in the canal had risen and pushed through the levee and into the cozy subdivision of Lakeview, where rooftops of houses looked like upside down sailboats, floating near treetops and telephone poles. The water spread through this part of the city on the eastern side of the canal, and even snaked a little to the west, flooding part of the New Orleans suburb of Metairie in Jefferson Parish.

In my mind I quickly drove from where the split was near the Old Hammond Highway Bridge, past my high school, and toward my house. I knew it was only a five-minute drive through several lights from my neighborhood to the canal, and I imagined the water traveling through the area, wrapping around the quaint cottages and adjacent three-story homes and into the parking lot of the small shopping center that housed Walgreen's, the first place my parents allowed me to drive once I earned my license.

I knew Grandpa and Grandma were making the same drive in their minds, wondering if the water would flow farther past my neighborhood to their own and still farther to Ferrara Supermarket. I watched as my grandfather pulled himself off his chair in the hotel room and walked quietly out of the door with a cigarette in his hand as the news reporter described yet another breach, this one to the London Avenue Canal. I knew he was thinking of his grocery store on Elysian Fields and wondering if the water would climb up the walls and seep through the glass doors to ruin not only crackers and diapers but his history, his lifestyle, as a New Orleans grocer just a few months short of Ferrara's one-hundred-year anniversary.

"Our house is dry," Grandma kept repeating in the hotel room, and while Grandpa nodded, slowly, humoring his wife's denial, I searched the Internet for pictures of our neighborhoods. I contacted Elizabeth in New York City through e-mail on my laptop and consistently pressed redial on my phone in the hopes of hearing Mom's voice.

We sat silently on the two double beds, mesmerized by the bulletin flashing underneath a picture of the flooded neighborhoods of Lakeview and Gentilly.

“Well,” Grandpa said, sounding tired. He crossed his right arm across his chest and rubbed his left shoulder before he brought his arm back down again and pulled at the waist of his pants. “Let’s go down to the restaurant here and get a bite. Okay, Amy?”

“Sounds good, Grandpa.” I nodded as I spoke to make sure he heard me over his coughing.

“You okay, Merrill? Grandma asked. She walked over to the bed and touched his bony back. He nodded and cleared his throat, and Grandma followed him to the door.

He was a stubborn man, my grandfather. He had probably only gone to the doctor five times in his life, including a visit a few days before our evacuation. It took my grandmother, father, uncle, and aunt months of begging him to go, of their constant concern for his weight loss, small appetite, and surprised loss of energy. He had gone, had X-rays taken, and now he had no way to find out what it was that was making him so uncharacteristically old. We suspected it was the smoking. He knew it was bad, that it could pull his life from him, but still he continued to buy packs of Winstons and to quietly excuse himself from his den chair to go sit in his chair in the garage to smoke.

“Y’know smoking’s bad, right?” he had asked Hunter and Michael one afternoon. It was about two years before Hurricane Katrina. He sat in his garage chair and watched the three of us play pool while he turned his head slightly to the right every few minutes and blew smoke away from the table.

“Sure, Grandpa,” Hunter said as he smiled. I noticed the outline of a box in his jeans. Michael nodded.

“It’s just not good for you, y’hear?” He knew from the way I winced when I walked into a pocket of his stale smoke that I hadn’t picked up the habit. But my brothers, they never winced.

Grandpa couldn’t stop, though. And when he said, “Scuse me, ladies,” as he often did and got up from his den chair at his house and walked past my grandmother and me toward the garage, we could only watch him go.

\*\*\*\*\*

On the second night of our evacuation in Tallahassee, I told my grandparents after dinner that I planned to go to the mall to buy a book, which I was supposed to be reading for one of my literature classes. I didn’t know when class would resume, whether in a week or a semester, but I knew I had to get that book. Grandpa handed me a ten-dollar bill before I left.

“I need a razor,” he said, folding a wad of bills back into his pocket. “See what you can find.”

I noticed then the white stubble that had formed on Grandpa’s chin, and I felt content for the first time in days, as if someone had just given me a hug. It was the same rough spot of skin my brothers, sister, cousins, and I felt each time we walked in our grandparents’ house and crossed through the living room toward Grandpa’s worn chair in the den. He would reach out as we came into his view, grab each of us, and pin our cheeks against his one by one.

“Oh Lordy,” he’d laugh, “I’m stuck and I can’t get lose. Oh Lordy!”

He’d finish with one grandchild and grab the next, repeating his routine until each of us had felt his stubble of white beard against our own skin. Then he’d concentrate on each of his grandchildren again. “Amy,” he’d say. “A-M-Y. Elizabeth. E-L-I-Z-A-B-E-T-H.”



I didn't want to buy that razor, but I couldn't think of a way to tell Grandpa that his stubbly cheeks simply made me feel better.

\*\*\*\*\*

Somehow I fell asleep later that night after a television reporter said that the Seventeenth Street Canal was still overflowing, that the leak had not been fixed yet. I listened to her say that if the levee wasn't repaired soon, if the water continued to tumble into the city, then New Orleans would be lost under water forever. I could hear my grandfather's heavy snoring in the adjacent room when I flicked the television off, and I quickly dozed off.

\*\*\*\*\*

The sky was clear the next day in Tallahassee, and without the rise in gas prices and the crowded hotel rooms in the city, it would have seemed like a category three hurricane had never rammed into the Gulf Coast just one day earlier, sweeping away whole towns and flooding one of the most important ports in the country. Not long after we had breakfast, I finally got a call from my mother confirming that we could drive to the beach the next day. She had felt the impact of Hurricane Katrina during her stay in Fairhope, where they had experienced heavy winds and lost electricity. Further down the coast, the vacation house had survived the storm. I told my grandparents the good news.

“Oh Lord have mercy,” Grandpa said. The change of pitch in his voice made him cough.

\*\*\*\*\*

The next morning on our way out of town, my grandparents and I stopped at a large grocery to buy a few items to take with us to the beach house. The store seemed unusually crowded for a Wednesday morning, and as soon as we walked through the glass doors, Grandpa decided we should split up.

“Get what you need, Lena,” he said. “Amy and I will grab some meat.”

So I followed my grandfather through the crowds of people and watched as he turned his torso from side to side to avoid bumping into other customers. But occasionally his shoulders did brush against other people, and every few minutes he brought his right hand up to the brim of his hat and said, “Scuse me, ma’m. Pardon me, sir.” At one point, he turned toward me and shook his head. I knew then we were thinking the same thing: this wasn’t Ferrara’s.

Grandpa led me to the meat case, where he grabbed a pack of bologna, handed it to me, and said, “I’ll be outside.”

A few minutes later, I found Grandma on the pasta aisle. “I can’t find the Vermicelli pasta,” she said. “And where’s your grandfather?”

“Outside,” I answered as I dropped a package of Vicetti spaghetti into the cart. “I think he’s ready to go.”

Grandma sighed. “He wants to be home. We all want to be home.”

## *Chapter 7*

### *My City, My Grandfather*

The high tidal surge that hit Pensacola Beach from Hurricane Katrina left just a few inches of slick mud on the large slab of concrete under the raised cottage. Not long after we arrived at my parents' vacation house, I went downstairs with the ambition of creating a walkway over the mud for my family to use to get from their cars to the back stairwell. I smelled smoke before I reached the last step. Grandpa was already under the house, sitting on an old wooden bench. If we'd had the supplies, he would have made his own bench, and no one would have been surprised. Whenever Grandpa took a break from working around Ferrara's, he often stacked a brown box on top of an empty milk crate and sat near the open warehouse door in the back of the store smoking a Winston and drinking a Miller High Life pony beer, which he stuffed with a twisted piece of paper towel to keep the flies away when he wasn't sipping.

"I'm going to make a walkway," I said when he looked up at me.

He nodded. I started to ask Grandpa to help, but his coughing interrupted me mid-sentence. Instead, I picked up loose boards from under my father's workbench and began placing them in a line, one after another, like a train of flat Dominoes. My grandfather watched me from his seat.

"Move that one over a bit," he said as soon as I placed the first strip of wood down. So I followed his pointed cigarette and moved the board over. "That there. Yeah. Put that one right there." I followed his hand again and did as my grandfather told me. "You got it. Good girl. Look." He coughed. "Move that one there closer to that one there." Each time I picked up a piece

of wood, Grandpa told me where to place it, point it, or move it. He was working, my grandfather, he was working.

\*\*\*\*\*

An hour later, Grandma stood stirring a pot of simmering meatballs when Gregory's truck pulled into our driveway. It had been three days since our evacuation from New Orleans, and hence, three days since either Mom or I had heard from any of the Ferrara men who stayed in Mandeville. Fallen trees and heavy winds knocked out phone lines, and cell phone connections were weak. It wasn't until that morning that Dad called my mother to say that he, Michael, and Gregory were safe. They were on their way. Three hours later my father reached the front porch, and Grandpa pulled his son close to his body.

"Oh Lord have mercy," he said over my dad's shoulder, "am I glad to see you." I saw Grandpa quickly wipe a tear from his eye as my grandmother wrapped her arms around Dad. I hadn't seen them hug in years.

It wasn't long before we had all congregated around the table as Grandma placed meatballs and red gravy over plates of Vermicelli spaghetti. We sat down and waited for the signal Grandpa always gave before a meal, our family's prayer: "Let's go to work." At that, we all began eating.

Several minutes later, with a mouth full of bread, Grandpa said, "This girl right here saved our lives." He pointed his finger at me across the table. "Yes sir, I don't know where we'd be without Amy." Immediately, I felt embarrassed. The truth was it was Grandpa who had helped me. During our evacuation, he had reminded me of New Orleans at a time when I needed to remember what I had left behind and what, as far as I knew, was under water. I had wanted so badly to go home, and by watching the way he tipped his hat to people in restaurants and stores,

telling them “g’day” in his deep New Orleans accent, my grandfather assured me that I wasn’t far from everything I loved. But as we ate lunch, Grandpa continued anyway. “Whatever Amy wants, she can have.” He looked up from his plate and gave me a nod. Then he lowered his voice as he soaked a roll in his gravy. “Yes sir. Saved our lives. Lord have mercy. That girl.”

We all had our own stories about what it was like to watch the hurricane thrash our city on television or to hear the howling wind and cracking trees outside the front door. Yet, for several more minutes, the only sounds in the room were seven forks twisting pasta around on plates. And to me, it was better than talking.

But Dad soon broke the silence. “We didn’t know when we’d get out of Mandeville,” he said. “The streets were blocked by trees. Lots of fallen trees around those parts.” As we continued eating, my father explained that out of the anxiety of not being able to communicate with his family, he and Gregory wrote letters. Dad wrote one to Elizabeth in New York, explaining that they were well and alive. Gregory wrote one to his fiancée in Arlington, Virginia. Later that afternoon Dad rode Gregory’s bicycle to the nearest intersection, flagged down a lone truck, and asked the driver to mail the letters at the next mailbox he saw. A few days after Dad and my brothers arrived at the beach house, the recipients got their letters, which had eventually been mailed from Jackson, Mississippi.

Although letter writing was a creative endeavor in the nervousness of not knowing when the phones would work again, our communication efforts were more advanced on Pensacola Beach. In fact, the beach house acted as a media center in our post-Katrina evacuation. The television became background noise throughout the house, and when the news station broadcast an aerial view of the city, we all leaned a little closer to the TV.

Eventually our New Orleans area code cell phone numbers connected more easily to other digits so that we learned of our friends' own evacuation experiences. But we couldn't contact everyone, and my father and brothers wondered aloud about their employees and customers. Had Mr. Dominic, Ms. Mary, and Ms. Dot left the city? Had Ms. Johnson bought enough cat food to evacuate with her house full of felines? Had Rocky, a mentally-challenged adult, found another store in another city that would give him a roll of receipt paper so that he could dance around the aisles like a child, leaving a trail of white behind him? Had the batteries, bottled water, and canned goods customers bought at Ferrara's lasted long enough for those who stayed in the city?

And then there was Ferrara Supermarket itself. Without the building, there would be no groceries, and without groceries, there would be no customers. And without the customers, there would be no employees. Throughout our days at the beach house, we browsed the Internet for information and photos relating to the fate of Ferrara's, fearing the worst.

I never asked my grandfather if he thought his grocery store was lost in the floodwaters. I didn't have to. In the beach house, I heard him cough more than laugh. When he sat near the television, most of the time he didn't look at the screen, but instead, he watched his brown shoe dangle at the end of his crossed leg. Often in the afternoons he sat in the sunroom and stared out of the windows at the neighboring houses, the empty lots of sand, and the turquoise waters of the Gulf of Mexico. But I knew Grandpa wasn't interested in architecture and crashing waves. Behind his thick glasses, my grandfather's brown eyes were still as he stared through the windows, but his hands fidgeted on his lap. Grandpa knew Ferrara Supermarket was gone just as he must have felt his own body deteriorating.

But while my grandfather grew quieter, the rest of our family became more communicative. Beryl's daughter, Kristen, called Gregory to check on our grandparents and to hear the voice of a relative – a cousin – even if he was on the opposing side of the family feud.

“Uncle Brian saved my grandparents' lives,” she said, and for that Kristen seemed grateful.

But it was Beryl's call to my brother's phone that made my stomach feel as if it had been tickled and twisted at the same time. She wanted to talk to her mother, but she had called my brother to reach her parents. She had talked to her nephew whom she had declared years earlier didn't exist to her anymore. She had talked to the son of the brother whom she insisted six years earlier had ruined her life. Every time I heard “Beryl,” my adrenaline stirred. But that day during our evacuation as I watched Gregory hand Grandma the phone, my body relaxed. I remember I was standing in the kitchen, and although I couldn't see her entire face, I could see the edge of a smile indented in Grandma's right cheek as she took the phone from her grandson.

\*\*\*\*\*

During our two-week stay on Pensacola Beach, throughout the day my grandfather moved in a line from the sunroom to the den to the front porch, where Dad had set up a radio. His body was stiff as he walked across the tile through the front doors to get within hearing distance of the broadcasts. One afternoon I offered him another cushion to put in his chair as he sat next to me on the porch. He laughed softly before answering.

“Oh Lordy, Amy. I just need to get these old bones home.” He got up and walked back inside, repeating, “Oh Lord have mercy” until the door closed behind him.

We spent fourteen days just a few hundred feet from the Gulf, the warm body of water the hurricane used in order to gain strength before making landfall and breaking levees the Corps of Engineers failed to construct and maintain well enough. We reminded each other daily that we were lucky to have a second house, but even so, I whined about how much I wanted to go back to New Orleans to continue with the same life Katrina had swept away. I wanted to go to class. I wanted to run through my neighborhood. I wanted to shop at Ferrara's. I yearned for all of this, until I realized and admitted that Grandpa's cough was growing thicker and that the lemon and honey mixture Grandma encouraged him to drink only made the sound weaker, not silent. It seemed as if there was water stuck in his lungs that he couldn't release. After listening to that cough so often that I memorized the rise and fall pattern of Grandpa's strained voice, I finally accepted the fact that my grandfather was struggling for his life daily, even if he wouldn't admit it. To me he was New Orleans. And to me he was dying. My city and my grandfather were both dying.

For Grandpa, it was a modest struggle. The way he squirmed on the chairs told me that he wanted his old chair in the garage, where he could smoke slowly after a hot lunch his wife had prepared. When he sat on our couch in front of the television and picked up the remote, I knew it was an effort for him to remember which buttons were for volume control and which he should use to change the channels. At home he just knew. After dinner one evening he stood up from his chair as if he was about to give a speech. Then staring down at the table, he told my parents he was sorry he had to use the bathroom across from their bedroom often during the night. He hoped it wasn't keeping them up. I cursed Katrina every day after that.

\*\*\*\*\*



At some point over the course of our evacuation at the beach Hunter arrived, knowing that because of fallen trees on his university's campus, he accrued unplanned holidays from school. So my youngest brother pulled into our driveway in the same truck he often used in high school to collect loose shopping carts in the neighborhood surrounding the store. I remember thinking as I watched my brother park his truck that it would have been comforting to see several metal baskets wedged in the back. Picking up loose baskets had been a grocery tradition. I saw Grandpa do it often in his white pickup.

Elizabeth completed our family picture when she flew down from New York. Seeing her anxiety about the national disaster in her hometown, my sister's boss sent her to join us at the beach for Labor Day weekend. When she arrived, I saw Grandpa cry again. The more members of his family whom he saw and recognized as safe, the more relaxed his eyes became behind those thick-rimmed glasses. Two days later when my sister flew back to New York, my grandfather turned off the television that evening for the first time in days and sat on one of the chairs on our front porch. When I heard from upstairs the frantic sound of post-Hurricane Katrina's continued coverage grow silent, I walked down to see what had happened. Through the glass doors, I caught a glimpse of my grandfather's left shoe tucked behind his right ankle, and I could hear the sound of his cough through the walls. I went outside to be near him.

\*\*\*\*\*

A cool evening breeze lifted from the Santa Rosa Sound and blew the ferns that hung between the white columns on our front porch. Grandpa wore his hat to protect his head from the wind, he had said with a smile, and my grandmother sat next to him with her hand over his. Mom and Dad slowly moved back and forth together on the double rocker. Sitting near Grandma,

Gregory fumbled with his phone in his lap, and Michael sat on the floor between our two sleeping dogs. My family was quiet on the porch as we listened to the wind brush through the salty air until Grandpa straightened up in his chair and chuckled.

“Let me tell you this, and I don’t mean to be mean or nothin’.” I was surprised at my grandfather’s sudden urge to talk, but now I know it was natural for him to narrate as he sat on a front porch. He grew up in a city that claimed porches and porch gatherings as part of local tradition, like the corner grocery. That porch must have been a comfort to him as he sat there during his evacuation, without any proof that his house and grocery store were not submerged under water hundreds of miles away. My grandfather seemed to come alive with darkness, wind, and family surrounding him.

“There was one boy in the old neighborhood, Michel, who every time we’d say a cuss word like *damn* or somethin’, he’d spit.” Grandpa laughed. As he continued talking, his voice grew louder and softer at the same time. “Oh Lordy. There were five of us sitting on some steps one day and we decided to have a little fun with Michel. One guy said *damn*, and Michel turned around like this and spit.” Grandpa jerked his head to the side. “Another guy said *hell* and Michel turned and spit again.” My grandfather threw his head back and laughed loudly in that same uneven pattern that was so familiar. He slapped his hand across his right knee and leaned forward again like he was going to tell a secret. “Michel run outta spit pretty soon.” This time we all heaved forward, and I had to turn my head so that my family wouldn’t know that I was crying instead of laughing, thinking that if my grandfather didn’t stop coughing soon, as he was doing now, he wouldn’t be around anymore to tell us stories.

A year later, I would learn just how much of a prankster my grandfather was as a boy. I sat on that same porch talking about Grandpa with his niece, Alison, and two of his nephews,

Ronnie and Jim, when Alison laughed and said that her mother, Grandpa's sister Lil, or Lilly as he called her, told on him. Lilly claimed that her older brother Merrill was always into something when he was a boy, much like Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer. He used to juggle eggs in the grocery, until his mother yelled at him to stop, and occasionally my grandfather would throw crumpled paper up to the grocery ceiling so that it would catch in the fan and shoot through the air, gently hitting customers on their heads. One day Grandpa sat in the back of the store, where he was supposed to be filling a barrel with cooking oil instead of reading the book he held in his hands. Eventually he heard his mother's voice shout his name as the oil continued to spill over the barrel, down to the floor, and out onto the sidewalk. At that point, Grandpa fled the house.

After a few minutes of quiet on that front porch during our evacuation, Grandpa's deep voice broke the silence again, and no one was surprised because we knew that once he told one story, there were always more to follow.

"There was another little fellow who was an alter boy for the five or six a.m. Mass," he said. "I told 'em I'd go with him sometimes. Well, I tied a piece of string to my pajamas and a potata to the other end and threw it out the winda." I could hear his accent growing thicker with each sentence, and I wondered that if after eighty-seven years of living in New Orleans I would have that same rough dialect that seems to linger in the voices of old locals. "Well, when he was ready to go, he'd come and tug on that potata and I'd get dressed and go to Mass with 'em." We all laughed again and within a few minutes Grandpa was telling another story. For the first time in two weeks, he must have finally felt like he was home.

"When my cousin Antny was bad, you see, his mother, my aunt, used to put a dress on 'em," Grandpa continued, slapping his knee again as he laughed at the memory of Anthony wearing a dress. "That was so he wouldn't go outside, but ole' Antny didn't care. He'd go to the

corner and stand there with that there dress on.” I smiled, wondering why Grandpa never told me this story when Elizabeth and I used to peel a yellow sundress off one of Beryl’s old large dolls and slip it on one of our little brothers when we slept at our grandparents’ house. Sometimes we’d tie small pigtails in our costumed brothers’ hair, and before we could finish, both of the boys would run down the hallway laughing until they reached the den, where Grandpa would tell us sternly from his chair to take that dress off the boy and settle down for bed.

Grandpa was quiet again and then a few minutes later, he took a deep breath, sighed, and said, “Well, if you all will excuse me, I’m going to bed.”

\*\*\*\*\*

A couple of days later, I told my grandparents goodbye. I had decided to take advantage of an opportunity to be a visiting student in the graduate program at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. I learned that the credits I earned during that semester would transfer back to the University of New Orleans once the campus became fully functional again.

I didn’t want to leave Grandpa. Every day he looked weaker to me, and every day his coughing sounded thicker. It seemed that daily his clothes grew looser over his body, and his glasses expanded on his face. But I had to leave. My city seemed dead to me. Now every day my grandfather reminded me more and more of our city, our New Orleans, that was slowly deteriorating under contaminated floodwaters as some locals watched on televisions hundreds of miles away, helpless, and others tried to survive in a dysfunctional city. He was my New Orleans, my home, and it hurt me to see him every day dying, too.

A few days after I moved into a friend’s apartment in Baton Rouge, Gregory read on the Internet that the power was back on at his house in Mandeville. Shortly after, my brother,

parents, and grandparents went to live in Mandeville while Michael went with Hunter to Hammond to continue his classes as a visiting student for the semester. We were all moving closer to home.

## *Chapter 8* *Common Love*

Not long after they arrived in Mandeville, Mom, Dad, and Gregory drove into New Orleans to see for themselves what Hurricane Katrina and the three levee breaks had left of our city. They trekked in through the neighboring suburb of Metairie, followed National Guard traffic directions down a makeshift road over the Seventeenth Street Canal levee break, and continued dodging debris as they drove toward Lake Pontchartrain. They passed vacant lots where seafood restaurants and cottages had once cradled the canal, and as they got closer to our own neighborhood, they saw the old Coast Guard station, once an old-fashioned, red-roofed lighthouse, tipped on its side and shattered. Sailboats that had been pushed from their water slips to the concrete parking lot lay tangled together, their masts piercing the side planks of neighboring boats.

When my family reached our lakefront neighborhood, they saw that some houses had permanent water lines and others, the ones closer to Lake Pontchartrain, appeared unscathed. Our house had not flooded. Mom said there was a feeling of relief at first, and then of guilt. Of the eighty percent of New Orleans that had flooded, we were a part of that lucky twenty percent who did not have a damaged house. Our street was one of several that seemed like short narrow islands in a neighborhood surrounded by mold-infested residences.

After cleaning out the refrigerator and packing extra clothing, my parents and brother drove farther down Lakeshore Drive along Lake Pontchartrain to Gentilly to see Ferrara

Supermarket. But as they neared the intersection, they noticed from a distance that, even three weeks later, the nameplate on the grocery still appeared to float on the surface of murky floodwater. The large red sign that Gregory purchased to light up with neon green letters at dusk had fallen off the exterior of the building and sunk eight feet under water to Grandpa's parking lot. The strips of aluminum Dad had purchased many years before to hold the "old sign," the red Ferrara's nameplate of my childhood, were partly submerged in the water as if clinging to the exterior of the building for survival. But what hadn't peeled off was the red paint that spelled Ferrara's Super Market in a nameplate I had never seen before, a design that had been covered by those strips of aluminum since before I was born. I like to think Grandpa painted those letters, or at least stood in front of his grocery and watched as a professional painter climbed a ladder with a brush and can.

It had been a month since the London Avenue Canal levee breached, flooding the neighborhood of Gentilly, and Ferrara's. But the water still surrounded the building, saturating food, products, computers, and any hope of salvaging the grocery.

"Ferrara's is neighborhood," I heard a former customer tell Dad ten months after Hurricane Katrina. "Without that grocery, there's no neighborhood." And without the neighborhood, there would be no Ferrara's. Gentilly was deserted.

I guessed the car ride from the grocery back down Lakeshore Drive toward my grandparents' house on Leon C. Simon Drive was quiet, and even quieter still when my family saw the light brown water line that branded the brick two feet up from the ground. And just as they were about to walk toward the front door, Gregory's phone rang.

"Grandpa has lung cancer," Kristen said on the other end of the line. She and Beryl had learned of the test results. "And an aneurysm. The doctors give him three months to live."

My grandparents' front lawn was brown, streaked with gray, as if someone had dumped ashes in lines across the dead grass. A tree Grandpa had planted lay on the ground and its roots bulged under the grass, not quite breaking the soil. The only colors around my grandparents' house were three wilted red plants, the size of shrubs, not far from Grandpa's water-lined truck, and the green leaves of a Bird of Paradise near the front porch.

From this ashen yard my parents and brother stared at the house, trying to understand the grocery's terminal damage, Grandpa's terminal illness, and Hurricane Katrina's extended wrath on the grocery man's home. Mom said that she looked at my father as Gregory relayed the news. It had also been her husband's grocery store, his childhood home, his father.

After several more seconds of quiet, she followed her son and husband to the warped front door, which they unsuccessfully tried to push open. They retreated to the back door. Once inside, they saw that mold had climbed the walls and two feet of slick mud had spread across the carpet, fractured furniture, and the bottoms of my grandmother's freshly finished kitchen cabinets.

\*\*\*\*\*

I heard that my grandfather took the news of each disaster that day quietly, as he did most things. And a few days later when I drove from Baton Rouge after my first week of classes at LSU to Gregory's house in Mandeville, I was happy to see him sitting at my brother's kitchen table in his faded pants and hat, smiling below his black-rimmed glasses. It was early in the morning, and he wanted to teach me how to fry an egg, his favorite breakfast. He came and stood behind me at the stove and cracked an egg into the pan.

“If I had a smaller pan,” Grandpa said, “I’d show you how to flip it.” He picked up the spatula from the counter and started to lift the edges of the egg. “Move it around gently like this,” he continued. He looked up and smiled, and I nodded. I would’ve let him teach me how to tie my shoes again if he had offered.

Grandpa had already finished his egg, but he sat with me while I ate until Gregory called his name from the front lawn. My grandfather got up carefully from his chair and walked toward the garage. I felt his hand on my shoulder then, where it lingered for a few seconds, covering the entire bone as it pressed down on my thin frame. It sat there, feeling strong and confident against my body, until I felt less of his palm and more of his fingers as he lifted his hand slowly from my shoulder and walked through the door. At that moment in my brother’s kitchen in Mandeville, my grandfather knew he was going to New Orleans to assess the damage. At that moment, my grandfather knew he was going home.

\*\*\*\*\*

Grandpa wanted to see his city, and he wanted to see his grocery. So Uncle Dennis, who was visiting from Virginia, and Gregory drove Grandpa into New Orleans and to Ferrara Supermarket, where they saw that the water had finally receded, leaving a discolored one-story building at the corner of Elysian Fields and Robert E. Lee. Gregory saw his fifteen-foot red sign twisted on the concrete in front of Ferrara’s as if a tractor had rolled over the metal. Now uncovered from the water, the mural that had colored one side of the building still showed a pictorial history of New Orleans with a variety of painted images, from a woman clad in a long pink skirt and modest purple shirt carrying a bag of groceries to a picture of the old Smokey Mary train that used to transport New Orleanians at the early part of the twentieth century down



Elysian Fields Avenue from the Mississippi River to Lake Pontchartrain. On the far left side of the mural, in faded blue letters under a smaller Ferrara Supermarket nameplate was yet another sign: *Makin' Groceries Since 1906*.

\*\*\*\*\*

It had been Gregory, Dennis, and Grandpa's mission to get to the store's safe, but when they saw through the windows that a stray dog had taken ownership of Ferrara's, they decided not to risk an attack. So instead, they drove to Grandpa's house and began cutting at a tree that lay across the driveway.

But it wasn't long before Grandpa and Gregory decided to go back to Ferrara's to try one more time to get inside the building. They were in New Orleans and they were less than a mile from their grocery. My brother and my grandfather had to go back.

While Dennis worked to clear debris at his father's house, Gregory tore into one of the grocery's walls with Grandpa's tools and cut the studs that led into the office. Dad's desk was only recognizable as a pile of dirty wood, and black mold spotted the beige walls I had painted just two summers earlier. Gregory took pictures of the mess, but even as I study the images, it's difficult to see which side of the office held the wide bookcase my father had used partly as a picture stand for our baby photos and preschool drawings. In the heap of mess, there's the outline of a maroon leather chair, spotted with something white, and a brown door, off its hinges and leaning hazardously against a computer. In one picture I can see the door customers used to knock on to request money orders, but its small window is closed, and the area surrounding the door looks like the inside of a large trash bin – wood, torn papers, and another chair piled together, this one with a black milk carton on top.

After he maneuvered around the office destruction, Gregory had to tear his way through four feet of wet papers in the office closet to reach the safe. It took a long effort of prying at the metal box, but my brother finally pulled it open. Echoing his own yells of excitement was our grandfather's voice on the other side of the wall, where Gregory eventually placed piles of wet money into Grandpa's wrinkled hands.

There are other pictures too. These show the spoiled groceries, some of which covered the floor and others that remained on the shelves, as if a stock person had just placed them in rows. I could have walked down aisle three and never touched the orange vinyl, as if walking on a cloud of canned tuna fish, jars of pasta sauce, and bottles of Wesson vegetable oil. Before the storm, someone must have left a basket on aisle two, into which several blue boxes of Pop Tarts had fallen. But in no way does this picture remind me of a normal shopping day at Ferrara's. The boxes of Pop Tarts are faded, and a heavy layer of dirt covers the red handle of the basket while the metal is rusty from the floodwater. There's a picture of a stack of Contadina Tomato Sauce cans, but if Ms. Bertha had asked Grandpa where she could find the can with the girl pictured on the front, he couldn't have shown her, even if he could have climbed over the piles of spilled food. The Contadina picture had faded. And then there's the wine aisle. As if it was only the camera lens that was dirty, the five rows of bottles are lined on the shelves just as they were before Hurricane Katrina. Even the labels are facing in the right direction so that if there were customers at the store on the day my brother took the picture, they could easily have decided if they'd prefer to buy Yellow Tail or Woodbridge.

\*\*\*\*\*

About a week later, Gregory and Grandpa drove back to the city to meet our grandfather's insurance adjuster at Grandpa's house in New Orleans. Two hours before the adjuster was scheduled to arrive, Gregory and Grandpa pulled into the driveway. Grandpa unfolded a metal chair that had rusted from the floodwaters in his house, laid a piece of cardboard on the seat, and sat in his garage with his legs crossed.

After the adjuster arrived, Grandpa waited for two hours in the garage on that rusted chair while Gregory showed him the damage.

That day Howell Cavalier, Grandpa's contractor, also arrived at the house. Fifty years earlier, Howell had built my grandparents' house on Leon C. Simon Drive, and now retired, he had agreed to do the repairs. He was a cousin and the only man Grandpa wanted for the job. Howell was honored. Like many others, he admired the grocery man.

I can imagine my grandfather sitting on that metal chair, as Gregory described, in his open garage with his thin legs crossed one over the other as Howell walked up the driveway. He told his cousin matter-of-factly that he was a sick man now, and that he didn't have the energy to walk through the house with him. His grandson, he said, would lead him through the rooms to discuss the repairs. His grandson had always taken care of things, he said. His grandson, he insisted, had always been a good boy.

\*\*\*\*\*

The next move my grandparents made was to Baton Rouge, where Aunt Beryl rented a house for herself and her parents. It had been one month since Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, and it had been just several days since the doctor gave my grandfather three months to live.

The rental house in Baton Rouge was a single-hallway, one-story residence half the size of my grandparents' home in New Orleans, but still my grandmother often became confused as to which room to turn in to reach her bedroom or which to reach the kitchen. In just a month, she and my grandfather had lived in one hotel room and four different houses, including their own in New Orleans. And for a couple who had lived in the same place for half a century, each time they unpacked their bags somewhere new it was an adjustment. Grandma said her confusion was due to the number of times she had moved, but when she turned the wrong corner in the Baton Rouge house, I knew my grandmother's mind was absorbed with thoughts of her husband in the next room.

Grandpa didn't seem to have the same confusion as Grandma. While my grandmother moved through the house trying to distract herself with cooking or restoring her artwork that had been salvaged from her flooded home, Grandpa sat in a chair in the small den with each of his hands propped on the arm rests. At times it seemed as if my grandfather was staring at a blank wall without processing any thoughts. But I knew this wasn't true. Everything that my grandfather did was productive. If it looked like he was staring, then it probably meant that he was computing numbers in his head. Perhaps not grocery coupon numbers anymore, but numbers.

I was counting too. I thought about how many more talks I would have with my grandfather, how many more smiles he would give me across the kitchen table, or how many more times he would place his large hand on my shoulder and say, "Oh Lordy," in a deep, often chuckling, voice. And with each new visit to see my grandfather in Baton Rouge, the count got lower.

As I walked through my grandparents' front door and into their den on one of these visits, I saw my grandmother, Dad, Uncle Dennis, and Beryl sitting in a semi-circle around Grandpa. There was a low hubbub of voices in the small room, but these seemed to flow easily, as if carried by a breeze. I can't even remember what they were talking about, but it doesn't matter. Grandpa finally had his three children together again, and even with a front page *Seattle Times* picture of Ferrara Supermarket submerged under water taped to the wall across the room, he smiled.

\*\*\*\*\*

Every time I visited my grandfather in the last three months of his life, his body was smaller. His skin hung more loosely over his thin face, and his voice quickly became a whisper instead of that full pitch I had heard so often. But his smile, it never changed. One day when I opened a box of Christmas sugar cookies I had made for him, his pale lips lifted his sunken cheeks. My mother was with me then, and when she asked how he was feeling, my grandfather nodded before taking a deep breath.

"I'm good. Real good." He took another breath and then stretched out his stomach as he sat in his chair with a red blanket tucked under his legs. "I'm lucky, see. I haven't felt any pain." He was still smiling, my grandfather. "No pain. Yes sir, I sure am lucky." When I talked with Beryl in the next room a few minutes later, she told us that Grandpa refused to take morphine.

For all the times I didn't visit Grandpa after he disappointed me that Christmas Day, I now wanted to see him as often as I could. A couple of times a week, I drove across Baton Rouge and sat in my grandparents' den. At least once during each of our visits, Grandpa wondered out loud about Gregory. Because he didn't have a job at Ferrara's anymore, my

brother had accepted a position with the National Grocers' Association in Arlington, Virginia, to be near his fiancé. Grandpa often asked about Gregory, curious about what kind of work his grandson was doing and if he was happy living far from Ferrara Supermarket. I knew my brother wanted to be working at the grocery again, but for Grandpa, I always said that Gregory was content in Virginia. Sometimes he asked about Elizabeth and Hunter but always about Michael.

"Is he studying?" he'd demand to know, as if it was Michael himself and not me Grandpa questioned. I'd say yes, that I was certain he was, and my grandfather would nod. Education, he often assured us, is important. His highest degree was a high school diploma, but it wasn't unusual during our childhood to see him sitting in his den chair in New Orleans, figuring math problems in a used high school math book Gregory had wrapped up for him one Christmas, or reading a used paperback he had lifted from a leaning stack next to his chair. He sent all three of his children through college, and two through law school.

Finally he'd ask about me. He wanted to know what books I was reading for class or what I'd do with my MFA degree once I graduated.

"Tell me again," he'd say with a childlike smile. "It's slipped my mind here for a second." When I said I'd like to teach, he told me he thought it was a good profession.

"Are you still writing?" he asked one day. I said yes, he nodded, and I knew he approved of this too.

Other times Grandpa just listened as I talked with Grandma or Beryl in the den. If a stranger had walked through the door, she would have never known that four years earlier I stood in front of my grandmother with a resentment toward my aunt that I thought would never be dispelled.

I had started to enjoy my aunt's company, and I appreciated how patient and attentive she was to Grandpa and Grandma. She had even assured my grandfather that she would live with her mother once he passed away, and I knew that it would be a sacrifice for my aunt to give up her independence. In this way, she impressed me. But then I would remember the way she treated my father, the way, I thought, she separated our family, and I would hesitate to accept a hug from her on my way out the door, or to preface her name with "Aunt." I struggled between wanting to be near Beryl and wanting to distance myself further from her until I finally decided that in a family, it is common for relationships to waver between dislike and like. But if there is a common ground, a common love for someone, then the dislike or like doesn't truly matter. What matters is that love. What mattered to us was Grandpa.

## *Chapter 9*

### *Peppermint Patties*

In the middle of my semester at LSU, I spent a Tuesday afternoon alone with Grandpa. Grandma and Beryl wanted an opportunity to run errands, but they wouldn't leave my grandfather by himself in the house. "He has an aneurysm," Grandma reminded me one afternoon while she tucked slices of hot roast beef into the fold of a piece of white bread. "I won't leave him alone."

So I filled my backpack with schoolbooks and drove across town to sit with my grandfather, excited about the fact that we would get to spend time together without the distractions of my grandmother and aunt hovering over him to refill his plastic cup of water or to fix a blanket they draped over his thin legs.

As soon as Grandma and Aunt Beryl closed the front door, I sat down on the couch in the den and opened my backpack. Grandpa squirmed in his large, cushioned chair next to the window as he had often done since the hurricane. It was as if his organs periodically became tangled, and by straightening out his body, they would align themselves back into place.

There was an awkward silence between us. I wanted to ask him to tell me more stories about his boyhood in New Orleans. I wanted to ask him about his first date with my



grandmother. I wanted to ask him what the best day in his life had been. But instead I just sat there, fumbling through pages in my book. My grandfather looked physically uncomfortable, and I was worried that I would hurt him if I encouraged him to use his energy to talk. He must have sensed my anxiety.

“Don’t worry if I get up a lot and walk around,” he told me. “I’m fine.” He swiveled the chair toward me, and smiled. It was the same smile my dad gives on his way to the cookie jar each evening before everyone at the dinner table has finished their meal. It made me wonder if on one of those walks my grandfather would try to sneak a cigarette, since Grandma was gone. Even though it was too late, she often begged him to stop.

“I know, Grandpa. I know you’re fine.” I smiled too, and somehow saying it out loud made me believe that he was okay.

Grandpa did take a short walk around the house, but he returned a few minutes later without the scent of Winstons on his clothes. We looked shyly at each other and then remembering that Beryl’s son, Todd, was coming to visit the next day from Washington, I suggested we learn how to blow up the air mattress together in the spare room. I didn’t want him to think I was there to baby-sit him or that I thought he was an old, sick man. Even if the doctors said he was, to me he was still Grandpa. And Grandpa had always worked.

So together we learned which nozzles fit into which holes, and as we watched the mattress fill with air, I felt my grandfather’s large, firm hand pat me on the back before he turned to walk toward the open door. “Good job, Amy. You figured it out. Oh Lordy, good job, Amy.” I heard him repeat my name several times as he walked out of the room, and I sat by the mattress a few seconds longer, listening to his deep voice echo down the short hallway. It had been my grandfather, not I, who figured out which hole to put the pump into.

When I reached the couch in the den again, there was a chocolate Peppermint Pattie on my book. Grandpa nodded from his seat in my direction and then took a bite of a Peppermint Pattie he also held in his hand. Anyone who knew my grandfather knew this was his favorite candy.

It was quiet again. When I tried to read, I found myself repeating sentences. I noticed that my grandfather was also distracted. He would turn his chair to look out of the window and then back around again to stare at the blank television screen. As soon as he saw me put my book down, he swiveled to face me. I sensed he wanted to talk by the way he ran his hands over the cushioned arms, as if wiping sweat from his palms. But he was quiet. So I asked him about the construction on his house in New Orleans, and he said that Howell was doing a good job, that my dad had checked on it Saturday.

I smiled.

“It’s moving along quickly,” he said. “But, y’know…” He paused. “But y’know, I’m told I only have three months.” My eyes burned then, and I quickly looked down at my book and read the title so that I wouldn’t cry. Grandpa’s voice only got stronger. He was smiling, and it seemed he wanted me to be happy too. This was the first time he had ever mentioned to me that he wasn’t the same man he was a year ago, that he was now sick, and dying.

“It’s moving fast, the house y’know, but I dunno if it’ll be finished in time.” And then, without taking a breath, he said, “But that’s okay, see. I got this here house, and I’m content here, and it’ll be okay.” He raised his tone, as if he was asking me a question.

“It will be okay, Grandpa,” I somehow said, speaking louder than usual to force away the cracking sound in my voice. “And doctors aren’t always right. It could be longer than three months, y’know.”

“Yeah. Right.” he said with a short chuckle, and I knew he was just humoring me. “I just hope I make it to Heaven.”

For me, there was no doubt. “Of course you will, Grandpa.”

“Oh Lord have mercy. I’ve done some bad things in my life, and I’ve done a few good things, but I sure do hope I make it to Heaven.” Before she left the house, my grandmother had pulled the blinds up so that the sun fell softly against the thin, pale green curtains that had been pushed to either side of the window, which my grandfather stared through to the quiet street.

“I can’t imagine that you’ve done any bad things, but you’ve done more than a few good things.”

Grandpa laughed again as he turned his chair back around to face me.

“Oh Lord have mercy.” He leaned back to stretch his stomach, and then he leaned forward again. “Sometimes, I don’t even know there is a Heaven.” That was the first time I had ever heard my grandfather talk about religion. He had been raised Roman Catholic, received his first Communion and Confirmation, and taught his children to believe in Jesus Christ as the Savior. But when I was a little girl, Grandpa only attended Mass on Easter Sunday and Christmas Eve, and he never got in line to take Communion. It was understood that he stayed in the pew; my parents and grandmother never condemned him for it. And when I was old enough to know, old enough to understand, I knew that for Grandpa, leading a moral life and working hard in that life were his religion. And Ferrara Supermarket, it seemed, was his church.

But when he was older, when he and my grandmother had wrinkles and slightly bent backs, he went to church. He put on a tie and sport coat for eight o’clock Mass on Sunday mornings for my grandmother, so that she would know that when he died, he would have died going to church the last few years of his life. She believed more than he did.

Maybe on that afternoon he knew I was finally old enough to make my own decisions, that whatever he would tell me about religion wouldn't necessarily affect my own beliefs, or the Catholic way my parents raised me. "I don't even sometimes believe," he paused and arched his back again, "that Jesus Christ was Savior. I think He was a good man, but I dunno know how a Higher Being could pick one person out of the whole human population to be His Son. I just dunno." He smiled then, and I saw a glimpse of the boy he must have been in those Catechism classes in the 1920s, the gangly kid in the back of the classroom who raised his hand constantly to ask questions that would never have concrete answers.

"Sometimes I don't even know if there is a Higher Being, a Gawd." He smiled again. "And then I say in my head, 'If there is a Gawd I better believe now before I have to go face Him in Heaven.'" He lifted his butt from his chair and sat back down again. "I just hope I don't end up in purgatory, if there is such a place. If I die, I die and I'm dead, and I don't want to be no place in between." We laughed softly together now about life and death because, to me, it seemed better than crying.

There was a silence that followed, and Grandpa rubbed his forehead with his hand. I could tell that he had been thinking about God and Heaven a lot lately.

"I believe," I said, breaking the silence.

"Good. Good girl. That's fine. You should believe."

"I believe because I need to believe." I paused and took a deep breath to let my voice even out. "At times like this, I need to believe that there is something greater than me, or us, and that Someone wants to save us from all this."

Grandpa nodded. "That's good. Yeah. Real good."

It was the last time I saw him alone, just the two of us.

\*\*\*\*\*

Grandpa died two months later. The doctors had been right. It took only three months for the lung cancer to suffocate him so much that the Hospice nurse had to continually up his morphine levels while his family surrounded his bed on Christmas day. Gregory and Elizabeth were in town for the holidays, and while my sister smiled at Grandpa from across the room, Gregory sat on a stool next to his bed and held his hand. Sitting next to Michael on the couch, I could hear my grandfather ask my oldest brother in a dry whisper if he liked his new job.

“I love my job,” Gregory said loudly. “I love it just as much as I loved working at the store.” The thin layer of skin on Grandpa’s face lifted over his cheekbones.

Dad sat on a chair at the foot of the bed, massaging his father’s feet that were tucked under a white blanket. They were swollen at least four sizes larger than usual, and they seemed out of proportion with the rest of his body that lay under the blanket and outlined in the gaunt shape of a Holocaust victim.

Just a couple of days before, Beryl told me how Grandpa had tried to get out of bed on his own. Even with oxygen plugged into his nose, when he lay down, my grandfather must have felt as if he were suffocating. So Grandma had watched him pull the top half of his body up, and when she offered to let her husband lean against her so that he could stand, he refused. He knew she would tumble down too. So Grandma called Beryl into the den. Although he tried to resist her help for the same reason, my aunt convinced Grandpa to place his left arm around the back of her neck as she swung her right arm around his thin waist. But when my grandfather finally did try to stand, he was too weak to hold his body up, and he was too heavy for Beryl to carry.

So they both fell to the floor. After that, Grandpa must have been thinking. The next day he told Beryl, in a near whisper, how he would be able to get out of bed.

“Tell Brian to put wheels on it,” he said, referring to the walker that had been pushed into a corner in the room. “He’ll know how to do it. Brian Ferrara.” There was a bit of the morphine that Grandpa had finally agreed to take when he told his daughter about his idea, stating her brother’s last name. But he was still Grandpa. Dying of lung cancer, my grandfather wanted to make sure he could be self-sufficient so that he didn’t have to trouble anybody with anything.

On that Christmas day, Michael walked to the bed to touch Grandpa’s hand. He smiled shyly, the same way he always does when he meets a stranger, and then carefully lifted his hand from Grandpa’s and walked out of the room. When he came back into the room later, I could smell the scent of cigarettes on my brother.

My grandfather was too weak to talk, and all of the communication he made was either with a few whispered words, a slow wave of his hand, or a slight smile. Barely lifting his left arm from the bed, he motioned for his red plastic cup of water that happened to be on the table near me. But before I could reach it, Beryl grabbed the cup and brought it to her father. Her hand was shaking, I noticed. While my aunt put the straw into my grandfather’s mouth, Grandma continued to softly rub her husband’s head.

“He wanted to see all of you,” she said a couple of times. “He was waiting for you to get here. And Dennis and his family will be here soon.” She paused and blew her nose. “Hopefully soon.”

After she had repeated this, I looked at my grandfather one last time while he was alive and walked out of the room and into the kitchen, where most of my family had already gathered.

Someone said something funny in an attempt to keep our spirits up, but when I began to laugh, tears poured out of my eyes, over my runny nose, and dropped from my lips onto the linoleum kitchen floor. Beryl grabbed me then and held me against her chest.

“You were so good to him, Amy. He appreciated it, y’know.” Her voice sounded strained, and I wanted to say thank you. I wanted to say thank you for taking care of him, and I wanted to say thank you for, at this moment, recognizing our family’s pain as one. But I was sobbing now, and everyone else in the room just listened to my aunt’s voice try to drown out the sound of my heavy crying. “You were so good to him.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Back home in New Orleans, I rolled over in my bed and answered the phone the next morning around 6:30.

“Amy?” I heard Beryl’s voice on the other end of the line. “Grandpa’s gone.” I said no, and then I repeated it louder. No.

“Yes. He’s gone. He went this morning. We think about thirty minutes ago. I was just with him, and he was breathing.” My aunt had been crying. “I went to bed. When Grandma came out a few minutes later to sit with him, he was already gone.”

I cried a little, though not as much as I had the night before, and an hour after Beryl’s call, Gregory, Dad, and I left for Baton Rouge. Mom and the rest of the family would follow later with cooked food. I was scared. I had never before seen a body just hours after death, but even so, I felt like I had to look at Grandpa one last time. I had to see for myself how this man, who was always so alive, had settled into the quietness of death. And, an hour later when we arrived at the house, I was happy to see that he must have been sleeping when he finally let go.

His mouth was open, as it most often was when I saw him take his afternoon naps, and his eyes were closed.

“He was the greatest man that ever lived,” Grandma cried as she touched his sunken cheeks in a room that now seemed empty with the echoing sounds of quiet sobs. “The greatest man.”

Just a day before, early on Christmas morning, my grandfather told Grandma thank you, though I imagine he whispered. It was when he was still Grandpa, before the morphine numbed his senses and put his body to sleep. I’ve loved you my entire life, he told his wife. Thank you for everything, he had said. It’s a beautiful thing to say, but still, it’s hard for me to believe that it came from my grandfather. There’s no doubt that he did love his wife for the sixty years they were married and that he appreciated everything she had done for him throughout. When it came to sentiments, however, Grandpa was a man of few words. I never heard him say *I love you* to anybody. I just knew he loved me because he would stand on the bleachers for the entirety of many of my high school soccer games, even if my coach only played me for the first half. I knew because I received a letter from him in the mail with *Congratulations! I am so proud of you...* written on white typing paper above a taped newspaper cutout listing honor roll names with one – my own – circled in pen. Sometimes he cut out newspaper articles he thought I might be interested in, enclosed a short note, and mailed them to me, such as this one: *Dear Amy: Thought you might be interested in the attached information about Loyola.* In all of these letters, he signed: *Love, Grampa.* Not *Grandpa*, but *Grampa*, the way I always pronounced it.

I knew he loved me because this man, who never spent more than five minutes on the telephone a day, called me one afternoon to say that he had seen an article I had written for a local publication during one of my internships. He told me I had done good. Real good, he had



said. I suppose we all have our own reasons. But with tears in her eyes, Grandma had repeated his declaration the following day to us in the kitchen, as her husband lay still beneath the covers on the bed in the next room. I've loved you my entire life, she told us a second time. Thank you for everything, she repeated.

I stayed at the far end of the room and looked at my grandfather's pale body, so tranquil. I knew that if I touched him he would be cold, and I didn't want to remember Grandpa as feeling cold. So instead I watched as Dad massaged his father's right hand that lay flat, with the palm down, on top of the white blanket, and I watched as my brother did the same minutes later. It wasn't long before Gregory said that we needed food. Dennis and his family would arrive in just a couple of hours, and we needed some bread and meat and chips and, well, we just needed to go to the grocery store. Grandma said it wasn't necessary, but Gregory insisted. My brother was mourning. His grandfather was dead in front of him, and he wanted to go grocery shopping. It was the most appropriate thing anyone did that day.

Before I left with Gregory, I looked at Grandpa one last time. It was better to see him like this, I decided, than gasping for air and sucking on a straw in a plastic cup that someone had to hold up for him. As I turned to walk out of the den, I noticed the two pictures on the wall across from Grandpa's hospice bed. One was a photocopied black and white photograph of the old Chartres Street corner grocery store with a grown man and several children standing under a canopy near a screen door. Next to this picture on the wall was the front page of the *Seattle Times* that had printed, in color, an image of a Jet Ski creating a wake as it motored past the nearly submerged red letters that read *Ferrara Supermarket*. It was, I noticed, the beginning and the end. Grandpa had been ready.

## *Chapter 10*

### *Groceries and Grandpa*

Immediately, I could feel the cool air as we walked into Baton Rouge's Calandro's Supermarket, a family-owned grocery with an Italian heritage that had that same neighborhood atmosphere as Ferrara's in New Orleans.

"I used to shop in this store when I lived in Baton Rouge," Grandma said over the rattle of the metal cart. "Before I married Grandpa."

Since her displacement from Hurricane Katrina, Calandro's was where Grandma had done most of her grocery shopping. I had resumed courses in New Orleans in January, but that weekend I had been in Baton Rouge visiting a friend. When I picked up Grandma for Mass on Sunday morning, she asked if I minded if we went grocery shopping when the service ended. Of course not, I said quickly, but I remember that I stuck my hand into my purse to see if I had brought a packet of Kleenex.

It was February 19, 2006, nearly two months since Grandpa's death. When I visited with my grandmother in Baton Rouge on occasion, something I said, something she said, or something she saw in the kitchen would remind her of him. She cried often. But on that day in February when we went grocery shopping, Grandma was surprisingly strong. As I maneuvered the cart behind her up and down the aisles, she studied the vegetables and examined the fruit as if she were a little girl looking at the leprechaun picture on the front of the Lucky Charms cereal box. I hadn't seen her so relaxed in weeks. I even tried to distract her with talk about my schoolwork, afraid that if she became too engrossed in groceries, she would think of Grandpa and begin crying again. But I couldn't divert her attention.

“It’s weird shopping in another grocery store,” I remember she said while we looked for a box of Graham Crackers. They would have been on aisle eight at Ferrara’s, near the warehouse doors. “In my own store I knew where everything was. Now I’ve got to walk down these aisles and look and look and then finally ask someone, if I can find them.” She waved her hand in the air and then leaned over to scan the bottom shelf. “I just want my grocery store back. I just want my life back.”

But even as she said this, Grandma seemed steady as she continued to scan the aisles. The tone of her voice was strong, constant, and when I looked up at one point in the grocery and saw a carton of Winstons, I began to wonder if it was I Grandma would have to console instead of the other way around. In that grocery, I wanted to see my grandfather. I wanted to see my dad and my brothers in front of the office door, and Ms. Dot and Ms. Mary behind the cash registers. I wanted to hear Mr. Dominic say “Hey, honey” as I walked past the meat counter, and I wanted to hear the sound of metal baskets and rubber wheels rolling across that orange vinyl floor that dipped in some places and rose into small mounds in others. More than anything, though, I wanted to see Grandpa slowly push open the warehouse doors, watch him turn in my direction, and hear his voice rise as he said my name. I would’ve given anything to have him pull me close again and press his stubbly cheeks against my smooth face so that he could exclaim that he was stuck – oh Lordy, was he stuck – and that he couldn’t get loose. Even the smell of cigarette smoke on his breath would have been fresh to me.

But our store was a hundred miles away. It was decaying on the corner of Elysian Fields and Robert E. Lee in New Orleans, marked with a brownish-yellow water line near the nameplate that branded it as a Hurricane Katrina disaster. And in another month it would become

first a pile of rubble, and then a vacant lot with a For Lease sign pinned to a temporary fence around it.

I found the Graham Crackers and dropped the box into the cart. “If I ran out of money I could just ask,” Grandma continued. Even if I hadn’t been there, I think she would have talked to the groceries she tossed into her cart. I knew my grandmother needed to say these things out loud, while grocery shopping. Her life and her devotion to my grandfather had been a testimonial to Ferrara Supermarket, but still, I felt as if she was apologizing for shopping in another grocery store. Pushing the cart, I followed her with down the next aisle, amazed at her fortitude.

“Grandpa was always there,” she continued. “Now I have to make sure I have enough money with me when I go to shop.”

As we walked past the meat case, Grandma peered inside. “I used to get this for your grandfather because he liked it,” she said, pointing to a piece of pre-packaged meat. It was a type of soup bone, though I don’t remember exactly what kind. She took a deep breath and sighed. “But no more.”

I thought for sure she would cry then, so I mentioned that I had talked to Elizabeth on the phone the night before. But Grandma only took the grocery cart from me and turned it onto the next aisle. I don’t think she even heard me. She had groceries on her mind, and Grandpa.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Alvarez, Alfred A. “7<sup>th</sup> FA on D-Day at Omaha Beach: First to Fire.” Field Artillery Nov. - Dec. 2001: 40-42.

<sup>2</sup> Margavio, A.V. and Jerome J. Salomone. *Bread and Respect: The Italians of Louisiana*. Gretna: Pelican Publishing, 2002, 35-36. Some of the information used in the historical background of this chapter also has been taken from the knowledge obtained from this book.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35-36.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.



Lil's and Grandpa's First Communion



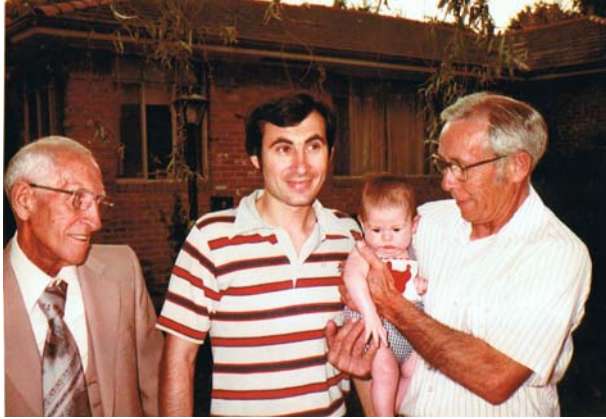
Lieutenant Merrill Ferrara



Grandpa painting signs outside of Ferrara's Food Store



Lil, Grandpa, Gloria, Tresa, and Tot



Four generations of grocery men: Tot, Dad, Gregory, and Grandpa



Grandpa and me



Elizabeth, Gregory, and me working with Grandpa by his white truck



Michael, Elizabeth, me, and Hunter selling Girl Scout cookies at Ferrara's. Grandpa was our best customer.





Dad, me, Hunter, Mom, and Gregory at Ferrara Supermarket  
Photo courtesy of *Associated Grocers' Ink*, Oct. 29, 2001



Me, Grandpa, Grandma, Michael, and Gregory during  
our Hurricane Katrina evacuation





Lil Ferrara Maratea and Grandpa



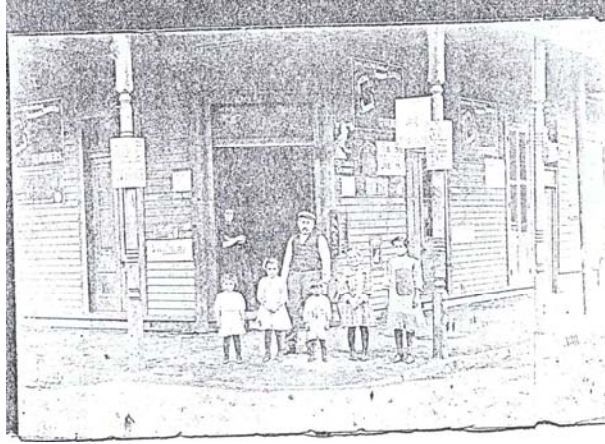
Ronnie Reese, Merrill Maratea, Gloria Ferrara Reese, Gregory, Dad, Mom, Elizabeth, and me



Grandma and Grandpa



Gregory, Grandpa, Lil, Hunter, Michael, me, Grandma, and Drucilla at a shrimp boil in Grandpa's garage. In the upper left corner is the poster Grandpa pinned to the wall in his rental house during his evacuation from Hurricane Katrina.



This is a copy of the picture of the Chartres Street grocery that Grandpa taped to the poster board. Years earlier, he had photocopied the original and passed copies among his relatives. This is the one I received.



Ferrara Supermarket at Elysian Fields Avenue and Robert E. Lee Boulevard



Ferrara's after Hurricane Katrina  
Photo: Associated Press



Grandpa

---

## *Vita*

Amy Marie Ferrara was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. She is a graduate of Mount Carmel Academy and Loyola University New Orleans, where she received her B.A. in communications with a minor in English writing. She currently reads, writes, and runs in Florida, where she lives with her husband, Justin Smith.