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N'Awlins Po Boy

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N' Awlins Po Boy

A Thesis

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

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Fiction

by

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B.S. Fairleigh Dickinson University 1976
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In the Beginning

“Tony! Get your brother.”

My head snapped around to see Tony looking around before putting his sandwich on the bench to run after Sal. “Sal, stop. Wait for me.”

Sal turned around, giggled, and with his ten yard head start, put his feet in rapid motion. He was headed for Decatur Street, fronting Jackson Square. Tony caught up with him about ten feet from the street. Grabbing Sal by the arm, Tony dragged the squirming, yelling, furious, four year old back to the benches. It wasn't an easy job as Tony was only two years older and just a few inches taller than our younger brother. Tony forced Sal to sit on the bench next to Li'l Grandma, who was only a few inches taller than the six year old boy next to her,

Tony said, “Why am I always the one who has to look after him? Why not Stacy? He's the oldest.”

Grandma said, “You were the closest. Sit down and eat your sandwich.”

I handed Tony a fresh sandwich. I unwrapped my own bologna sandwich and sat the paper on my lap. A sudden burst of morning breeze caught the wrapper and blew it onto the grass. I set my sandwich down, got up, dodged around the shopping bags at my feet, and retrieved it. Grandma cast a stern look in my direction. I mumbled, “Sorry, it got away.”

Sal said, “I want.” He pointed to the street where a cart was drawn by a single mule. It was the Roman Candy taffy wagon rolling slowly along the street with its bell clanging a call to kids. The taffy making machine could be seen inside turning and pulling fresh taffy. Sal was drawn to anything bright, and the candy wagon with its bright white paint and blazing red lettering was eye catching.

Grandma said, “No. You can’t have candy this early. Too much candy is not good for you.”

Sal didn’t say anything, but I could see his eyes brightening with the beginning of tears. Grandma said, “Don’t you dare cry. You can’t have everything just because you want it.”

I was beginning to feel hunger pangs, no doubt triggered by the smell of fresh beignets and hot café au lait carried on the morning breeze and coming from the Café du Monde coffee shop a few yards away from where we sat on park benches between Decatur Street and the Mississippi River levee. I ate my sandwich and Grandma poured a small cup of iced tea from one of two thermos bottles she carried along with our sandwiches, napkins, aspirin, and Band-Aids in a large burlap bag.

Sal was fascinated by the hustle of automobiles, trucks, horse and mule drawn wagons, and the steady stream of people rushing by. Across the street, artists were setting up easels and hanging portraits and other samples of their work on the fence surrounding Jackson Square. Although it was early, some tourists were already congregating in the Café du Monde, examining the paintings, talking to the artists, and strolling around the square.

Along with my three brothers, Tony, Angelo, and Sal, I was enjoying a first-time all family visit to the French Market. Although it was not all that unusual for either Tony, me, or both of us to go shopping in the market with Mother or Grandma, we had never gone as a family. At seven years old, I was considered old enough to go shopping and take care of my younger brothers. Tony was six, Angelo five, and Sal had just made four. It was Sal’s first time going into town and he wiggled and fidgeted constantly, waiting for a chance to get loose and close to all the bright colors and motion just feet from where we sat on the benches.

Grandma stood up and said, “Stacy, take those bags and lets go find your mother.” She came over to where I was sitting and, as I stood, I noticed Li’l Grandma stood only a few inches taller than me, and looked even smaller in her ankle to neck dress. I was big for my age at four feet four inches. Big Grandma was much taller standing nearly six feet. Mother was taller than Li’l Grandma, but shorter than Big Grandma. Tony, Angelo, and Sal were about the same size as other kids their age. I resembled my father in that I had darker skin, black hair, brown eyes, and an overall look that stamped me as Sicilian. Except for having green eyes, Angelo shared these features but Tony’s hair was nearly blond, his complexion was very light, and his blue eyes were more appropriate to a north European. Sal was somewhere in between with brown hair, blue eyes, and light complexion. I guess Tony and Sal more closely resembled our grandparents than either our father or mother.

“The rest of you clean up those wrappings and put them in the little bag.” Tony and Angelo collected the debris from our small meal and Tony took the little bag to a trash barrel a few yards from where we had eaten.

We walked in train with Grandma up front followed by Tony holding one of Angelo’s hands and Angelo holding Sal’s hand. I followed in the rear. We wore our school clothes, but I noticed that most of the people we saw were dressed either in work clothes or, in the case of tourists, what in my family would have been Sunday clothes. Locals who worked in the Market went about their chores quietly and moved at a deliberate pace. The tourists seemed to flutter all over the place. Locals carefully examined lettuce, cabbage, potatoes, tomatoes, watermelons and other vegetables, selecting those they thought best for the money. Late arriving merchants filled trucks and horse drawn wagons with produce to sell in the streets or deliver to restaurants and small grocers.

We walked past the first of the two market buildings where souvenir sellers hawked their wares. Voodoo dolls, love potions and charms were sold next door to spice shops. We found Mother at one of the fish stands at the lower end of the building. She was talking to our Great-uncle Don, who sold his fish there. Mother had already picked out the fish she wanted, and one of the boys, probably one of my cousins, was wrapping several fish in newspaper for her.

Not for the first time, I noticed how all the men who passed smiled when they looked at Mother. Several of the other merchants stopped near Uncle Don's booth and just watched. Mother did look nice in her knee length skirt and striped blouse, but I was accustomed to seeing men smile at Mother that way.

One of the men said something to Mother. She just smiled and looked away. Uncle Don said, "Hey, that's my niece and besides she's married and got four kids."

The man said, "No mother has a right to look that good."

Mother said, "Thank you, but I don't need compliments from men who smell of fish in the morning."

Uncle Don laughed and then greeted us. "Hi sis, hi boys. Good lord, the way you guys are growing, you'll be helping out in the Market soon."

I replied, "Hi, Uncle Don." Somehow, I didn't see being a fish handler in my future.

Tony said, "Hi Uncle Don. I'm going to work with race cars."

"Well, you never know. Remember, you can always come see me if you want to work."

Grandma said, "I want more for these boys than working in a fish market, and so does their mother."

Mother said, "Thanks Uncle Don, but I want my boys to go to college and make something of their lives."

Don looked dubious. “College? Got to be smart to go to college, and how could you afford it? Besides all that, ain’t never been anyone in this family ever gone to college.”

“Then I’ll be the first.” I said.

Mother smiled. “Yes, you certainly will.”

Uncle Don patted me on the head. “Well, we’ll see. You got big dreams, boy.”

That was one of the best days of the summer of 1946. We rode the bus home instead of walking the mile or so like we usually did when going to the market. I guess it was the unusually large number of packages that dictated riding instead of walking, but then Sal was also getting tired and that may have had something to do with it.

The war had been over for nearly a year that summer, and people were generally happier than before. Things seemed to be just a little brighter, and the newspapers, for the first time in my memory, did not have war news and photos of soldiers fighting on the front page. In fact, if it hadn’t been for the way other kids picked on me and called me names, it might have been a perfect summer. I suppose fate and the strange circumstance of my name almost had to preclude that.

A Sicilian by Any Other Name . . .

“Stacy, run down to Mr. Solia’s and get a loaf of French bread. Hurry up now, I want it while it’s fresh.”

“Okay, Grandma, soon as I get my shoes on.”

As soon as I left the house, I saw them; a clump of five girls, standing together about fifty feet away. When I came out they all called, “Staaacy, Staaaaccyyyy”

“Shut up and go play with your dolls.”

Maria Louisa stuck her tongue out at me and said, “Why don’t you lend us one of your dolls, Stacy.”

I picked up a couple of small rocks and threw them, but the girls were out of easy rock throwing distance, and I wasn’t actually trying to hit them anyway, just get them to shut up. They started teasing me with a familiar chant; “Stacy is a girl’s name, Stacy is a girl.” I turned around to chase them, but they ran around the corner, giggling and laughing. They never teased my brothers like that, but of course my brothers had acceptable names: Anthony, Salvatore, and Angelo. That was one reason I hated my name.

I was born Stacy Marcus Garavolia and I’m Sicilian, or at least my family is, or was. . . whatever. I was born October 28, 1938, at home in the lower French Quarter of New Orleans. Near the end of the great depression, and just before WWII, the lower Quarter was not exactly a fashionable address. Everyone knew that the only people who actually lived in the lower Quarter were “niggers, faggots and poor white trash.” Well, we aren’t black, and there are no gays in the family, at least none who are close relatives, so I guess that put us in the latter category. I wouldn’t say that to our faces, or for that matter, not even behind our backs.

I doubt that most people spend their days worrying about, or even wondering, how they got their name, since most can trace their names to relatives, famous people, or sometimes a family friend. In any case, the name usually fits the person's ethnic origins.

I've never liked my name for a number of reasons. Not that my name is so terrible. If I had been born into a WASP family in Grosse Point, The Hamptons, or Telegraph Hill, I'm sure no one would give it a thought. However, I was born into a Catholic Sicilian family, in a Sicilian neighborhood, in the lower French Quarter of New Orleans.

There's a truck-load of men and boys named Anthony and Joseph in my family. We have a basket full of Guisseppes, Giacomos, Salvatores, Angelos, and even a couple of Guidos thrown in for balance. However, there's never been a Stacy. Okay, so like I said, it's not the world's worst name, but for a young Sicilian boy growing up in an Italian neighborhood, it damn sure isn't the greatest.

There's a flock of girls in the family. At least a dozen female cousins conspired to make my young life miserable. No matter how many times I tried to get them to call me Mark or Marcus, they found it more fun to taunt me with my given name.

Another aggravation was that all the boys in school not only made fun of the name, but called it a sissy name.

"Hey, Stacy, why don't you go play with the girls?"

"Why don't you shut up?"

Pauli said, "Ah, let the little sissy go."

Tonio agreed, "Yeah, the little pussy won't fight anyway. His mommy won't let him."

I felt rage and frustration rising to my throat, itching to get out while I struggled to keep them in check, but that struggle usually ended in a tie. I was mad as hell, but Tonio was right. If I

got into a fight, I'd catch hell when I got home and would usually be punished. Mother and both grandmothers were constantly preaching that "Gentlemen don't get into fistfights." That might be true, but if it was, then I wasn't sure that being a gentleman was such a great a thing.

The boys at school had a whole dictionary of variations on my name, particularly my last name: ravioli, gramophone, graphite, grave boy, and sometimes Gerty. That kind of challenge could be answered in only one way, regardless of parental strictures, and that resulted in myriad cuts, abrasions, bruises, and more than one black eye, usually mine.

There was another, even more pressing reason why I disliked my name. This had to do with the circumstances of my birth, which I discovered in bits and pieces. My mother was unmarried and only fifteen when she became pregnant with me. In 1938, that was a scandal of the first magnitude. Part of the problem was that my twenty-five year old father was married, but not to my mother. A Sicilian community in those days, dealt with that kind of a situation in one of two ways: my father could marry my mother, which meant divorcing his first wife; or he could deal with the business end of a sawed off twelve-gauge shotgun. However, the latter solution didn't resolve the major dilemma, and the former created another problem; the Catholic Church did not and does not recognize divorce. Sicilians are devout Catholics, and church dicta are taken very seriously. Not only would the church frown upon such a marriage, but a divorced person is not allowed to be married in church. In the church's view, someone who was divorced and remarried was living in sin and damned to hell.

As I later learned, faced with the somewhat unpleasant alternative, it was, after some very heated discussions, decided that my father would get a divorce and marry my mother. However, even in special circumstances, divorce takes time, and so I was nine months old when my parents finally married. One result of that mess is that I was born at home, and since I had no legal father

at the time, and my mother didn't want me to not have my father's family name, no birth certificate was filed. For all practical purposes, I didn't exist. To say that this caused difficulties throughout my life would be gross understatement. Of course, I am only repeating what I've been told or have since discovered on my own, as I was a bit too young to have direct memories of things that happened just before and after my birth.

Although married to my mother, my father continued to spend more time with his first wife, his son by her, and his girlfriends, than he did with us. My memories of him at that time were of a man who always dressed above his means, kept his hair slicked down with oily hair dressing, and no doubt saw himself as some kind of Rudolph Valentino. Whenever other women were around him, they smiled a lot and hovered like moths surrounding a hot flame.

His side of the family saw his situation as due entirely to my birth, and that earned me and my mother the enmity of almost the entire paternal side of my family, a hostility that exists to this day. Sicilians neither forget nor forgive. I learned this first hand when I lived with my father's first wife for a few months when I was about four years old and had been sent to live there during one of our perennial financial disasters due to my father's abandonment of us.

That side of the family didn't speak to me at all, and if they called me anything, it was "the little bastard," that is, all but my paternal grandmother. "Bastard" is a curse word, and cursing is a sin, so she never used it.

Aunt Talia asked, "Mama, where is the little bastard?"

Grandma Theresa answered, "Stacy is outside playing in the shed." When she said "Stacy" she bit her thumbnail and spit. She did this every time she said my name.

Aunt Talia called me in to dinner. "Come in and get something to eat. Sit over there at the little table." As usual, I was the only one seated at that table.

“Maria, get the little bastard a plate and bring it to him.”

“Why do I always have to do it?”

“Do as you’re told.”

“Oh, okay, Mama.”

She all but threw the plate on the table. “Here, bastard, don’t spill it.”

Grandma grabbed her by the arm and said, “Maria, watch you language. You not call Stacy that name.” She bit her thumb and spit.

Maria sighed. “Okay, Nonna.”

After dinner, Grandma Theresa said, “Stacy,” she bit her thumb and spit. “You help Maria pick up the dishes and clean up the table.”

And so it went. At four years old, I couldn’t understand their feelings or their attitude toward me, but I did know that, for some reason, they all seemed to hate me.

Some years later, nine-year-old natural curiosity, and other considerations, formed the basis for a desire to discover how I got my name. The obvious course of action would have been to simply ask Mother; but since I wasn’t supposed to know anything about the particulars of my birth, I didn’t think I could just go up to her and say, “Hey, mom, why do all our other relatives call me the little bastard, and why did you give me a name that girls hate, and makes boys fight with me?” Even at that age, I sensed that just wouldn’t be cool. Besides, thanks to my father’s philandering, and our worsening economic situation, the family was having greater problems than curiosity over a name’s origin. I decided to investigate on my own.

The first line of inquiry was my mother’s only sibling. My favorite aunt always liked me more than my brothers. Maybe it was because I was the oldest with Tony a year younger, Angelo two years younger and Sal the youngest at three years younger than me. Perhaps it had to do with

my living with her and her brood of six kids because my mother had to split up the family while she worked to raise enough money to support us and find a place for us to live after my father did another one of his disappearing acts and left us nearly destitute. He didn't actually disappear, everyone knew he was back with his first wife and his harem of girl friends, but regardless of reason, he wasn't with us, and that meant we had no means of support. As a result of that abandonment, we were evicted from our rented house, and my mother farmed us out. My first thought was that I might be sent back to live with my father's family.

“Why do we have to go live somewhere else?”

“Because we don't have enough money to live together, but we won't be apart for long. It's just until I get a better job and make enough money for us to live together again.”

I felt tears come to my eyes. “Why can't we live with Grandma?”

“Because she doesn't have enough room for us, and we don't have enough money for us all to live together for now.”

“Please don't send me back to live with Father, please.”

Mother stroked my hair. “Don't worry; you're never going to have to live there ever again.”

I wound up staying with my Aunt Lorraine. That was fine with me. I liked Aunt Lorraine. Her oldest daughter, Sylvia Ann, was my favorite cousin; we were both born in October, she on the thirty-first and me on the twenty-eighth, and we shared birthday parties most years. As far as I was concerned, even if Mother, my brothers, and I did have to live apart for a while, I was happy that my father was gone and I hoped he never returned.

Aunt Lorraine was usually a great source of information, especially after she had consumed her first six bottles of Jax beer for the day. It was from her that I had gathered most of

the information I knew about my birth, and my father's transgressions. One evening, when she seemed in a good mood (she was on her last beer), I decided to ask her how I got my name.

"Aunt Lorraine, do you know why Mom picked Stacy to be my name?"

"Your mother picked that name. I don't know why. It's a nice enough name, I guess, but it sure is strange."

"But why that name? Am I named after someone in the family, or maybe someone famous?"

She looked at me in a funny sort of way and said, "It had something to do with a newspaper story."

That was intriguing, but not very helpful. I had the sense that she was withholding something, so I said, "That's your last beer. Would you like me to go get you some more?"

She smiled and patted my head. "That would be nice."

I ran to the corner bar and got another bag of six bottles of beer, but no matter how many beers she had, I couldn't get any more out of her on the subject.

It became clear that my search was not to be as easy as I had anticipated. My next thought was to ask my grandmother, but I had to wait until our next visit, which was nearly a month away. In the meantime, I did some library research into the derivation of my name. All I could find were some references to a number of old English Lords and sailing captains. What the hell did any of that have to do with me? Although slightly interesting, that line of research was pretty useless, so I abandoned it and waited for the promised visit to my grandmother.

Mother showed up on a Saturday and said, "Okay, if you're ready to go visit Grandma, let's go,"

Sylvia Ann tugged at my pocket to remind me to ask. “Mom, Sylvia would like to go with us. Is that all right?”

Mother looked to Aunt Lorraine who nodded permission. “All right, get dressed and we’ll leave right away.”

Sylvia grabbed a dress and ran into the bathroom to change. I changed my shirt and shoes, combed my hair, and made sure my hands were clean.

Sylvia emerged from the bathroom wearing her Sunday dress, small white gloves, patent leather shoes, and a small bonnet that tied under the chin.

Mother smiled and said, “You look very nice Sylvia.”

Sylvia looked embarrassed and replied, “Thanks, Auntie.”

“What about me? Don’t I look nice too?”

Mother passed her hand over my hair and said, “Of course you look nice too.”

Sylvia took Mother’s hand and Mother smiled at her. I sometimes wondered if Mother wished she had a girl instead of four boys. She treated Sylvia like a daughter to the point I sometimes felt a pang of jealousy.

We walked four blocks to where we could catch the Magazine Street streetcar to go across town to Grandma’s house. The once-a-month trip to Grandma’s was the only time we were all together. Tony lived just a couple of blocks away and could walk to Grandma’s house. Angelo lived with Grandma, so he was already there. Mother dropped Sal off before coming to collect me. Aunt Lorraine’s house was clear across town, and we had to ride the bus to get to Grandma’s.

When we arrived, everyone made a great deal of fuss over Sylvia and I felt virtually ignored. Sylvia always attracted a lot of attention in the family. Just one year younger than me,

she was the oldest girl in the family and, everyone said, also the prettiest. Even on my father's side of the family, everyone said that Sylvia Ann was definitely the prettiest girl on either side of the family.

When I finally got to talk to Grandma later in the afternoon, she turned out to be a source of almost no information at all. She did tell me that my mother didn't want to name me after my father; Guglielmo. I was glad of that. However, the name wasn't available anyway, as my half-brother from my father's first marriage had the name; Guglielmo, Junior. Damn, talk about a narrow escape! As much as I disliked my name, I nearly gagged at the thought of being called Guglielmo, Junior.

I had exhausted every line of investigation I could think of. I had a definite feeling that everyone knew something that they were not sharing, but I couldn't figure out what it was or why that might be. After all, what could be so secret about a name? What could be so bad they didn't think they could share it with me? Nothing. That didn't stop my imagination from running a gamut of possibilities. Perhaps there had been some secret something or other between Mother and someone named Stacy. Maybe I was named after some famous actor or person Mother had a secret crush on. Maybe it even had something to do with my grandmother's penchant for raising rabbits, chickens, turkeys, and such for eggs and dinner, although I couldn't, for the life of me, think of what that might be. Maybe I had a girl's name because of a secret desire of Mother to have a daughter. What was so bad about any of those possibilities that couldn't be shared with me? Not a thing. Finally, I decided, there was no way out. The only avenue left was to approach Mother.

She came to visit me just about every weekend while I stayed with Aunt Lorraine. One Saturday, I was able to have some time with her alone while Lorraine was at the grocery and her

kids were occupied either exploring empty railroad freight cars across the street or, for the younger ones, taking a nap. Mother was sitting at the kitchen table, cleaning and breaking string beans and putting them into a colander. The thought of broaching a subject that had all the signs of something taboo made me more than a little nervous. I sat down across the table from her, drew in a deep breath, and broached the subject. “Hey, mom? I was wondering how I got my name. Aunt Lorraine said it was from a story in the newspaper, is that right?”

She looked at me for a moment and asked, “Why do you want to know?”

“Well, it’s different from everybody else, I mean, no one else ever had that name.”

“I see. And the other kids tease you about it?”

“Well, some of them do.”

She seemed to be thinking for a few moments, then she said, “When you were born, there was a lot going on. Your grandmothers didn’t want me to use your father’s name, and I hadn’t thought much about any other name before that, so I didn’t know what name to use. There was a picture of a man on the front page of the newspaper the day after you were born, and his name was Stacy. I thought that was a really nice name, and so that was the name I decided on.” She put her hand on my head. “It’s a very special name, and I liked it for you because you are a very special boy.”

I thought about her explanation. I guess it sounded reasonable, but I couldn’t escape the feeling that I was being handed a dump truck full of B.S. Still, it explained how I got the name, and I had to leave it at that.

Years later, in 1965, a large category four hurricane named Betsy struck New Orleans and caused a great deal of flooding. This was several years after my father’s death, and Mother owned a house in the suburban town of Chalmette. Although the flood waters did little injury to

the house, because it was built on a slight rise of ground, there was some minor wind-driven water damage inside the house. When the waters receded, the roads were opened and we could get into Chalmette from where we had stayed in the city to escape the brunt of the storm. I went to Mother's place to help her, along with Angelo and Tony and Marian, his wife, clean up, restore stacked up furniture to its place, make a few repairs, and generally straighten things up. It was decided to use the circumstances as an excuse for a thorough, and probably long overdue, general house cleaning. We opened all the doors and windows wide to allow a breeze to blow away the odor of stagnant water and mildew, and set to work.

I found an old shoe box in a closet we were cleaning out, and set it on the bed. After getting all the winter clothes stored in the closet straightened out, and removing some old boxes for mother to look into and decide whether to keep the stuff inside them or throw it away, I reached behind me with one hand for the shoebox to put it back on the closet shelf. It twisted out of my hand, and fell onto the bed, spilling the contents. There were a number of very old black and white photos and some sepia toned tin-types, obviously from the early years of the twentieth century, or maybe the late nineteenth century. I looked at the photographs, wondering who all those people were. I didn't recognize any of them; although I was pretty sure they had to be relatives. There was also a newspaper clipping, faded and almost crumbling with age. I was curious, and opened it. A picture of a man with a frown was centered in the clip. The article described a man, whose name was Stacy something or other, being sought statewide after escaping from the state prison at Angola where he had been awaiting execution for three murders, including two small children.

I stared at that clipping for a very long time, and then carefully refolded it, replaced it in the box, and put it back on the shelf with all the other memories my mother thought important enough to save.

Later that day, mother and I were sitting in the glider swing on the porch. Curiosity about my name got the better of me, and since I was twenty seven years old and felt I could now approach the subject with Mother, I said, “Mom, while I was cleaning out the closet in your bedroom, I dropped a shoebox full of old photos and stuff. I was wondering, who are all those people.”

“A shoebox?”

“Yeah, it has a lot of really old pictures in it.”

“I haven’t thought about that box in years. Those are pictures of your grandmothers and our relatives in Sicily and Italy.”

“There was something else, too.”

“Oh? What was that?”

“An old newspaper clipping with a picture of an escaped criminal.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, I was wondering who that was.”

“I haven’t seen or thought about that since you were born.”

“The newspaper said that the guy’s name was Stacy, just like me. Is that who I’m named after?”

She was quiet for a long time, then she said, “Yes, I named you after him.”

“I’m named for a murderer?”

“That isn’t why I picked the name.”

“Who was he?”

Another long pause. “He was a young man who lived around the corner from us before you were born. He was a friend of your father.”

It was my turn to pause and think. Then I asked, “Is that it? He was a friend of my father, and that’s why you named me after him?”

“He was my friend, too.”

“Oh.” A number of thoughts flashed through my mind. We sat for a moment without saying anything, until I asked, “I guess he was a pretty good friend, huh?”

“Yes, and I’d rather you just let those old memories lie. I’m not comfortable talking about it.”

“Okay.”

We were silent again for a while. I looked at Mother and she seemed to be far away in her memories.

I couldn’t let it go. I asked again, “The paper said he killed his wife and two children. Did you know them too?”

I thought I saw her eyes brighten, but she answered, “I knew Charlene. She was a year older than me, but we went to the same school.”

“Why did he kill his family?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t want to talk about this anymore.” Mother got up and went in to the house, leaving me alone on the porch to think.

I wondered why something that had happened twenty seven years before could cause Mother such distress. Why was she so obviously reluctant to discuss someone who had been only a friend in the neighborhood? Mother said that this guy had been a friend of my father, too. Was

there some reason there that caused my father and his family to hate my name? Perhaps they called me the bastard, not because of my father, but because of Stacy? If so, they were damn sure wrong. Whatever the relationship between Mother and Stacy, I was the very image of my father when he was my age. We looked enough alike to have been twins. Although he was two years younger, Angelo could also easily have passed as a twin. Even Sal bore a marked resemblance to our father. Only Tony looked different. He favored Big Grandma with facial features more square, light colored hair, and the light complexion associated with more North European cultures. The rest of us had unmistakable features born of our Mediterranean roots. Our skin tone had what many called an olive cast, we all had nearly raven black hair, and other than me, short of stature. No, I couldn't escape the fact that there was no doubt we were all sons of our father.

I sat for some time thinking about the circumstances of my birth and how screwed up my family was compared to others I now knew. I shook my head. We were what we were. Perhaps Mother was right. Some memories should stay in the box.

Grandmothers and Tommy Guns

Most of my early memories involve living with my maternal grandmothers. I was almost six years old when my father left us, not for the first time and not the last time, although it was the longest separation, lasting nearly eight years.

The entire maternal side of the family including mother and grandmothers, along with me and my brothers, were pretty much jammed in together in a house in the lower ninth ward of New Orleans. The house was provided by the Orleans Parish School Board as partial compensation for grandmother's caretaker services to the property, and occasional assignments as custodian for Parish schools. She had worked as a custodian for the School Board for years; a position obtained through her long school board service for which she drew a relatively small monthly retirement check, her work as an unpaid neighborhood political ward boss and the political connections that entailed, connections that would come in handy later, including getting me a guaranteed appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis.

The entire lower ninth ward property consisted of a large empty lot, occupying the major part of an entire city block, and what was left of where a public school had once stood. Only a large concrete foundation remained covering what was left of an above-ground basement. Wide concrete stairs led up to what had been the main floor of the building. Parts of walls and forms that had apparently created the sections and rooms of the first floor structure and base for the upper floors, dotted the concrete floor. In holes and depressions where dirt and water collected, weeds and wildflowers struggled against wind, erosion and rodents, to find solid footing. The grounds also hosted my grandmother's large vegetable garden.

Little Grandma, who got her name from her stature, she was only about four foot nine inches tall as opposed to Big Grandma who was nearly six feet tall, was responsible for keeping

the weeds down and discouraging trespassers. Even to a six year old, that seemed silly. It was obvious, even to us, that there was nothing on the place worth stealing, and no one in the neighborhood ever stole anything anyway, including vegetables or fruit from the garden. A three-foot high wrought-iron fence surrounded the property. The most common problem was trespassing interlopers. Young black kids who lived in the neighborhood had a habit of jumping the fence and using the large empty lot as a shortcut to and from their homes.

One day, I was hoeing weeds in the vegetable garden. Fresh vegetables: tomatoes, corn, potatoes, squash, onions, watermelons and sweet potatoes were planted, cultivated, and grew nearly year round. Little Grandmother yelled to me, “Stacy, get the gun. There’s another one of those damn nigger kids in the yard.”

I looked around and saw Lukey, one of our neighbors, running for the fence. I called back, “It’s okay, Grandma, it’s only Lukey.”

“Don’t you tell me what’s okay. You do as you’re told and get the gun.”

All of this was clearly audible to Lukey, sprinting across the yard at near Olympic speed. I waved at Lukey, shrugged, and headed for the house. I got the gun she referred to, a large realistic looking plastic and metal version of a Tommy gun, and handed it to her. By this time, Lukey had jumped over the front fence and was high-tailing it home.

Little Grandma yelled out, “I see him, I see him. Let me get a good shot here. He won’t be jumping no more fences.”

Of course, neither Lukey nor any of the other kids living around us ever knew the “gun” was only a plastic toy. I guess it never occurred to anyone to wonder why a four foot ten, elderly grandmother would have a sub-machine gun in a financially destitute community. However, considering that even then, seventy-five years after the Civil War, a black person would not

dream of questioning the actions of a white woman, at least not in public, I suppose it made some kind of weird sense.

White families were a definite minority in the neighborhood, there was only one besides us, but in that section of town in the mid-nineteen forties there was little tension between blacks and whites. Had a trespasser or intruder been a white boy, she would have simply yelled at him to not use our yard as a roadway, but there was little chance of a white kid jumping our fences, because the only other white family in our immediate area had no kids, and the next nearest white family was a half dozen blocks away.

In the basement of the abandoned school foundation, partitions created rooms where heating and water systems had been located along with storage areas and what had been the maintenance man's workshop. Bits and pieces of wood, metal and assorted desks, chairs, light fixtures, and plumbing parts, all in various states of rust and decay, were stacked along the concrete walls and covered much of the floor, littering most of the area. Water settled in corners and pooled until it became covered with a green slime and smelled heavily of moisture, mildew, and organic rot. A strong odor of urine and feces, testified to the abandoned structure serving as home to stray cats and dogs, rats, mice, and other rodents. The spacious grounds hosted my grandmothers' gardens, the remains of the school, and a fairly large house, occupied by the school custodian/watchman in better days. The house was situated at the extreme eastern end of the property.

From a kid's point of view, the grounds, foundation, and debris were almost made in heaven. They provided nearly everything needed for four young boys with a highly developed sense of adventure and unfettered imaginations. As long as we lived there, we never ran out of ways to use the grounds, artifacts, remains, and even the tall bamboo plants and weeds that grew

along the perimeter of the property. Our fertile six and five year old imaginations had no trouble creating fantasy worlds that we roamed through and inhabited as pirates, soldiers, sailors, pilots, knights, and the merry men of Sherwood Forest. The woods were also sometimes populated with monsters as well.

Tony and I were in the yard just after sunset one evening. A wind was blowing, and we heard eerie moans coming from the virtual bamboo forest along the west fence. Tony asked, “Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“That noise. I think it’s the tigers.”

“There are no tigers. It’s just the wind blowing through the bamboo.”

The noise grew suddenly louder. Tony grabbed my arm. “Let’s go back to the house. I don’t want those tigers to get me.”

“There are no tigers in the bamboo. We play in there all the time, and we’ve never seen a tiger or anything else bigger than an alley cat.”

“You know they only come out after dark. I’m going back to the house. You can stay out here and get eaten by a tiger if you want, but not me.”

“We invented the tigers, remember? It was when we were playing safari and the bamboo was the forest of India. We were white hunters looking for Bengal tigers in the forest. It was all make believe.”

Another gust of wind hit the bamboo and another loud moan came out of the bushes. Tony started for the house. “I’m telling you, it’s a tiger. You better come with me.”

I laughed and said, “Okay I’ll come with you.” However, when I looked back at the now dark bamboo forest, I thought I saw something move inside. A shiver ran down my back and I hurried after Tony.

The broken remains of walls on the top of the partially demolished building served many purposes in our games. Whenever Sylvia came to visit, she played the princess of the castle and we played knights, evil sorcerers, and villains of various kinds. Sylvia always objected to being the damsel in distress or the princess needing rescue.

“Why should I always be the one who needs rescuing? I can run faster than any of you, and I can out wrestle everyone except Stacy. Why don’t one of you play a knight in distress and I can come and rescue you.”

Tony said, “That’s dumb. It has to be you. You’re a girl, and the princess is always a girl and she always has to be saved.”

“I’ll show you who needs to be saved.” Sylvia grabbed a stick and chased Tony all over the yard.

I was laughing at the sight until Sylvia passed my way and stopped. “What are you laughing at?”

“Tony.”

“Oh, yeah?” She swung the stick at me and I took off, running. Sylvia stood where I had left her; laughing until she couldn’t stop.

The house was common for the neighborhood. A style called “shotgun” because the rooms were arranged in serial fashion with no hallway. If a shotgun was fired through the front door, the shot would go clear through the house without hitting anything. Well, almost. In order to access the kitchen, one traversed the living room, first bedroom, through the second bedroom,

passed through a short vestibule fronting the bathroom on one side and sometimes a side door on the other, then into the large country-style kitchen. Some variants had another small room to the rear of the kitchen. This was essentially a rear porch, enclosed so as to add another room to the house. A back door allowed entrance to the add-on, or to the kitchen if the extra room was not included.

An architectural style in use from pre-Civil War days to the early nineteen-thirties, the shotgun house was a popular type, common to many New Orleans neighborhoods. The shotgun double was common and the dominant style throughout our neighborhood. Another variant featured mirror image sections on either side of a common wall, allowing two families to live separately in what were basically two individual houses in the same structure. It's the kind of house that is called a duplex in some areas of the city.

The school board house was relatively new, about fifty years old, dating only from the last decade of the nineteenth century. Shoulder to shoulder shotgun doubles, many dating from the end of the Civil War, separated only by constricted shoulder-wide alleys, existed on either side of the narrow street, and surrounded the school board property.

To us kids, it was just another house with an unusually large yard that was also littered with interesting parts of old wagons, rusted tools and bits of machinery. Stacks of old roofing slate, and timbers rotted and eaten away by various ants and termites, were piled up in places around the building remains. Several of the large wagons used to make floats for the Mardi Gras parades also were parked on the property most of the year. They made excellent props for make-believe games of wagon trains, and cowboys and Indians. We considered ourselves lucky. After all, how many kids could claim to have their very own real honest to God wagon train in their backyard?

The Spinning Wheel Turns - - - Day By Day

Monday

Monday was the major gardening day of the week. After school in the Spring and Fall, Tony and I would come home from school, change clothes, and go with Li'l Grandma to work in the garden while Big Grandma and Mother got supper together. In the summer months, both grandmothers and Tony and I would work in the vegetable garden most of the day; hoeing, pulling weeds, inspecting leaves for bugs, beetles, and spraying for insects. The large garden was the source of most of our fresh vegetables, and some fruit, throughout the year. The garden was probably considered another part of my grandmother's compensation for her work on the property.

Whenever possible, everyone shared the chore of tending to and picking vegetables from the large garden Little Grandma tended. We kids offered whatever we could do, even though Angelo and Sal were too young and little to be of any real help and more often than not simply got in the way and slowed things down. The home grown tomatoes were always great, and I developed a taste for the native Louisiana variety called Creole Tomatoes that I've never outgrown. Sweet potatoes were another of my favorites, and we had them from our garden most of the year.

The garden was separated into three major areas. The biggest part was where the corn was planted. That took up nearly half of the whole garden. Next to the rows of corn, other rows were planted in potatoes, sweet potatoes, cabbage, and some herbs and other things I couldn't identify.

The end of the garden across from the corn was set up with a number of poles strung with heavy cord. Some parts had large square chicken wire stretched between poles. Vines were

raised there for tomatoes, string beans, and a kind of pepper. In addition, there were several small wood boxes used to grow herbs and a large arbor, covered with vines, was used to grow squash.

Another part of the yard was reserved for trees that produced Japanese Plums that were about the size of cumquats and apricots, but were bright yellow in color. Several fig trees produced large, juicy sweet figs, while a couple of other trees brought large plums like peaches to the table. Growing alongside the house, Grandma had planted a number of banana trees and they produced small bananas, but not all the time. We participated in all these efforts and sometimes, we could take some figs off the tree and eat them fresh, although most of them went to make fig jam and preserves.

Whenever we worked in the garden, a very stringent clean-up was necessary. The rich black dirt seemed to infiltrate the very pores of our skin and it took a lot of scrubbing to get it out, especially under the fingernails.

Angelo was bent over, and I stooped to help him. We were picking small weeds out of the corn rows. He said, “the corn is really getting big this year.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, “and the tomatoes are bigger than before too.”

I had a vague understanding of what made things grow and how they grew, but it wasn’t a subject that was close to my heart.

Angelo asked, “Why are the vegetables bigger this year than last year?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s all the rain.”

“You think that’s it?”

“I don’t know. I guess so.”

It never occurred to me to wonder about why it was that the ground would grow almost anything Grandma planted, nor did I wonder why we had a virtual farm in the middle of town when no one else had that I knew of.

As is true of most things in life, nothing comes free. Our garden held a great attraction for another of the neighborhood's denizens; flocks of large crows would occasionally attempt to raid the garden. Once, when a number of them got to the garden undetected and undisturbed, they left two rows of corn and tomatoes devastated.

Sometimes a couple of old sheets attached to wood poles, and flapping in the breeze, would suffice to keep them away. Other times they just ignored the fluttering white cloths and made their way to whatever struck their fancy that day. In those cases, we would rush in and try to shoo them away.

Another day, when we were playing outside, under the vine arbor where we grew merlitons, a kind of green squash nearly identical to chayote, we heard Little Grandma yelling from the garden. "Shoo, shoo, get out of here you filthy animals."

I called to Tony and Angelo, "Let's go, it's the birds again."

We all ran to Grandma's assistance and found her swatting at a half dozen huge crows with a broom. Tony and I, as we were the oldest, began to throw rocks at the birds. Angelo, at age five, could barely manage to throw and he wasn't very accurate.

"Hey, look out. You hit me with that one." Tony yelled.

"Angelo, just run around and wave your arms at them. Tony and I will throw the rocks. You're not good enough at it."

"I want to throw too."

Li'l Grandma said, "Angelo, come over here and help me."

He went to where she was now waving one of the sheets at the crows. Angelo started running around and waving his arms and yelling at the birds.

The crows flew off, went around us and tried to settle in another area of the garden. Salvatore was still a toddler, but he always wanted to be part of the action, so came running from the house. When he ran into the garden, the crows saw him and flew right at him.

“Look out, Sal.” We all yelled. We ran over to that side of the garden and surrounded Sal. The crows seemed to have a real aim to get us.

“Look out Stacy, there’s one right over your head.”

I turned and swatted at that one. Others flew at us and passed so close their wings hit my head. I twice felt my hair pulled by their claws. We finally chased them off.

Although it lasted only a few minutes, the encounter drained me of energy. I sat down in the dirt. Tony sat next to me. “Wow, that was really something. It was like they were attacking us on purpose.”

“I think they were.”

Angelo came over and sat down with us. “Did you see the way they went after Sal?”

I said, “Yeah, I guess it’s because he’s so little.”

I looked over to where Sal was next to Li’l Grandma. He was poking in the dirt with a small stick and Grandma was telling him something, but it was too far to understand what she was saying.

Sal and Angelo seemed to have a real affection for the garden. Angelo, even when he was a small child, could make almost anything grow, but I never cultivated a love of gardening. To me, working in the garden was a chore I could easily do without. Angelo, however, could work in the garden for hours at a time and never grow tired of it.

Tony said, “Maybe we should wear hats when we’re outside.”

I laughed. “They aren’t around all the time and it’s a little warm to be wearing hats all the time.”

“Maybe, but I think I’m going to keep my cap with me. I don’t want any birds picking on my hair.”

True to his word, Tony took to carrying his baseball cap in his back pocket whenever we were outside. Whenever the birds came close, he quickly jammed the hat on his head.

That was the most dramatic incident I can remember with the crows, but the contest was more akin a small guerilla war. It never ended in complete victory for either side. When I saw the actress Tippi Hedron being attacked in Alfred Hitchcock’s movie, “The Birds,” I smiled.

On Monday, it’s a New Orleans tradition to have red beans and rice for dinner. Served hot, the creamy red beans simmered all afternoon on the stove and were served over a bed of rice with various condiments. We each had our own preferences. For me, Louisiana hot sauce and chopped fresh onions spread liberally over the beans was just the ticket. Angelo had a strange habit of putting a few teaspoons of sugar across the top of his beans. Tony liked to put some ketchup on his. We shook our head at each others’ quirks. I thought, to each his own, even if my brothers were weird.

Notwithstanding fence jumpers, everyone lived together and life moved in an ordered harmony dictated by long tradition and shared economic deprivation. Had it occurred to me to think of it, I wouldn’t have thought anything unusual about the way things were. Our relations, friendly and cordial on the outside, never including any kind of intimate contact or conversation, with our black neighbors seemed perfectly natural to me.

I had never known it to be any other way, and so the way things were, was simply the way things were. Each person, white or black, knew his place, knew what was allowed, what was not, and for the most part, most of the time, everyone kept to their proper places.

Tuesday

Tuesday mornings were announced by a collection of metallic clanks and bangs coming from the street, and heralding the arrival of Mr. John. A sing-song voice called out over and over again, “Pots and pans, scissors and knives, sharpened and fixed.”

My grandmother grabbed me by the neck of my shirt and pulled me up from the floor where I was reading one of my favorite Jules Verne stories. “Here, boy, take these scissors and knives and have them sharpened. Hurry up so you don’t miss Mr. John. But mind you, hold them by the point and don’t run. I don’t want you falling and putting an eye out.”

I took the scissors in one hand and the two knives in the other. She gave me a quarter to pay for the service, and I hurried to the front of the house, as fast as possible while being careful to not run, and waited on the sidewalk for the mule-drawn wagon to reach our house.

That morning the wagon stopped on the corner where one of the neighborhood black women haggled with the driver over the price of a frying pan. Finally settling on the payment, she handed him some coins, took the pan, and went into her house. Mr. John put away the down payment, entered the transaction in a small notebook he kept in a shirt pocket, and called out to the mule, “Come on Sebastian, get up, we got places to go.”

The wagon started along our street, which was paved with creosote-treated blocks of wood stood on end in the dirt street that was lined on either side with ditches comprised of dirt covered with inches-thick beds of clamshells mined from the shallow depths of Lake Pontchartrain. The wood blocks softened the sound of the wagon’s steel wheel rims, but it also imparted a rhythmic swing to the whole vehicle. Pots and other utensils suspended from hangers clanged together as the wheels swayed and bumped from one block to the next.

An old black man, Jonah, had a mule-drawn wagon and did odd jobs. Several times he had come to the house to clear away some of the broken concrete and bricks left over from the school's demolition. He would arrive sometime before noon; put the mule inside the yard where it could munch long grass that grew around the old foundation, and wait patiently for his owner to finish whatever he was doing. Jonah would generally work at a relatively slow pace and stretch the job until five or six in the evening.

Grandma arrived with a pitcher of ice water. "Okay, Jonah, here's some water to keep you cool. Maybe the boys could help out a little."

"Thank you Miz Celia, but I likes to work alone. Ain't no big hurry."

"Suit yourself."

She went back into the house and I watched Jonah for some time. He would lift one brick at a time and carry it to the wagon, go back for another brick, and repeat the movements all afternoon. I guess it was like he said; no big hurry.

The door-to-door trade wagons selling pots and pans, ice, furniture, knick knacks, or fresh vegetables and fruit, always came to our street in the early morning. Once the sun got high in the sky, those black hard wood blocks would heat up to uncomfortably high temperatures that could injure a mule's hooves. By afternoon, the whole neighborhood was bathed in a light pall of creosote and asphalt emanating from the street blocks and telephone poles also treated with the tarry substance half-way up. Even with thick soled shoes, one was well advised to step lightly and move quickly when crossing the street.

The wagon stopped where I was standing. The mule stared straight down the street; its gaze focused a thousand yards ahead. A matted tail switched nervously at ever-present flies

gathered around scabs and sores worn into the mule's back by sweat-hardened leather. The old man leaned out and asked, "What you got for me, boy?"

"I got these knives and these scissors. Grandma says make sure you get them sharp, 'cause these are her best sewing scissors."

He climbed into the back of the wagon and held out a hand, "Give them over. I always get them scissors sharp, and your grandma knows that."

Settling himself on a makeshift stool cobbled together from an old bicycle seat, he started a large grinding wheel turning on its axis by giving it motion with a hand, and then operated a foot treadle to keep it going. He took the two knives and buffed them with a steel wool pad and then sharpened them on the grinding wheel. He looked at the scissors and used a screwdriver and a small wrench to take them apart. After disassembling the scissors, he ground one side at a time. In a few minutes the job was done. He cleaned and put a light coat of oil where the scissors were joined, wiped it clean again, reassembled the scissors, and tested them on a piece of silk. They cut cleanly and without a snag.

Nodding approval, he handed me the scissors and held out his hand for payment. I looked carefully at the newly ground and gleaming surfaces of the cutting edges as I had seen Grandma do. I nodded approval and handed him the quarter.

He smiled and said, "You tell your Grandma I got some new black-iron fry-pans coming next week. You tell her I'll stop by and see her."

"Yes, sir. I'll tell her."

Settling into the wagon's front seat, he nodded to me, slapped the long reins across the mule's back, and said, "Come on, Sebastian, let's go, we got customers to see today." The wagon

moved off down the street accompanied by its dissonant symphony and the sing-song voice calling out, "Pots and pans, scissors and knives, sharpened and fixed."

In other places or times, the old tinker would probably be viewed as a kind of vagrant, but for us, he was a respected tradesman whose services were needed and desired. Others also sold goods door to door from horse-drawn wagons. One such was a Jewish man who sold furniture from the back of a two-mule wagon and later opened a store that eventually became Goldberg's, one of the most prestigious and respected furniture houses on Canal Street.

Other services were available from the horse drawn wagons of gypsy entrepreneurs. Before widespread use of electric refrigerators, iceboxes were used, and every section of the city had its own ice house where merchants bought ice in large two hundred pound blocks. The ice box was a large, two-compartment, insulated cabinet. The iceman brought the ice in his wagon and, using an ice pick, would cut off however much was needed or could be afforded. He carried the ice inside and installed it in the upper level of the icebox, trimming it with the ice pick when necessary, as the ice block was frequently too large to fit. While he was inside a house, making his delivery, we kids, specially my three brothers and me, would run up to the wagon's tailgate and scoop up the shards of ice left over from chunks carved from the 200-pound blocks. Sucking on the cold pieces of ice was a real treat on summer mornings.

The ice man came out of the house and said, "You kids get away from there. You could get bad hurt if that ice slipped and fell on you."

We'd run away, but always be back, scooping up chips of ice, at his next stop.

Tuesday was one of only two days in the week when our dinner fare varied. We would have spinach cooked with eggs and butter on one week, and on another we might have smothered cabbage and potatoes. Sometimes we would have mixed vegetables and corn on the

cob lavishly bathed with a thick layer of melted butter and salted for taste. A side benefit of living in New Orleans was that, no matter what the food selection was, we always felt that it had to be the best tasting food in the whole world. Part of that was Big Grandma's ability as a cook, but I think it was mostly because the city had a history and a tradition of good food that created unique and great recipes.

Looking back, it seems that the times were nearly idyllic for us kids, but not everything was sunshine and light.

Wednesday

Wednesday was market day. Mother, Li'L Grandma, or sometimes both, would usually walk the half mile or so to the French Market to shop for fresh food, meat, shrimp, crabs, or fish. Instead of the relatively simple and ordinary groceries to be found in the neighborhood store, the Market held all kinds of exotic things. Every now and then, Mother or Grandma would take me, or Tony and me, to the Market especially if they planned to buy a large amount of things and could use help to carry the half dozen or so bags. In the summer, besides basic foods, we shopped for watermelon, cantaloupe, bananas, and other things we normally bought from a street vendor. Buying at the Market saved some money, which was always in scarce supply.

Another advantage of shopping at the Market was that whatever Mother bought there, we would have something to supplement the normal Wednesday dinner of spaghetti and meatballs with a large green salad. Although all the food was good, almost any variation from the norm was universally welcomed by my brothers and me.

“Okay boys, stick close.”

“We know.”

“Don't go wandering around and getting lost like you did a few weeks ago.” This last was directed at Tony who had somehow, purely by accident according to him, found himself lost in the taffy store. The lady who ran the store gave him a small piece of taffy for free while he waited for us to find him.

We stood shoulder to shoulder with produce and fish merchants vying for goods to stock their wagons. I winced when a voice behind us yelled out, “White Gulf shrimp, number eight at twenty five.” The number eight referred to how many shrimp made up a pound.

Immediately a chorus of other voices yelled out, “Ten at twenty five.”

Another cried “Fifty at twenty five.”

A dozen others joined in, vying with each other to get their orders in. Suddenly one deep voice said, “Two hundred at thirty.”

Everyone turned to see who had just raised the stakes in the bidding war. A smallish man with a large mustache was waving his hand.

The silence lasted for only a minute, and then everyone began bidding again. Mother nodded toward the mustachioed man and said in a whisper, “That’s Mr. Santini. He owns a big restaurant. Your father used to work for him.”

The name meant nothing to me, but I looked with some interest because of the mention of my father. Santini looked like any number of Italian men who lived near us, but there was something that called attention to him. It wasn’t his appearance, but I was still too young to realize how some men radiated power.

The bidding suddenly ended with the price at thirty three cents a pound for the shrimp. The next lot was for number sixteen shrimp that eventually went for eleven cents a pound. The smaller shrimp were more plentiful, whereas the larger ones commanded a premium price.

I walked down the sidewalk under the roof of the market building. A two or three block line of open stalls surrounded one of the two block-long market buildings where produce shops were interspersed by souvenir and candy stores selling New Orleans pecan pralines and salt taffy. Grocers, street vendors, restaurants, and the public could buy fresh produce, vegetables ranging from onions and lettuce to okra and pigeon peas. Available fresh fruit included bananas just in from Central and South America, plantains, mangoes, and guava. Catfish, trout, red fish, flounder, white gulf shrimp, octopus, clams and lobster were arranged in colorful arrays on beds of fresh ice chips. Fresh-butchered meat was available in beef cuts, veal, mutton and goat. But it

was the spice shops that always caught my interest. The smells and colors of the spices caused a tingle in my nose, and sometimes brought tears to my eyes when I examined some of them too closely. All of the ordinary spices could be found along with things like annatto seed, arrowroot, and Trinidad mix a blend of lemon and garlic, from the Caribbean, and a myriad of peppers like habanera, jalapeno, and Louisiana specialties like Tabasco and Louisiana hot sauce.

Horse-drawn wagons and a few panel trucks formed long lines hours before dawn to load up and get the food to their respective destinations before the retail stores or restaurants opened. Even when we arrived, a little after nine in the morning, the crowds and noise were at a high pitch.

Noise: vendors shouting orders, horses neighing, truck motors running, horses' hooves clip-clopping along paved streets, wagon wheels bumping along, and produce sellers calling out their wares and prices. My nose tingled with smells and odors that wafted along Decatur Street, carried by the early morning breeze coming off the Mississippi River, adjacent to the market. Sweet odors of fresh fruits contrasted sharp fish smells and pungent vapors from South American and Caribbean spices, all competing for dominance.

To my eyes, holding tightly to Mother's hand on the way to get fresh fruit, fish, or meat from uncles and cousins who worked in the Market, it was a wonderland of motion, sights, sounds, and smells. At the end of each of the two main buildings, competing coffee and beignet stands had stood for a hundred years. In the morning, they served the vendors and customers of the market. At noon, business people and tourists partook of their unique treats. At night, it was standing room only as locals vied with tourists for seats and service.

Vegetables, stocked before dawn at the produce stalls in the French Market were peddled hours later from wagons touring set routes in the city's neighborhoods. In our neighborhood, the

vegetable and fruit peddlers came on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. Other mornings found them in other parts of the city. We walked to a stall at the end of the lower produce market spaces. A familiar face greeted us. Lonnie smiled and waved. He was a close friend of my great aunt who was profoundly deaf and didn't speak. She was married to Johnny, who was also deaf and non-speaking. Because so many of our family and friends were deaf mutes, everyone in the family learned to sign at some level or other.

Mother signed to Lonnie, and spoke out loud so he could lip read. "Hi Lonnie, I need some carrots, lettuce, and cabbage."

He nodded and signed his understanding. He went into the stall and shortly after brought out two large bags with the vegetables. He handed me a small bag containing four large sweet smelling peaches. I smiled and signed my thanks. He patted me on the head and he and Mother engaged in sign language discussion that far too rapid and advanced for me to follow, but I knew what it was about. Lonnie was saying, as usual, there was no charge that it was old stuff he would have to throw away anyway.

Mother signed and said, "No, Lonnie, this is good food. We don't take charity, so how much."

After several minutes, Lonnie gave in and signed that it would cost fifty cents. Mother said, "I'm sure it's worth more than that, but thanks."

It was a ritual repeated at every stand where we had relatives working, and we had a lot of relatives working in the Market.

The peaches were a gift for me and my brothers, and Mother did not insist on paying for them.

Thursday

“Watermelon, red to the rind, twenty cents. Get em fore they’re gone.”

Mr. Don’s wagon was pulled by two mules. He had a large load of fresh vegetables: cabbage, Creole tomatoes, potatoes, celery, lettuce, snap beans, sweet potatoes, corn, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, and carrots by the bunch. The entire back half of the wagon was occupied by piles of watermelons, honeydew melons, and cantaloupes.

Big Grandma came out and checked the melons. She thumped the melons and pressed her thumb into the stems and squeezed them. Although we grew some watermelons in the garden, they were not as big as the ones Mr. Don sold, and we used them up pretty early in the season. She selected one watermelon and two cantaloupes. She motioned to me and pointed to a watermelon. “Here, take that one.” I carefully hustled the large melon out of the wagon and balanced it in the cradle of my arms. Grandma took a bunch of carrots and two pints of strawberries. Tony nudged me and smiled. Sal giggled. I said, “Shhh. Don’t do anything dumb.” I didn’t want anything to happen that might get us punished and spoil a chance to have Grandma’s strawberry desert. We did not smile when she tucked two boxes of Brussels sprouts into her large shopping bag.

In the months when school was in session, we came home and did chores around the house. None of us were old enough or big enough to do heavy cleaning, but Grandma found an unending list of things suited to our size and abilities. One job I hated was lying on the floor and using a brush to sweep dust bunnies and other things that accumulated under the beds. This job usually occurred in the middle of the week, only once a month, but it was one I tried to avoid. Nearly all of the work fell to me and Tony as Angelo and Sal didn’t have the coordination to do the work.

Angelo was tagging along after me. “Come on Stacy, let me help you.”

“You can’t do anything.”

“I can if you show me.”

“All right you can help with under the beds.”

“What do I have to do?”

“Just take this brush and crawl under the bed and sweep up all the dust and anything else under there.”

Angelo got down on the floor and crawled under the bed. A few seconds later he screamed and started flopping around trying to scoot out from under the bed. He was yelling, banging his head on the underside of the bed, scrabbling his legs like a crab on fire, and not getting anywhere. I reached in and grabbed his arm and pulled him out.

“What’s the matter with you? Why are you yelling?”

Angelo was crying and pointing under the bed. Li'l Grandma rushed into the room and demanded, “What’s going on here?” She looked at Angelo and then glared at me. “All right, what did you do to him?”

“I didn’t do anything. He just started yelling and crying.”

“What are you crying about?”

Angelo just cried louder and kept pointing under the bed. I got down on the floor and looked. All I saw was the brush lying on the floor where Angelo had left it. I grabbed the brush and got up. “There’s nothing there. What are you crying about?”

He stuttered and said, “There’s a big spider there.”

“There’s no spider there. I just looked and I didn’t see anything.”

“He was there. He threw a big cobweb over me. He tried to catch me.”

I saw a couple of wisps of cobweb hanging from Angelo's hair. "Look, it's just a little cob web. There's no spider, and nothing was trying to catch you."

"He was, he was. It was a giant spider and he was after me."

Grandma asked, "What was he doing under the bed?"

I answered, "He wanted to help me, so I let him sweep under the bed."

"That's your job. Don't ever let me catch you trying to get your younger brother to do your work again."

"But, he wanted to do it."

"Just don't ever let this happen again." She took Angelo by the hand and went into the bathroom to wipe his face and get the cobweb out of his hair.

As far as I know, Angelo has never gotten under another bed to this day.

Thursday's dinner menu frequently featured either cabbage with potatoes and ham hocks, or pork chops with mashed potatoes and peas. We preferred the pork chops, but they were relatively expensive, so we had them only once a month or so. Grandma got the chops sliced thin and pan fried them so that they were cooked all the way through and were dry. We frequently shared one pork chop between two of us kids. They had a sweet taste that I have never been able to duplicate, but a taste that still resides high in my fondest memories.

Friday

“Let’s go, we don’t want to be late today.”

Tony slowly got up and rubbed his eyes. He stretched, sitting on the edge of his bed.

“What’s so special about today?”

“It’s Friday.”

“So?”

“Last day of school.”

“Oh, yeah, right, yeah, okay, I’m coming.”

Angelo squeezed past me and ran for the bathroom. Thanks to Tony’s tardiness, he got there before I could head him off. As soon as he finished, I took my turn and found Tony standing outside the door, shifting from one foot to another, “Come on, come on, I got to go.”

I gave him the room until he finished his morning business and then reclaimed the bowl to brush my teeth. Angelo yelled from the bedroom, “Hurry up, breakfast is already on the table.”

Tony and I rushed back into the bedroom. I grabbed a shirt and put it on, slipped into my corduroy pants and quickly put on socks and shoes. Tony was rushing to do the same. The smell of fresh pancakes cooking, and biscuits fresh out of the oven sent waves of rumbles through my stomach. We got to the table and Sal was already seated in his chair, fork in hand. A pair of old telephone books on the seat served to raise him to a comfortable height. He reached for the glass of milk at his place. “Leave that milk alone. We all eat together.” Grandma admonished him. Sal had an advantage. Since he didn’t go to school, he didn’t have to dress before breakfast, so he was always the first at the breakfast table. As soon as we were seated, Grandma served one fried egg, a large buttered biscuit, and two pancakes to Tony, Angelo and me. Since it was Friday,

bacon was foregone and we had an extra buttered biscuit in its place. Sal was too young for bacon, so he usually got a large spoonful of apple butter instead.

I reached for the maple syrup and Tony asked, “Pass me the molasses?”

I handed it over and slid the syrup to Angelo. He used it for his pancakes and poured some for Sal.

I watched Tony pour a liberal amount of the thick, pungent, black molasses on his pancakes. “How can you eat that stuff?”

“Hey, it’s great; especially with a little syrup mixed in.” He grabbed the syrup and demonstrated by pouring a goodly amount of syrup over the molasses.

“You keep eating all that sweet stuff like that, and your teeth are going to fall out.”

“Ha, you just don’t know what’s good.”

Grandma said, “All right, that’s enough chatter. Eat your breakfast. It’s getting late.”

She looked at Tony’s plate. “Make up your mind which one you want. It’s wasteful to use both.”

Last school day is probably the only day of the school year when I didn’t have to worry about being baited and picked on. Everyone was too busy saying goodbye to friends they wouldn’t see again until next term.

Mrs. Clark, the English teacher came up to me in the yard. “Now you keep on thinking about your writing. I want to see some really good essays next year.”

“Yes, Ma’am. I’ll look up some stuff in the library during the summer.”

“Aren’t you going to be too busy playing with your brothers and friends to be stuck in the library?”

“No, Ma’am. I like it in the library. I spend all my time there in the summer.”

She tilted her head and a small frown appeared on her lips. “Well, you take some time to have fun, too.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Mrs. Clark taught English classes and writing. She was very demanding and strict. Most of the students considered her the toughest teacher in the school, and mean as hell besides, but I got along well with her and she spent a lot of time helping me with my writing assignments and encouraging me to write stories.

She walked away, turned and smiled at me. That was the last time I saw her. When I returned to school in the sixth grade, I discovered that Mrs. Clark had died during the summer. I lost a friend who always inspired and helped me with my ideas about writing, no matter how far-fetched they were. When I heard about her death, I felt very sad. It was as though I had lost my best friend.

Friday dinner fare centered around seafood. Catholics do not eat red meat on Friday. We might have shrimp Jambalaya, fried catfish, or seafood gumbo, but the main course was always fish or shrimp, crabs, or other seafood. Thick seafood file gumbo, cooked with crabs, oysters and or shrimp, served over a bed of white rice was delicious and filling too. It was another mealtime treat I could never get enough of.

At bedtime, Tony asked, “Oh boy, no more school. What do you think we can do this summer?”

Angelo said, “Yeah, we got all summer to do things, like go to the movies.”

Tony said, “If we have the money.”

“We’ll get the money.”

“How?”

“Like before, with money we get doing chores and cutting grass.”

I added, “We didn’t get all that much last year.”

Tony said, “That’s ‘cause you were in the stupid library all the time and me and Angelo couldn’t do all the work ourself.”

“I need the time in the library, but I’ll take some time so we make more money this summer.”

“You and your stupid books.”

I thought about how we could work during the next few months. We had established some contacts last year with some of the white families who lived nearly half a mile from us. We gathered up two sickles, a hoe, a shovel, and a rake and went door to door until we found a few older people who paid us to do small chores and cut weeds away from the gardens. Mr. Arnold had a rotary lawn mower he told us we could use on his small lawn and that of his neighbors. It was old and rusty. I had to work with it and oil it until it worked smoothly. Mr. Arnold used a file and sharpened the reel type blades so that it cut fairly well. Still, unless the grass was already cut fairly short, it took Tony and me pushing it together to get it through the tougher taller grass, but we made a couple of dollars with it. I figured we could do the same thing this year and maybe get a couple of more people to hire us.

Angelo said, “We could do other things.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Go to the soda fountain or the White Castle.”

“Yeah, maybe Mom will take us to the country again, like we did last year.” Tony added.

I said, “I don’t know. I guess that depends on whether she can get someone to take us.”

One of Li'l Grandma's friends, Mr. Andrew, had a large automobile and he would come around every now and then to take us for a ride in the country. The country was really just the adjacent Parishes only a few miles from the city center, but we didn't realize that at the time. However, his appearances were becoming further and further apart and we rarely went for rides with him anymore.

I shook my head. "Mom's working all the time. She leaves early in the morning to go to work at the telephone company and comes back late at night from her part time job as a waitress. She might not have time."

"Mom will find a way, she always does." Tony looked smug and satisfied with his appraisal.

I wasn't so sure. Things were changing, and I wasn't all that sure they were changing for the better.

Saturday

One of my regular chores was to take Big Grandma's lottery numbers across the street to the combination tobacco-candy shop on the corner. On Saturday mornings, Big Grandma would hand me a list of numbers. "Here, take this to Mr. Lou and give him these numbers." Then she gave me another lottery slip with numbers circled. It was a slip from a previous bet and her numbers had come in as evidenced by several of them circled in red on the list. "Tell him I want the Horseshoe played top, saddle and gig and make sure you tell him I want the Shamrock played straight and back."

The Horseshoe and Shamrock were two different lotteries and the top, saddle, gig, straight and back instructions referred to combinations of the numbers she picked. The numbers were printed on thin vertical lists with an icon at the top to identify which lottery was being played. Horseshoe had a picture of a horseshoe at the top of the list and a string of numbers below that indicated winning numbers or combinations. A typical bet would range from two cents to a quarter. Big Grandma must have felt pretty good about the numbers she picked for that day because she said, "I want a nickel on each with a double on the Shamrock." She then handed me a quarter to pay for the bets. A pair of nickel bets, with a double nickel bet on the side, left me with a nickel to spend on candy to be shared with my brothers. I never knew how much she won or lost, but I do remember that every time she "hit the list" my brothers and I would have some small treat or other.

The candy store was an olfactory wonderland. Besides tiers of jars filled with multi-colored and multi-flavored candies, rich tobacco fragrances of pipe tobaccos in bags, cigars in their boxes and humidors, cigarettes, and loose cigarette tobacco for those who "rolled their own" filled the small shop with a wonderful fusion of aromas. The small machines one could

buy to roll cigarettes, for those who favored the machine custom-rolled look over the somewhat wrinkled and shabby-looking hand-rolled versions, was a source of never ending fascination for me, and a couple of years later, I bought one from money saved from doing odd things around the neighborhood. A few pennies here, and maybe a nickel there, for delivering groceries, help to clean up a yard, or once in a while a whole quarter for doing something major like mowing a lawn, added up after a while. After buying the machine, I was no doubt a real pain in the ass forever asking people to let me roll their cigarettes for them. I got pretty good at it, and sometimes they would seek me out. Occasionally I would receive small tips for doing so and I imagine that over time, I made enough to pay for the machine.

That day, as on many others, George, one of the older black men of the neighborhood came in. Mr. Lou acknowledged him with a nod while he took care of me. Mr. Lou placed grandma's winnings, a couple of bills and some change, in a small envelope and gave it to me. "Now, you put this in your pocket so you don't lose it and you be sure you give it to your grandma soon as you get home."

"Yes, Sir. I got a nickel to buy some candy, too."

George said, "Y'all don't mind me. I'll just stand here on the side. Ain't no particular hurry."

Mr. Lou answered him. "Okay, George. I'll get to you in a minute."

"Yassuh, no hurry. I just come in to get my usual."

I said, "I still got to decide what kind of candy I want."

George smiled. "That's all right, Master Stacy, you just take your time and take care of your business. I can just wait here long as need be."

A number of the neighborhood black men bought loose tobacco or, sometimes, single cigarettes three for a nickel, two cents apiece. Friday evenings or Saturday mornings, depending on when they got paid, a couple of cigars would generally replace the loose cigarettes.

Mr. Lou said, “Okay son, if you going to be a while making up your mind I’ll take care of George.” I nodded acquiescence and he turned to the older man. “All right George, what’ll it be?”

“Just the usual, Mr. Lou, like I said. Same as I always gets on the weekend.”

Mr. Lou put three King Edward cigars, five cigarettes, and a small bottle of Old Crow whiskey into a brown bag and handed it to George, who in turn forked over two dollar bills. He waited a moment until he had his change and then said, “Thank you, Mr. Lou.” He turned to me and said, “Now, you take care, Master Stacy, and you tell your grandma that Miz Sarah gonna have another pie for her on Monday.”

I smiled at the thought of one of Miss Sarah’s peach pies. They were sweet enough to tempt a honeybee, and the crust melted in the mouth. “Okay, George, I’ll be sure to tell her.”

Miss Sarah lived next door to us and took in laundry to wash and iron. Sometimes she helped my grandmother when Lil Grandma had a large school custodian assignment. George was Sarah’s common-law husband and frequently helped out on the property when there was heavy work to be done, but he was not very reliable on Saturday evenings or Sunday mornings. Miss Sarah was locally famous for her pies, and it was a treat indeed to be included in her largesse.

Most stores of the time provided a separate entrance for blacks. Some had a room in the back or, more often, a Dutch door in the rear where blacks would be served over the transom. Lou’s shop was too small to accommodate a back room and had no rear door. Besides, in our neighborhood, no one noticed or cared that a black person came in the front way when he or she

needed to buy something. Black people, like Miss Sarah and George, were neighbors just like everyone else. However, no matter how one felt about a black person, the relationship always had a hierarchy wherein the white person was always superior and always took precedence in everything. It had been that way since the end of the Civil War. Everyone knew his place and, for the most part, things worked out.

It never occurred to me at the time that there was anything strange about the way things worked. Things were as they were, had always been, and most likely would always be. Even though we had good relations with most of our neighbors, Miss Sarah in particular, it would not have occurred to anyone in the family to invite them to dinner or any other family function. By the same token, we would never go to her house for dinner or family event. The families were what were called “over the fence” neighbors or perhaps even friends at some level. It didn’t seem at all strange to me that a fifty year old man would call an eight year old boy mister or master, whereas the eight year old would call the fifty year old man by his first name. In fact, I never knew the last name of any of the black boys, girls, or men in our neighborhood, although I did know and use their first names. Black women who held some direct relationship to us were called Miss Sarah, or Miss Jane and that was the way it was also. I never thought to question it.

It was much the same with public transportation. Somewhere along the length of seats, a sign would be placed in a seat back that read, “colored only.” The sign could be moved depending on the ratio of white to colored passengers. Black people sat in the rear of the bus or streetcar, even if there were seats available up front. I several times saw black people standing in the rear while there were seats open up front, but as long as one white person sat where the sign was, it wasn’t moved. Sometime in the mid 1950s the signs, called “Jim Crow” were quietly

removed from the busses and streetcars. Although there were some instances of blacks sitting up front, for the most part things went on as they always had.

There were few indications that a storm was brewing that would soon change the way things were. My brothers and I played with our black neighbors, but in any instance of a disagreement or altercation, in the end, the black kids would defer to us whether we were right or wrong. That those kids might grow to resent the way they were treated was an unimaginable thought on about the same level as men walking on the moon.

Sunday

“Get out of bed. Let’s go. Time for church.” Grandma’s call sounded reveille every Sunday morning. The day, as always, arrived with a hectic and chaotic rush. One bathroom was shared by four small boys and three adults. It was an arrangement designed for confusion and dangled on the precipice of disaster. “All right, let’s go. Everybody get ready, we have only ten minutes before we have to leave and I don’t want to be late.” Little Grandma’s familiar litany sounded. My three brothers and I elbowed each other out of the way to get to the bathroom and dress as quickly as we could. No one wanted to even think of the consequences of being responsible for being late for church.

Tony elbowed me out of the way. “Hey, watch it. I got to get to the bathroom too.” I pushed Angelo, and he in turn squeezed past Tony.

“Come on, guys. We all need to wash up and get dressed. It’s already past seven. I’m not going to be the one responsible for being late for church.”

“Yeah, well just ‘cause you’re the oldest don’t mean you got the right to push us out. You can wait your turn” Tony said as he squeezed alongside Angelo at the bathroom sink.

Sundays were always special, and the routine never varied. Rising around seven, we would scrub up, dress in our one set of church clothes, and go to Sunday services en masse. After the Catholic rites, when the dime apiece could be afforded, we went to the school cafeteria next door to partake of sugar-glazed doughnuts and rich coffee with chicory for the adults. Kids had a doughnut and a choice of orange juice or milk. This took the place of breakfast since no one ate before going to church. Fasting was required before receiving communion, and not receiving communion at Sunday services was another thing that never happened in my family. I suppose

that came from my Sicilian heritage, although Big Grandma was part Irish Catholic so maybe that also contributed to the strict adherence to the Catholic dicta.

The highly ritualized rites of Catholic Mass required a priest and a couple of minions to carry and move things, ring bells, and assist at the communion rail. Tony and I volunteered and were selected to become altar boys about the time I was nine and he was eight. That meant, among other things, that we had to get to mass early. Additionally, we also attended church several times a week, including at least twice on Sunday. My favorite duties as an altar boy were to work weddings, because we usually received a nice tip. We got tips for working funerals too, but somehow it wasn't the same.

Sunday afternoon Benediction service was a nice, warm, comfortable ritual. Fading sunlight, falling through stained glass windows set high on the walls, lent a muted rainbow of color to an atmosphere filled with rising clouds of incense smoke. I really liked the smell of that incense and always vied for the honor of being the one to hold the pot and swing it on the end of its four silver chains. A piece of coal would be burned in the silver incense pot and when it glowed as a hot ember, incense was added with a small silver spoon. The mixture of odors, incense, hot wax, sun-warmed waxed floors, oiled mahogany pews, and afternoon dusty heat combined to create a cozy, musty fragrance that still lives snugly in my memory.

When Tony and I worked a mass, we got home later than the others because we had to change out of our surplice and gowns before leaving the church. There was also the need for some small housekeeping duties to be done before leaving church, things associated with the rituals of the Mass. We removed things from the altar and stored them in set aside places in the vestry and straightened the altar cloth. We removed our vestments and hung them carefully on

hangers set aside for that purpose. Everything had a place and had to be in that place and no other.

Delayed by the usual after-service duties, I got home late one morning. Everyone was busy with chores associated with getting Sunday afternoon dinner cooked and on the table. Tony was putting away pots and pans already used and cleaned, Angelo was setting the table and Sal was doing his best to get in everyone's way. I made the mistake of asking, "Grandma, is there anything I can do to help?"

For my sins, my request was answered. Little Grandma said, "Yes, you can. Come outside with me."

We left by the rear door and went into the back yard. She pointed out a chicken in the fenced coop. "Catch that one for me, the one with the brown spot on the neck."

Several dozen chickens were housed in the small coop located behind the house. I entered the yard of the enclosure with no small trepidation. We sometimes would sneak into the chicken coop and try to catch one just for fun. Grandma scolded and sometimes punished us, because she said it interfered with the chickens laying eggs, although I never noticed any fewer eggs. It was one of the games we made up to play. It almost always generated little cuts and scratches from sharp beaks and spurs and a coating of dust and chicken droppings on pants, shoes, chest and arms. That meant not only a change of clothes but extensive cleaning up, and in some cases even another bath taken before the noontime dinner.

This was the first time I had to catch a chicken for dinner. Once inside the coop, I slowly approached the chicken Grandma had pointed out. Space inside the coop was relatively small, and the chicken was faster and a hell of a lot more agile than me. After ten minutes or so of running around and uselessly flopping on the ground in an attempt to trap the beast, I finally got

it cornered. I approached slowly, arms spread to contain the beast's movements, and when I figured I was close enough, I threw myself at it. I landed in the dirt a foot or so in front of the chicken, which immediately tried to fly over me. I hardly noticed the dust and chicken droppings being inhaled into my nose. I reached up with a hand and caught the bird where a wing joined the body. It wasn't over yet. I tried to grab it so that it couldn't move, but it kept twisting and turning in my hand. At last I got it under control. My efforts were rewarded with scratches all over my chest and arms from beak and claw.

By this time Little Grandma had reached into the woodpile and gotten a small hand axe. She said, "Okay, hold it over the block. Hold it still, you hear?"

I had not thought through what catching the chicken meant. I felt a little twist in my stomach when I realized that the object was to kill the chicken.

"Yes, ma'am." I closed my eyes and held the bird behind the wings so it stretched out with its head over a chopping block used for reducing kindling wood for the fireplace.

With a carefully aimed stroke, Little Grandma chopped off the fowl's head. I released it to flop and kick around, bleeding on the ground. I jumped back to get clear of blood splatters. After a few minutes, the chicken became still. It would be plucked, washed, gutted and prepared for dinner that day. Later, when dinner was served, I felt a little sick at the thought of eating the chicken. I poked at my chicken with the fork until Mother said "Stacy, quit playing with your food and eat."

Eventually, hunger and youth overcame my qualms and the moment passed after I timidly sampled a bite of the chicken. I was a little surprised to find it tasted the same as all the other chickens we had before.

Chicken was the mainstay of our Sunday fare. Almost every variety of chicken one could think of: baked chicken, fried chicken, chicken stew, chicken and dumplings, roasted chicken, chicken gumbo, or a form of Jambalaya with chicken. My personal favorite was chicken and dumplings. A plate of freshly cooked rice with chicken, and a rich thick chicken sauce poured over it, accompanied by a couple of large doughy dumplings, always delighted my taste.

Besides providing the main ingredient for the Sunday meal, the chickens were a source of fresh eggs. We collected more than a dozen each day, and Grandma frequently shared the excess with Miss Sarah, or traded them at the local grocery for things we needed.

I was fortunate this Sunday, I needed only to change clothes and do a fairly extensive wash up of face, arms, and hands being careful to use the small stiff-bristle brush to make sure my fingernails were also clean. We were always subject to an inspection to assure we maintained Grandma's standards of cleanliness, and did not want to be on the receiving end of that additional time consuming routine, especially after the chicken coop experience. When one of us was sent back to clean up properly, everyone had to wait to eat until the culprit returned and passed inspection. This made for less than happy feelings toward the unlucky perpetrator. Sal was on all of our lists, because he was always being sent back while we sat at the table with all the delicious food staring at us and stomachs reacted with groans and growls at the delay in satisfying hunger pains.

"All right, everyone get to the table for dinner." Big Grandma was setting hot bowls of chicken stew and rice on the table while Little Grandma and Mother set out peas, corn and hot French bread.

We scrambled for our places. "All right, let's see those hands."

We all held our hands out so Grandma could examine them to be certain we had washed up before coming to the table. No Marine drill sergeant ever performed an inspection with more diligence than our grandmothers did at lunch or dinner time. As usual, Sal was sent back to wash up again. In retrospect, I think we were often selected at random and sent back out of principle, to reinforce the impression of parental omnipotence and to keep us in line.

Once settled at table, we recited the prayer for meals, and then either Grandma or Mother would serve dinner. One after another we handed over our plates and, an interminable moment later, received the dishes back filled with chicken stew ladled over a bed of steaming rice. A large doughy dumpling was added, and peas or corn would be spooned alongside the chicken stew. We could select a slice of bread from one of the two breadbaskets centered on the table. Fresh from the oven, the smell of the hot bread always managed to start my stomach growling in readiness to eat.

There always appeared to be a large amount of food, but it was principally a lot of rice with thick gravy made from stock and flour. The chicken and corn came from our own yard, and only one bird was used to feed three adults and four children. Still, it tasted great, it was filling and, as Grandma always said, “It’s solid food and it sticks to the ribs.”

After dinner, everyone pitched in to get things cleaned up and straightened. Tony, Angelo, and I would take turns washing, drying and storing the dishes and try to keep Sal out of things. One time, in order to shut up his constant whining and pleading to work with us, we allowed Sal to help with the dishes. He dropped a cup and it broke. We were all sent to our room for the remainder of the day.

In the summer, dinner was usually followed by a short nap in the warm afternoons, but whenever we could escape the afternoon nap, we found things outside to occupy our time. Every

now and then, I find an afternoon when the sun is slanting just so, a small breeze is moving the warm air, and everything seems to move in slow motion. I sit and lean back in my chair, close my eyes and revisit those summer days when things were much simpler and life was a series of days filled with discoveries and adventure.

The Beginning of Change

Daily routine danced to a natural rhythm in slow tempo. In the days before television, and without enough money to find outside pursuits to occupy our time, we found ways to entertain ourselves at home.

“What are we going to do today?” Angelo poked at a pile of old broken pieces of lumber in the shed as if trying to divine some kind of structure from the pieces.

“We could do Knights and Castles.” Tony replied.

I looked over the remains of our last session. Stacks of old furniture, a couple of rusted bicycles, and an old bed spring formed the walls of what had passed for a fortress. “I guess we could make the fortress into another castle.”

The large storage shed contained any number of things that could, with a little imagination, serve as airplanes, tanks, automobiles, magic carpets, castles or fortresses.

“What about Sal?” Tony asked.

“He’s still inside. I guess he’s going to take a nap.”

“Good. He’s a real pain when we try to do anything, and he wants to horn in all the time.” Angelo said.

“Yeah, it’s better if he stays inside. He’s too little to do anything,” Tony agreed.

“So, what do you think?” I asked.

Tony said, “It’s going to take a lot of work to make this into a castle.”

“Yeah, we have to move all this stuff just to get to the big things to make a wall.” Angelo said, still poking at the pile of lumber.

“We don’t have to use all of that stuff.” I said.

Tony said, “Nah, that’s too much to do. We’d never get it all up and done before they call us in.”

Angelo threw down the stick he’d been using. “Yeah, I don’t feel like all that anyway. Besides, we’d get all dirty and dusty.”

“So,” I asked, “what do you want to do?”

Tony shrugged. “I don’t know, something.”

Angelo selected another stick to poke with. “I don’t care. We don’t have all that much time, so maybe just lay around.”

Tony went outside and sat down in the sun. Angelo resumed his investigation of the woodpile, and I found an old weathered book about repairing windmill pumps, and sat down to read it. It had obviously been in the shed for some time. The pages were wrinkled, stuck together, and smelled of mildew. I found the book interesting, although not as fascinating as my collection of science fiction stories by H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, and other science and science fiction writers. I would have rather have been reading one of them, but that meant going into the house to get one and risk disturbing or waking someone. I settled for what I had and, as I thumbed through the pages, idly wondered how a pump repair book came to be in the shed in the middle of a city that had neither windmills nor windmill pumps. But the shed was filled with many old items that seemed to no longer have any useful purpose, including a massive radiator from an old truck or tractor. Thinking about the mystery of how they came to be there, or what they might represent, passed many pleasant hours during the summer months. I heard a couple of crows cawing in the distance, and unconsciously noted and kept track of how close their calls seemed to come.

An hour and a half later, when the adults rose from their afternoon rest or nap, we were called in to the house for afternoon tea and bread.

A hot cup of fresh made sweet tea and one or two slices of hot buttered French bread was as eagerly looked forward to as might be a banana split and always hit the spot. We never tired of it. After tea, we could listen to the radio. Big Grandma was an aficionado of “The Lone Ranger.” We sat on the floor, as close to the radio as we could get, and listened quietly, under pain of awful retribution for making any noise while the legendary hero paraded through his always victorious battles against evil until the predictable closing lines were spoken: “Who was that masked man?” and the inevitable answer, “Why, that was the Lone Ranger.” And with a mighty “Hi-ho Silver, awayyyyyy.” He, with his faithful Indian companion Tonto, rode into the sunset accompanied by strains of the Philharmonic Orchestra playing the William Tell Overture. It somehow never occurred to me at that time to wonder how he managed to have orchestral accompaniment on those empty, dusty trails of the Old West.

On weekday evenings we would listen to other popular radio shows such as, “The Original Amateur Hour,” “The Green Hornet,” “Gangbusters,” “The Shadow,” and many others, including the “Jack Benny” show and “Amos and Andy.”

Noon until two o’clock on weekdays was sacrosanct and inviolate. Just after noon one day, Angelo and I were playing in the small hall that separated the large bathroom from the side porch. Angelo hit me with a toy soldier. He was simulating an explosion that threw his soldiers around. “Hey,” I yelled, “that hurt.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to hit you.”

“Yeah, well you didn’t mean to not hit me either.”

“I said I was sorry.”

“Here, you can have your soldier back.” I threw the small lead soldier at him. It hit him on the side of his face.

“Aiiieee,” he yelled.

Grandma came into the room and swatted Angelo with a broom. I snickered. She stepped around Angelo and swung the broom at me. I ducked, and she missed.

“It was an accident . . .” I started to explain.

Grandma reversed the broom and hit me across the shoulder with the handle. It was my turn to yell.

“You know better than to make noise when I’m listening to my program.”

She pointed the broom handle at both of us. “Don’t make me come back in here.”

It was a lesson that simply reinforced something we already knew; woe befell anyone who disturbed Big Grandma when she was listening to her soaps. When we acquired a television some years later, that didn’t change. The soap operas moved to television, and Grandma would sit immovably on the “parlor chair” and watch her favorite soap characters go through their routines. As soon as her program was over, she would rise, turn off the television set and, if we were inside, send us outside while she took an afternoon nap.

Prior to getting a television set, our entertainment was centered on playing in and outside of the house, listening to the radio, impromptu recitals by either me with my trumpet, Angelo and his Clarinet or, occasionally, both of us together. An alternative was listening to one of us, usually me, reading short stories or chapters from a book. On weekends when there was an extra dollar to spare, we kids would use our quarter apiece to go to the movies for a Saturday matinee. That quarter would buy a ticket for a double feature, short subjects, news, at least one cartoon and a chapter of the current serial. That left enough for a bag of hot buttered popcorn, a drink,

and a candy bar. I liked Baby Ruth with a large Coke, Angelo liked Hershey Bars, Tony mostly went for Jelly candies like Juju and squishy bears. Sal changed what he liked almost every time we went to the movies.

The arrival of television was the tip of an iceberg of change, thrusting us into a new world. Once we had a television, weekend movies were virtually abandoned in favor of cartoons and programs made for kids. On Sundays, after church and the afternoon meal, we would gather around the small glowing tube and watch a guest celebrity read the comics. We could follow the pictures as the narrator voiced all the parts. We would laugh out loud at Li'l Abner and The Captain and the Kids and other well known comic stories. This was great, as there were frequently comics we didn't have in the local Times Picayune or States-Item newspapers. However, like everything else in our lives, television was rationed as though it was gasoline during the war years. We could only watch about an hour and a half on Saturdays and Sunday mornings. We were generally allowed to watch the evening shows with the rest of the family only if our homework was done and we hadn't committed an infraction against the innumerable rules of the house.

Television brought other things into our closed world. After watching episodes of *Leave it to Beaver* and *Ozzie and Harriet*, we were sitting on the side porch, and talking. Angelo asked, "Do you think that's really the way they are?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"They are always so nice to each other, and hugging and things like that."

Tony added, "Yeah, and look at how nice and neat their house is. Everything looks like it's brand new all the time."

"We don't do that. No one hugs us, except sometimes Mom hugs Sal."

I said, "It's only a television show. Like the movies. I don't think that's really the way it is."

"But all of the shows have dads that play with the kids and help them," Tony observed.

"All the people we know have dads too," Angelo said, "even the black kids."

Tony said, "We have a dad."

"No," I said, "he's just someone who is married to Mom. He's not a real father, and I'm glad he's not around anymore."

Angelo said, "Yeah," and then got real quiet.

We sat there for a while and didn't say anything. After a while, I said, "Hey, let's do something."

Angelo said, "Nah, I don't feel like it."

"Me neither." Tony agreed.

"Okay. I think I'll go inside and read."

I sat in my favorite corner with an open book in my lap, but my thoughts weren't on Robert Heinlein's *Lensmen*, I wondered how it might be to have a full-time father who cared and worked and played with his kids. I couldn't get a feeling for what that might mean. Our family was not prone to showing open affection. We took for granted that Mother and Grandma both loved us, but it was almost never shown in personal touches like hugs or kisses. I felt a disquieting doubt that perhaps others did live like the television families. I had the disquieting feeling that we might be missing something, something important.

Death and Hors d'oeuvres

Death was something we saw on television programs, or heard about when the grown-ups talked about someone passing away. Death was something that happened to someone else. I had no personal feeling or connection to death until one day I came home from school and found mother and Li'l Grandma in tears.

“What’s wrong? Did something happen to Sal?” That was a normal question since it seemed Sal was always getting into something that caused Mom to cry.

Mother just looked at me, and Grandma left the room. I felt something funny in my stomach. Whatever it was, I knew it was something really bad. Mother motioned me over to where she was sitting on the couch. She dried her eyes with a large handkerchief and put a hand on my leg. “Your Grandmother died a little while ago.”

“Died? How?”

“She had a heart attack.”

“What does that mean?”

“Something went wrong with her heart and it stopped.”

My mind was processing the information, but I was not connecting with it. Intellectually, I knew what dying meant. We had had a small dog a couple of years earlier who had died. That had been an emotional tragedy for Tony and me. We had cried when Buddy died. I knew about killing chickens for dinner, but I couldn’t link any of those experiences to Big Grandma.

I asked, “Where is she?”

“They took her to the funeral home.”

“Oh.”

“We’ll go there a little later and you can see her.”

“Okay.”

Tony had tears in his eyes when he was told. He was Big Grandma’s favorite, and he was closer to her than were the rest of us, just as Angelo was close to Li’l Grandma, and Sal was to Mother. I wasn’t sure how I felt. I thought I should be sad, but I couldn’t absorb what her being dead meant. I remembered feeling the same way when I heard that one of my great aunts had died a year or so before. She was a fun person and always brought us some kind of gift when she came to visit. Intellectually I knew what being dead meant, but I just didn’t feel it.

Big Grandma was old enough to remember Union troops occupying New Orleans during the Civil War. She had been in her early teens at the time, so she remembered it vividly and used to tell us tales of the war and what it was like to live in the city under the Confederacy and then under Union rule. Until the day she died, she called all Northerners “Damned Yankees.” She and many of her friends were members of the Daughters of the Confederacy. We knew she was old, but I never equated that with dying.

Li’l Grandma kept to her room and we didn’t see her at all for the rest of the afternoon or early evening. Mother prepared cheese sandwiches and set out a glass of milk for each of us. She told us to get a bath and get dressed to go to the funeral home. She laid out our Sunday clothes and checked us over carefully before she was satisfied that we were dressed properly. Tony and I had to wear a jacket and tie, while Angelo and Sal just wore pants and shirt.

Mother wore a knee-length black dress, and Li’l Grandma wore a black dress that covered her from neck to floor. She also wore a black veil that covered her entire face.

Mr. Andrew, a friend of Little Grandma, showed up with his car to drive us to the funeral home. The large black Buick limousine could seat seven with the jump seats deployed. Grandma

sat up front with Mr. Andrew, and the rest of us spread out over the back seat and the two jump seats. We were pretty much a full load, although we kids didn't take up that much space.

We knew that any sign of fighting for the jump seats would cause instant response from both Mother and Grandma, so Tony and I pushed our way in and grabbed the jump seats before Angelo and Sal could take them. Mother reached over and pinched Tony and me on the leg and shook her head. We got the message and settled in quietly for the ride into town. It was a short ride to Canal Street, where we turned right and rode past the downtown stores, past nice homes and a few apartments on Canal Street, and finally arrived at the funeral home.

We got out of the car and waited until Mr. Andrew parked and re-joined us near the main entrance. Tony looked up at the large two-story building and whispered, "Wow, it looks like a castle."

I had to agree with him. With large Spanish arches surrounding the front and side of the building, the large gabled second floor, and a tower rising out of a building to the right, the whole picture certainly lent the atmosphere a sense of medieval castle. I whispered back, "Yeah, I bet there are suits of armor inside."

Mother said, "Shhh. Keep it quiet. I want you to show some respect. Speak only when spoken to. Remember to be polite and say yes sir, yes ma'am and thank you. No running or laughing, and mind your manners."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Okay, Mom."

Angelo said, "I'm hungry."

Sal held tightly onto Mother's hand. He looked around with wide open eyes and put his thumb in his mouth. He was just three years old, and he didn't understand where we were or

what was happening. Actually, none of us really understood what was happening. We had never been to a wake before.

Many of Big Grandma's family were Irish, as were most of her friends. The rest were mostly Sicilian. That meant a lot of Catholics and similar customs concerning a wake for the dead. We entered the main lobby and then went into the foyer of one of the funeral rooms. A number of people were gathered at a small table, and we joined them. Mother and Grandma said hello to several of them. We stood in line for a few minutes and then Li'l Grandma, Mother and Mr. Andrew signed a book on the small table. I watched Mother write her signature, and then add "Stacy, Anthony, Angelo and Salvatore." I had no idea what the book was for, but I felt good at being included.

We then entered the funeral room and mingled with the people there. I never knew that my Grandmother had so many friends or relatives. Mother and Li'l Grandma were approached by nearly everyone and they all put their arms around them or kissed them. I saw Aunt Lorraine across the room and waved to her. She came over and she and Mother held on to each other and they both began to cry.

Sylvia Ann took my hand and said, "Hey, come with me. I want to show you something."

I looked to Mother, but she was still tied up with Aunt Lorraine, and Li'l Grandma joined them. They all began to cry again.

I nodded and said, "Okay, let's go."

Sylvia led the way to a small room to the side of the large family room. A couple of people were seated at a table having a cup of coffee. Sylvia pointed to several covered platters and said, "Look at all the food, and it's free. Let's get a sandwich."

I looked around before asking, “Are you sure it’s all right? How do you know we can have some of it?”

“I asked the lady who was putting it on the table. She said it is for the guests of the Martin family.”

Martin was Big Grandma’s last name from her third husband, so I guessed Sylvia was right. We each selected one of the finger sandwiches. She took chicken and I picked a ham and cheese. One of the men poured some sweet iced tea for us and we sat down and ate our snack.

“This is a pretty good sandwich.” I said. “I wonder if we can have another one?”

Sylvia reached into the platter and handed me a sandwich I didn’t recognize. When I tasted it, it was tuna. That was the first time I ever had a tuna salad sandwich. “Gee, this is good, too. I was a little nervous about coming here, but this is okay.”

“Me too. I ain’t never seen a dead person before.”

“Me neither. I hope Mom don’t make us kiss Grandma.”

“Why would she would do that?”

“I don’t know. I heard someone say that kids kiss their Grandma goodbye.”

“Ugh, I don’t want to kiss a dead person, not even if it is Grandma.

“Me neither.”

“Mom didn’t say anything about that.”

I shrugged. “Maybe it’s wrong. Maybe we don’t do that.”

“I hope not.”

We finished our sandwiches and tea and drifted back into the main room. Mother spotted us and came over. “Where have you two been? I’ve been looking for you.”

“Sylvia and me went into the little kitchen and had a snack and some tea.”

Mother frowned. “Who said you could do that?”

Sylvia replied, “I asked the lady, and she said it was okay.”

Mother grabbed each of us by the hand. “All right. Both of you come with me. We’re going to get your brothers and go say goodbye to Grandma.”

Sylvia and I exchanged glances. She shook her head. I hung back a little and Mother pulled me forward.

She gathered us up, and we moved toward the front of the room where a large casket sat on a table that was draped with red velvet cloth. The closer we got to the casket, the slower I seemed to go. Sylvia took my hand and she held it so tight, I squinted and shook it a little, but she didn’t let go.

Several people were in front of us waiting to see her. Some knelt on a small *prie-dieu* and crossed themselves and said a small prayer. Others just looked. Some reached in and touched her cheek. A few leaned forward and kissed her. I felt a little chill when I saw that. I squeezed Sylvia’s hand and she looked at me nervously.

Finally, it was our turn. Mother kneeled on the *prie-dieu* crossed herself and said something I couldn’t hear. She got up, kissed Grandma, and motioned us forward. She said, “Say goodbye to Grandma.”

I slowly edged up to the coffin and peeked over the side. I didn’t notice I was squinting my eyes until, almost like an out of focus picture, I saw Big Grandma lying there as though she was asleep. I always thought dead people would look scary and like a monster. She looked very peaceful but kind of funny. She had a lot of make-up on and her face seemed very pale. Big Grandma never wore make-up. Her hands were crossed over her chest, and she held a rosary. I had never seen her wear a fancy dress like the one she had on. It was a light lavender color and

had twisty ruffle things on the chest and by her neck. I wasn't sure she was actually dead. It looked like she could wake up at any time. I backed away.

Sylvia asked, "Do we have to kiss her?"

"Only if you feel like that is what you want to do."

Sylvia mumbled "Goodbye, Grandma," and touched the casket. I did the same, and then Tony leaned in, put both hands on the casket, and stood on tip-toe to kiss Grandma on the forehead. He was crying. Mother put an arm around his shoulder, and led him back to a chair in the front row.

Angelo and Sal sat with them. Sylvia and I drifted out of the room and outside to the large veranda where we found bench seats. We sat down.

"Wow, I thought she was going to make us kiss her."

I nodded. "Yeah, me too."

"I'm glad she didn't."

"Me too."

We sat out there until it got dark and we had to go home.

We got up early the next morning and once more went through the routine of scrubbing up and dressing as though for church. Mr. Andrew showed up around eight, and we went to the church. We had seats in front again. We were among the first ones there. The door opened and four men in black pushed a cart inside. The casket was on the cart and they placed it in the aisle just in front of the communion rail.

Mother, Li'l Grandma, and Aunt Lorraine went up to the coffin and spoke to the men. When they returned to the seats, Mother said, "Grandma, Aunt Lorraine, and me will ride in the limousine. You guys will ride with Mr. Andrew."

“You guys” meant my three brothers, me, Sylvia, one of her brothers, and two of her sisters. Her younger brother and sister had been left at home with their father.

The hearse pulled out and the other cars followed in line. I looked out the window as we moved slowly through the streets toward the cemetery. The cortege moved through our neighborhood and as we passed people on the street, they crossed themselves, or in the case of the older black men, they took off their hat and bowed their heads.

I asked Mr. Andrew, “Why are all those people praying and taking off their hats? Are they all Grandma’s friends?”

“Some of them probably knew your grandmother, but it’s a show of respect.”

“But if they didn’t know her, how do they know to respect her?”

“It’s respect for the dead, no matter who they are. They respect her life, and they show it now.”

I didn’t really understand, but I felt good that so many people would respect Grandma.

We arrived at the Saint Vincent de Paul number two cemetery on Louisa Street. The cemetery was actually not that far from the house, but we had taken a roundabout way to get there. Louisa Street is very narrow as it is in one of the older parts of the city. The streets were designed to accommodate horses and carriages, not automobiles. The cars had to park with two wheels on the sidewalk in order to leave room for other cars to pass on the street.

We walked along the whitewashed wall of the cemetery and entered through the only gate that allowed access to the inside. There were three Saint Vincent de Paul cemeteries; each occupied an entire city block. It was like walking through a miniature city. Although there were some graves in the ground, the vast majority were small crypts built to stand alone.

I tugged Sylvia’s sleeve and whispered, “They look like little houses.”

She nodded, "Houses for dead people."

Yes, I thought, a city made up of houses for the dead.

Following the coffin being carried by six men, we wound around the graves until we reached a side wall. The wall had ground to top compartments to accept coffins. I remembered when Mother had taken me into town once and we had gone to the main post office. There was a wall of post office boxes. The vaults set into the cemetery wall were very much like those postal boxes, except in this case, I thought, we were mailing someone's soul to heaven.

The service was very brief and we returned home. A number of people were already there and there was a lot of food on the table and the stove. Every time someone else arrived, they brought food. There were pies, cakes, salads, meat loaf, cold cuts, many loaves of bread including the rarely used white bread cut into slices that came in packages. We mostly used either the Po' Boy bread from the local grocery, or home made French bread. This was a feast rivaled only by the Saint Joseph's altars made up for St. Joseph's day. Although a Sicilian tradition, St. Joseph's altars with huge amounts of food could be found throughout the city. Mother told us that there was so much food, that after St. Joseph's day, much of the food was given to the poor. In our neighborhood, we and our neighbors ate all the food, and there was rarely any left over.

There were so many people gathered in the house, it was hard to move around. Almost all of the women hugged me and told me how handsome I looked. Sylvia smiled at my discomfort. She was subjected to the usual amount of cooing and telling her how pretty she was. Finally, we were allowed to go outside with the strict admonition to not get our good clothes dirty. There were more than a dozen kids in the yard with us. I didn't know or recognize more than half of them.

One of the little boys I did know was Ronald. He was the son of Li'l Grandma's sister. She was my great aunt, Tessy, and was totally deaf and mute. Her husband, Ronald, Senior, was also deaf and mute. Along with a circle of friends, they comprised the handicapped side of the family. Ronald, however, could speak and hear naturally although he frequently accompanied his words with the gestures of sign language.

In the early afternoon, people started leaving until by around five or six o'clock in the evening we were alone again except for aunt Lorraine and her four kids. Mr. Andrew had volunteered to take them home, and Mother and Lorraine were packing some of the food into packages and containers for Lorraine to take with her.

Li'l Grandma stayed in her room again. Mother fixed us each a plate selected from all the food brought earlier. We sat down at the kitchen table, and it was only then that my Great Grandmother's death began to register with me. She was not there sitting at the head of the table. We didn't have her fresh baked French bread, and the radio was not on for her to hear The Lone Ranger.

I looked at my brothers. Sal was falling asleep. Angelo ate very slowly and didn't look around. No one said anything. Tony dabbed at his food and didn't really eat anything. Every time he looked at the empty chair at the head of the table, tears started to collect in his eyes.

I looked at all the food still on the table, and thought how strange it was that we had more food, and different kinds of food, than we had at any time I could remember. I could not decide whether someone dying was a cause for great sorrow, or perhaps a time for some kind of celebration, but ever since my grandmother's death, I associate funerals with food.

Hot Bread and Sweet Tea

During the hot summer days, we had dinner early in the afternoon followed by a short rest or nap, dictated by the heat and humidity of mid-day. Air conditioning was unheard of except for a few shops in town, and our sole relief was provided by a large fan set into a window in the kitchen which pulled air through the entire house and provided some escape from the heat. The noon rest, much like a siesta, was welcomed by the grow-ups and resented by the kids. Sometime after the afternoon rest, around four thirty or so, grandma would serve nearly boiling sweet tea with hot buttered New Orleans-style French bread. Instead of the typically thin French baguettes, called Po' Boy bread purchased from the grocery and used principally for sandwiches, this was wide, thick homemade bread with a crispy crust. Hot from the oven, covered with oleomargarine, it went great with the tea, and was eagerly anticipated.

We kids sometimes got to help make the bread. Grandma would assign us each a chore. Since I was the oldest, and largest, I frequently got the early morning job of kneading the raw dough and forming it into rolls that would make the bread loaves.

“Is it ready yet?”

“Almost. Go wash your hands.”

“I did that already.”

“Do it again.”

“Okay.”

I went into the bathroom and used the little stiff brush to scrub my hands until I felt they were raw. I looked them over carefully and could not find a speck of dirt, but that was no guarantee they would pass Grandma's inspection. I returned to the kitchen where Big Grandma

was rolling a large mound of dough on the floured surface of a piece of wax paper laid over the kitchen table. I showed her my hands.

“That’s good. All right, come over here and let’s get you started.”

I moved around the table to where she was standing. “Remember what I taught you. Knead with all your fingers until it feels a little tougher and then punch it down and do it again until it feels right.”

“Okay.”

I did as instructed until I had turned the cycle over about ten times and then said, “I think I have it.”

Grandma checked the dough and nodded her head. “That’s good. Now, make two loaves and set them on the board.”

I split the large mound of dough in half and sprinkled a little flour on the wax paper and carefully rolled each one into a tube with the ends narrowed into a blunt point. I removed the rolls of dough and placed them on a cutting board, also covered with wax paper, and covered them with dampened cloths. The finished rolls were put aside for the yeast to work and cause the dough to rise until the size of each roll was doubled. This was just about the only thing I was allowed to do to assist with cooking. Big Grandma always said I had the cooking aptitude of a German slug.

We usually made two loaves at a time, although sometimes, especially on Sunday, we made four baguettes. As the loaves baked in the antique oven, vapors and odors escaped into the kitchen and spread throughout the house. The wonderful smell of hot bread caused stomachs to growl in anticipation, and we kids usually stayed very close to the kitchen so as not to be tardy when called in for our afternoon treat. Although we were rationed pieces so as not to spoil our

supper, everyone loved the bread, and it went pretty quickly at dinner, afternoon tea, or just as a snack with margarine or cheese.

Another part of the routine was making the oleo-margarine. That usually fell to me because not even Tony was strong enough to work the mixing paddle through the thick paste.

“Stacy, get the margarine and let’s get it mixed.”

“Okay, Grandma.” I reached into the cabinet that held most of our dry groceries and canned food to find a gallon size can that held what resembled pure white lard.

“Okay, Grandma, I got it.”

“Put it on the table so I can open it.”

I set the heavy can on the table and waited while she used a can opener to get the lid off.

“There, that’s got it. You can go ahead and start mixing it now.”

“Yes Ma’am.” I grabbed a large wood spoon-like paddle and looked for the package of bright orange powder came with it. After the can was opened, I spread some of the powder over the surface and used the paddle to mix it, blending it in and stirring it until a rich buttery color and uniform texture were achieved.

Mixing the margarine was one of my favorite things to do, and I considered being allowed to make the margarine a reward. Since the margarine was used for cooking as well as being spread on bread, pancakes, and vegetables such as spinach and broccoli, a gallon of margarine didn’t last very long in our household.

Games and Emergency Rooms

Although time has mellowed the memories, it was not all sweetness and light. We had a father of whom only I of the four boys had any clear memory, and that was rapidly fading. And there were the usual disasters associated with four growing boys.

Our great-uncle had built what he called a volley-door and was actually like a merry-go-round. It was formed with a large eight-inch by eight-inch pole similar to a railroad tie for the support. It stood on end and was anchored by sinking it several feet into the ground. A cross-brace made of two heavy pieces of four by four lumber was set on top of the vertical center pole. A pipe inserted in a hole drilled in the top of the support pole provided an axle for the crosspiece. Four ropes were hung from the crosspiece and rudimentary seats were attached to the ropes. Two or four of us could sit on the seats and swing round and round on it.

I was riding on it alone with Tony pushing me around. "Faster, faster. Come on, you can go faster than that." I taunted.

"Okay, you asked for it," he replied.

With that he started running around with one of the ropes in his hand. The device went faster and faster. Unfortunately, neither of us clearly understood the mechanics of how the thing worked and ignored my uncle's warning that we must have either two or four riders, not one or three. The lop-sided load created by only one rider, made for an unbalanced strain that caused the pipe to wobble in its hole in the support, and finally crack the thick wood. The entire crosspiece came down and struck me in the head.

Tony ran into the house for help. "Mom, come outside, quick. Stacy got hit by the volley-door and his head is bleeding a lot."

Mother reached me in seconds, and examined my head. “Tony, go onto the house and get me a wet towel. Angelo, go to the ice box and get a large piece of ice and wrap it in a kitchen towel.”

They ran to do what Mother had directed them to do. I said, “It hurts a lot, but it’s not all that bad.”

“It’s not good. You’re bleeding all over the place and it looks like you’ve got a nasty cut on the top of your head.”

Tony and Angelo returned at the same time. Mother wiped the blood away as best she could and placed the ice wrapped in a towel on the cut in my scalp. I flinched when the cold wetness hit the open wound.

Mother said, “Tony, go inside and use the telephone and call Aunt Lorraine and tell her I need your uncle to come get us in his cab and take us to the hospital.”

Tony’s smile radiated smug pride. He ran to the house. It was the first time any of us had been allowed to actually use the telephone.

Mother moved me into the front room of the house, where she could see the street through a window, and we waited for my uncle to show up.

Although it felt like a long time, I guess it was only a matter of ten or fifteen minutes before he arrived. We climbed into the cab, and I wound up, not for the last time, in the Charity Hospital emergency ward. It took eight stitches to close the cut, and a part of my head was shaved clean. I wasn’t too happy about that. I could already picture the kids in school taunting me about being bald.

It must have seemed to Mother that some evil sprite visited us when we played. Almost every month, one or more of us required medical attention for wounds or broken bones. On

another occasion, Tony and I were playing a game similar to Frisbee. We found things that could do the same job even before there was such a thing as Frisbee. There were some large slate shingles in the yard. Slate shingles were a common roofing material in the older houses in the city, and broken ones could be found everywhere. One of the characteristics of broken slate is that the edges are almost razor sharp. We were skimming a piece of broken slate, a bit less than a foot in diameter, to each other when Tony missed and it caught him on the forearm generating another trip to the Charity Hospital emergency ward. Two dozen stitches were needed to close the eight-inch long slash in his arm.

It was difficult to determine which of us was the most accident-prone. During a game of mumble-peg played with a long World War One bayonet, Tony missed and drove the bayonet through his foot; back to the emergency ward.

About six months after Tony's accident, I jumped from the roof of the chicken coop in an attempt to test a pair of wings made from an old sheet and some bamboo sticks, and wound up with a severely sprained ankle and a dislocated shoulder. Once more we were off to the emergency room. We got to know almost every detail of that place.

I would wind up breaking a leg, two ankles, both wrists, numerous fingers and toes, and my nose at least three times plus sustaining several severe knife cuts from fights before I was fifteen years old. Every boy in the neighborhood carried a knife of some kind and many were adept at using it in a fight. Unfortunately, it wasn't a skill I learned and suffered the consequences of that lack of education. I often wondered how my mother survived those times. Perhaps it was because she was too busy working two jobs and couldn't afford the luxury of a nervous breakdown.

Going Downtown

Private transportation was virtually unknown in our neighborhood. Most of the city trade was conducted via horse or mule drawn carts and wagons. Only the rich could afford automobiles, and there was no place in the city for ordinary people to keep horses or carriages. Besides, who could afford to feed horses? That money was better spent feeding one's own family. Mr. Andrew owned an automobile and was Little Grandma's close friend. It was, in fact, a large immaculately kept Buick Limousine of 1934 vintage. About once a month or so, he would show up with the big black car and take all of us, grandmothers, mother, and kids, for a ride in "the country." Most of the places we visited then were in adjacent Parishes and are the middle of the suburbs today, but at the time, it was a great treat to go for an automobile ride. The open country side looked very foreign and it seemed like a long way from home. We would sometimes stop and be allowed to have a soda or some sweet treat before returning home.

Each neighborhood was a small community sufficient unto itself for most needs. Grocery shops, tailors, hardware stores, cobblers, butcher shops, and laundries were all within easy walking distance. Some neighborhoods also had shoe stores and clothing shops similar to small department stores.

Downtown Canal Street was the shopping Mecca of the city. It was here all the local and national department stores were located and one could find anything needed from notions to furniture or pianos in the large stores. Going downtown to shop was a relatively rare adventure. Everyone would begin preparations for the trip just after breakfast; boys spruced up, putting on their Sunday clothes and slicking hair down. Girls wore their best dresses, small purses, sometimes hats, but white gloves for the girls were mandatory to go shopping on Canal Street.

We generally rode the streetcar, or trolley as it is known in most other cities. That was another not often enjoyed treat.

Tony, Sylvia, and I took the bus one day just to ride around town. Although Tony and I had done this a number of times, it was a first for Sylvia.

“We just get on the bus and it takes us anywhere we want to go?”

“We can get on any bus or streetcar anywhere in the city,” I said, “and go anywhere, or ride all day, just on a seven-cent ticket.”

“How do we do that?”

“Whatever bus or streetcar we get on, the driver will give us a transfer, and we can use that for any connecting bus or trolley and we don’t have to pay any more for it.”

“Are we going to do that today?”

“No, we’ve never done that. Mom don’t allow us to go that far. We’re just going around to the Castle Burger and then back home. That’s just three buses.”

When we got a little older and were trusted to go on our own, my brothers and I sometimes took advantage of the transfer policy to ride completely around the city on those transfer tickets, leaving in early morning and returning late in the afternoon, meanwhile having been on a dozen public conveyances. One such trip was typical.

Around eight in the morning, I pulled Tony and Angelo aside and said, “We’ve got a little over a dollar between us from mowing lawns and hauling trash out. Let’s take the streetcar around town.”

Tony was instantly in favor of the idea but Angelo, in his usual fashion said, “If we do that, we’ll have to spend almost a quarter on the tickets and if we stop for something to eat, like we always do, we won’t have any money left.”

He was right. We would no doubt stop, as we usually did, for some Castle-Burgers. They were small, greasy, great tasting, hamburgers with lots of onion, mustard and pickle on them. Their two best attributes were that they tasted wonderful and cost only a dime apiece.

I replied, “Yeah, but we’ll have a great time and we could each have two burgers and a coke.”

Salvatore was still too little for such excursions so we had to leave him at home. Besides, if we took him, we could only have one burger apiece. We walked a block over and took the Claiborne bus to Canal Street. Most of the buses and all of the streetcars went to Canal Street. We would transfer to the St. Charles streetcar, which would take us into the Garden District, past the Tulane and Loyola campuses, by Audubon Park and Zoo. The streetcar ended on Carrollton Avenue at Claiborne in the Carrollton section on the western end of town. We would then transfer to the Carrollton Bus and ride it to City Park. There we could transfer to the Esplanade bus and ride that to the corner of Esplanade and Broad where the Castle-Burger was located. There, we got off the bus for our noon snack.

Angelo said, “Why don’t we just get one burger each? That way we can have some money left over.”

Although his argument made a degree of sense, Tony answered, “Hey, we don’t get that many chances to have a burger. I definitely want two.”

I shrugged and said, “We can always earn some more money doing chores and mowing lawns, like we do every summer.” With that settled, we had two burgers and a glass of fountain coke to go with them.

After a leisurely half-hour in the Castle-Burger, we boarded the Gentilly-Broad bus back to Canal Street and transferred to the Claiborne bus to return home. We had circumnavigated the

entire western half of the city, had lunch, were back at the house by three o'clock in the afternoon and, as a bonus, we had four cents change left.

Dauphine Street

I was a bit over six years old when mother found work in a Consolidated Vultee Aircraft defense plant located on Lake Pontchartrain frontage, building PBY flying boats for the Navy. We moved to a duplex apartment near the lakefront and just behind the New Orleans Naval Air Station. For the most part, our neighbors hated the noise of the Navy war planes flying low over the houses to land on the runway, but I loved being in close proximity to the planes that flew training missions at all hours of the day and night, preparing the pilots for combat duty in the Pacific theater of the war.

Our time there was all too short. Things changed again, Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft laid off most of the workers, including Mother, which severely reduced our financial situation and we moved once more. This time it was to the house on Dauphine Street. The best thing to be said about that place was that it was convenient to school and downtown. Otherwise, it was a battleground and an odds-on bet as to whether we, the mice, or three-inch long cockroaches would eventually dominate.

We set the paper bags of groceries on the lower step and made room for Mother to get to the door. We shivered in the chill wind. My light jacket, the only coat I owned, provided minimal protection against the colder-than-usual early blow. We huddled on the creaking splintered stairs that led directly from the sidewalk into the living room of the house. Built eighteen years before the civil war, the deteriorating structure was nearly a century-old. Mother, shifting a bag of groceries, reached around Tony to find the lock.

“Shhhh! Quiet!” I said to my brothers. “You’re making too much noise. If you don’t shut up, you’ll scare them away, and remember, you can’t just rush in and start swinging. Take your time and make sure you can hit one before swinging”

Tony pushed Angelo, who cried out. “Hey, watch out. You almost knocked me off the stairs.”

“Well, don’t crowd me so much. I need some room too, you know.”

Sal, the youngest and littlest, stood on the bottom step, out of the way.

“That’s enough,” Mother said. “If you can’t get along and keep still, you can wait on the sidewalk until I get in and then you can follow.”

“We won’t have a chance to get any,” Tony said.

“Yeah, when you turn on the light, they’ll all run away and get in their holes, and we won’t be able to kill any,” Angelo added.

“Then I guess you had better be still and mind your manners.”

I leaned forward while Mother fumbled with the key in the dark, trying to open the door and simultaneously juggle an armful of packages. Angelo and Tony, ignoring the warning, surreptitiously pushed and shoved in the cramped space at the top of the four-stair stoop, vying to be first in when the door opened.

Finally getting the lock unbolted, Mother cautiously cracked the front door, reached in, and switched on the light. She moved out of the way. “All right, you can go in now”

We rushed in before she finished speaking, grabbed the sawed-off broomsticks arranged just inside the doorway, and scrambled around the living room, swinging the makeshift weapons at anything and everything that moved.

“Wow, there must be more than fifty of them,” Angelo said, hitting a mouse in full flight and slamming it against the wall.

“Watch out, Tony, you almost hit my leg,” I said, swinging my own weapon as fast as I could, trying to kill as many mice as possible before they escaped through the holes in the wall.

“Sorry. Get that one!” Tony pointed to a particularly large mouse moving slowly as a result of a glancing blow from his broomstick.

Sal, without a weapon of his own, ran around the room trying to herd the mice toward us. He mostly just got in the way, and we had to be careful to not hit him.

I got the one that had gotten away from Tony, and caught another on the backswing. I looked around the room. Only inert bodies littered the floor. “I guess that’s it for tonight. They’re all gone.”

“Wow, look at that,” Angelo said, pointing to the scattered bodies. “We got more than ten.”

The battle had lasted less than a minute or so, but I suddenly felt tired. “Okay, they’re all gone. You guys clean up here. I’ll get the groceries in, and help Mom put them away.”

Those nightly efforts, regardless of passion, valor, and vigor, probably did little to reduce the mouse population of New Orleans, but killing the agile and unwanted little rodents gave us a lot of satisfaction, a rush of adrenalin, and a small sense of adventure and accomplishment.

I put my broomstick by the front door, and then brought in the large brown paper bags of groceries from the front stoop.

“These are all the bags, Mom. I’ll help you put the stuff away.”

“Okay, you can hand me the canned stuff first.”

I reached into one of the bags and began handing the cans to Mother one at a time, until we had them all put away. We moved to the ice box and I handed her the green stuff, lettuce, cabbage, asparagus, raw spinach, and the hated Brussels sprouts.

Tony and Angelo worked in the front room to wipe blood splatters off the scarred hardwood floor, administered the coup de grace to a few mice that still moved, gingerly collected the furry bodies, and disposed of them in the outdoor trash container.

Handing the groceries to Mother, I asked, “Are we ever going to live with Grandma again?”

She looked at me a moment, and then said, “I don’t think so. We have our own place now. Don’t you like it better here?”

“It’s okay, I guess. But we don’t have anything.”

“What do you mean, we don’t have anything?”

“Furniture and stuff. We don’t even have enough plates.”

Our eclectic chinaware collection featured four plates, only two of which matched, four cups of different sizes, one demitasse cup, and a paltry collection of saucers, bowls, and old flatware that matched neither each other nor any of the other pieces. A half dozen pieces of flatware had been pilfered from the restaurant of a prominent hotel just off Canal Street, where Mother had worked as a waitress for a year or so. Those pieces were silver-plated and heavy in the hand.

“Well, what we do have is ours. We don’t owe anything to anyone, and we can do with it as we please. Besides, things are getting better all the time, aren’t they?”

“Yes, some things. We can do more stuff here, and it’s more fun.”

One thing none of us missed was our grandmothers' old-world code of strict discipline, regimentation, and a yard-long list of do's and don'ts. We had moved to the Dauphine Street address less than a year ago, when Mother had found a job with the telephone company. But, being on our own, life seemed somehow less secure, and not as warm and comfortable. "I don't know," I said, "I guess it's just different."

Even at ten, I realized our living arrangements left something to be desired, but how much is a ten-year-old capable of understanding about the world around him? I couldn't realize the hardships our mother endured struggling alone to support four growing boys with no help and only the meager salary she earned working as a waitress or, in this case, a telephone company information operator. In 1948, even with tips, waitresses' earnings were below poverty level by several degrees of magnitude, frequently amounting to less than ten dollars a week.

A couple of weeks later, I was awakened by screams. Tony was crying.

"What's the matter? What's happening?"

Tony had the covers pulled up around his chin. He pointed at his feet, and cried, "There's a rat in my bed."

I pulled the string to turn on the single-bulb overhead light and looked in the bed, all around it, and kneeled down to look under the bed. "I don't see anything. Are you sure it wasn't a dream?"

"No! It was a great big rat. I saw it."

I checked around the bed again. "I still don't see anything."

Just then Mother came up the stairs. "What's going on up here? Tony, are you all right? Did you hurt yourself?"

Angelo wiped sleep from his eyes and asked, "What's wrong? Why is the light on?"

I said, "It's nothing. Go back to sleep"

"Okay."

Sal didn't even wake up.

Tony was still crying. I told Mother, "He says there's a rat in his bed. I don't see anything. Maybe it was a nightmare."

Mother hugged Tony. "That's right; you were just having a nightmare. It's all right now." She began to straighten his covers when a mouse jumped from underneath a fold in the blanket and onto the bedroom floor. Tony screamed, Mother cursed, and I picked up a shoe and threw it at the mouse. I missed, and it scrambled away, running to the shadows.

Mother comforted Tony while I searched every inch of the room, but no sign of the mouse could be found. I sat on the edge of Tony's bed and held his hand. "It's all right. It wasn't a rat, just a mouse. I checked, and it's gone. We scared him good. He won't come back."

Tony could not be consoled. Mother held him close until he finally went to sleep an hour or so later. Mother replaced the covers, and I looked at my brother's wet face and felt rage building inside me.

From that time on it was all-out war against the mice. Traps, poison, broomsticks, shoes, and whatever else could be found were pressed into service. Tony checked every inch of his bed every night to make sure no mouse was there.

"Don't worry," I said. "I hate those mice. I'll get them for you. I'll kill them all."

My frustration and anger transformed the mice from an undesirable pest into an implacable enemy, to be exterminated to the last mouse by all and every means possible. I started baiting the mice and waiting for them in the semi-darkened room so that I could ambush them. However, no matter what technique I used, I never got any of the mice that appeared in the

upstairs bedroom. They ran under beds, behind wardrobes, around obstructions, and even had a route that took them over the tops of furniture in the room, including Mother's prized vanity dresser. There were simply too many places for them to hide, and not enough space to maneuver in the cramped room.

At dinner, I sprang an idea I thought would work. "Mom, suppose I use my gun? I could get all of them then."

"No. You know you're not allowed to shoot the gun in the house."

"It's only an air gun, Mom, it can't really hurt anything, but it could kill or cripple the mice."

The gun was a prized Daisy Red Ryder BB gun. It was an expensive luxury for the times, and they were only then becoming available in large numbers, three years after war priorities and material shortages had kept them out of production.

Tony said, "Why not? Stacy shoots real good. He can hit a quarter clear across the yard."

Angelo agreed. "That's right, he can even shoot a penny out of my hand."

Even Sal went along with the idea. "Yeah, Mom, he's really, really good."

"That has nothing to do with it. I gave in on the gun only on condition that it stayed with me, and could only be used when I am here . . . and just why would Stacy be shooting pennies out of your hand, Angelo?"

"I was just saying he could. I didn't say he did." Tony tittered and Sal covered his eyes.

"If I hear anything about you shooting pennies, or anything else, out of your brother's hand, I'll get rid of the gun, is that understood?"

"Yes ma'am."

The next afternoon, we were sitting in our bedroom. Mother would not be home for a couple of hours. We had exhausted the possibilities of indoor games, the only thing on the radio was soap operas and news, and we were bored. Tony tossed playing cards into a small bowl. Angelo constructed houses with dominoes and then knocked them down. Sal was asleep on the large couch.

Tony said, "I hate it when it rains. We can't go outside, and there's nothing to do in here."

"Yeah," Angelo said, "and even if we could go out, we'd track dirt and mud in the house and Mom would throw a hissy fit."

I said, "Hey, that's right. It is raining."

"We already said that." Angelo said.

"Yeah, but what do the mice do when it rains?"

Tony and Angelo looked at each other for a moment, and then Tony asked, "They go in the walls to keep out of the wet?"

"That's right. Suppose we turn out most of the lights up here and put some bread crumbs on the floor in the open space?"

Angelo asked, "The mice will come out?"

Tony nodded. "Sure they will, but they'll run back in the wall as soon as we turn on the light."

Angelo added, "Yeah, that's right, they always get away. We never catch them up here."

"Suppose we block all the holes except one. That way they can come in, but they won't have any choice but to go right there. We can hide, and when we get three or four inside, Tony,

you can block the hole with something, and we'll have them trapped in the room. We can turn on the light and get them all."

"So?" Tony asked, "They're still a lot faster than we are, and they have too many places to hide. We'll never get them."

"We will if I'm on my bed with the gun. You guys chase them into the open, and I'll shoot them."

Tony and Angelo looked at each other. Tony said, "Mom will kill us if we shoot the gun in the house."

"We don't have to tell her. If we don't say anything, how could she ever possibly know about it?"

Angelo shook his head. "Mom always knows when we've done something we shouldn't of."

"How?" I asked. "There's no way she can know if we don't say anything, and the gun is back in her room when she gets home."

"I don't know how. She just knows."

"Forget it, let's get started. Tony, cut the top and bottom out of a can. Angelo, get the hammer, ice pick, and some small nails from the kitchen drawer. Oh, and get some stale bread, too. Bring all the stuff upstairs."

Tony asked, "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to move the furniture away from the walls so we can get to the holes and cover them up."

Tony and Angelo brought the stuff upstairs and we got busy making hole covers by flattening an edge of the can lids with the hammer, using our shoe box like an anvil, and punching holes for the nails with the ice pick.

I said, "Here, Tony, you nail the covers over these two holes. Leave the big one open. I'm going to get the gun."

I went into Mother's room. She wouldn't be home for a couple of hours, but I still felt a need to move as quietly as a burglar. The air gun was in the large wardrobe, propped against a side wall. I took the gun out and shook it. The sound of BBs rattling in the magazine told me it was loaded. I closed the wardrobe, left the room and hurried up the stairs.

When Angelo saw the gun in my hand, he said, "Oh, man, we're going to be in really big trouble."

"We're not going to be in trouble."

"Yes we are. Just because everyone says you're the smartest, you think you know everything."

"I know about this," I said. "Tony, put the towel at the bottom of the door. Angelo, spread the breadcrumbs, and don't put too many."

With those tasks finished, I told Tony, "Take the shoeshine box and get over where you can use it to block the mouse hole when they come out. Remember, you have to be really still or you'll scare them away."

"I know that. I'm not stupid, you know."

With a wash cloth over the small bedroom lamp to dim the light, we were ready. Tony was on a chair near the mouse hole, and Angelo stood next to the vanity dresser, ready to snatch the cloth off the lamp.

We didn't have long to wait. Within minutes, three mice came out and cautiously sniffed the air. They froze for several seconds, ready to rush back into the wall. When they ventured further out to get at the breadcrumbs, Tony quickly slammed the box across the hole, and Angelo pulled the cover off the light. The mice stood stock still for a fraction of a second, frozen in place. Their beady black eyes seemed to glow. In a fraction of a second they were off, scampering to where their holes were. The momentary pause was long enough for me to get sighted in on one of them. I pulled the trigger. The mouse screeched and flew across the floor. Another one ran under the bed and Tony lunged after it.

The third ran up the side of the vanity. Angelo yelled, "Yikes, get away from me!" and spun around to get out of the way.

The mouse paused and turned to run the other way. Just as I pulled the trigger, Tony, still after the mouse, put his hand on the mattress where I was sitting. The pressure of his hand depressed the mattress, and the sudden shift through me off balance. The shot went wild, striking the mirror on the vanity.

Immediate silence fell. "Oh, God," Tony cried out, "Look at what you did. Mom's gonna kill us."

Nearly dead center on the glass was a small hole, surrounded by a spider web of fine cracks.

"What I did? If you hadn't shaken the bed, this wouldn't have happened. It's your fault."

"You're the one with the gun. You shot the mirror, not me."

I pushed Tony. He pushed back. I pushed harder. He stumbled back and dodged the dresser. His shoulder hit the wall and punched a fist size hole in the crumbly century-old plaster. A large crack radiated from the hole he had made.

Angelo started to cry.

Tony said, “Oh, God, now we’re really going to get it.

“Stop it. We’re in enough trouble already.” I said, “Stop blubbering. Let me think a minute.”

What could we do? Thoughts whirled, possible excuses ranging from a close miss by a thunderbolt, to; “It just broke” swirled through my mind. There was no reasonable way to explain the damage. I didn’t want to think about Mother’s reaction when she saw her vanity mirror broken.

“I have an idea,” I said. “look, we can say it was an accident. We hit the mirror with the broom handle when we were cleaning our room.”

Tony jumped on that. “Sure, it really was an accident. I mean, we didn’t do it on purpose.”

Angelo pointed. “What about that hole in the wall? We can’t say we did that with the broom.”

I hadn’t seen that. The hole made by Tony’s shoulder was only part of the problem. There was a crack running down almost to the base board. “You’re right, the hole is too big. Hanging a picture over it won’t work either.”

I looked around the room, searching for some way to cover up the damage. When I looked at the vanity mirror, I knew what to do.

Sal, who had been asleep on the couch downstairs, came into the room. When he saw the mirror, he said, “Oh wow, Mom’s going to kill you guys.”

Tony grabbed Sal’s arm and pinched it hard enough that Sal cried out. “You were downstairs, sleeping. You didn’t see nothing and you ain’t going to say nothing.”

“Ouch! All right, all right, let go.”

“Let him go,” I said. “Okay, here’s what we’ll do. Let’s move the vanity over to this wall and the mirror will cover the hole and the crack.”

Tony nodded, “Yeah, that’ll work. We can say we were trying out a new way to put the beds and furniture and that’s how the mirror got broke.”

“That sounds pretty good.” Tony grinned at the unusual compliment.

Rubbing his arm, Sal said, “It ain’t going to work. Mom ain’t going to believe it.”

I said. “Shut up, Sal.”

“I’m telling you, it ain’t going to work.”

We all glared at him and Sal threw up his hands and started down the stairs. “Okay, okay, but I’m telling you.”

When he’d gone, I said “All right, give me a hand with moving the bed.”

We moved one bunk bed to another wall, shoved the second further from the cracked wall, and then pushed the vanity dresser across the hole. It hid the damage on the wall nicely, but when we moved the heavy piece, the mirror cracked all the way down. Our only hope was that the explanation would make sense.

The two hours remaining until Mother got home seemed to never end. We kept to the living room, sprawled across the couch and easy chairs. We did our best to ignore the question of what would happen when Mother arrived, but we couldn’t push it out of mind. The more time passed, the direr our plight seemed to grow.

I said, “The more I think about it, the worse this idea seems. I don’t think she’s going to believe us.”

Angelo threw himself onto the couch. “It still sounds good to me.”

Sal muttered, “It ain’t going to work.”

We ignored him.

Tony, playing with a model car, chipped in, “Yeah, anyway, what choice do we have now?”

Mother arrived about five-thirty and, as usual, immediately began working in the kitchen. When she had several pots started on the four-burner stove, she went into her bedroom to change from her work clothes. A few minutes later, the whole family was gathered in the kitchen. Mother was working at the sink when she turned around suddenly and said, “Okay, what’s going on here? You guys are way too quiet.”

My stomach felt hollow. We all looked from one to the other, Angelo, sticking to the script, looked away and said, “We had a little accident when we were cleaning up our room and moving the furniture.”

Mother looked concerned. “Accident? What accident? Is anyone hurt?”

Everyone quickly answered, “No.”

“Well, then, what was the accident?”

Tony piped up, “The mirror cracked when we moved the vanity.”

“The big mirror?”

We nodded, and Angelo added, “We didn’t mean to break the mirror, it just happened when we were cleaning up the room.”

“Cleaning your room, huh? All right, let’s have it. What really happened?” She went from concerned mother to disciplinarian in seconds. She leaned against the sink, folded her arms across her chest, and waited.

Her face was pinched, drawn, and looked more tired than usual that evening. I felt bad, because I knew we were partly to blame for the lines that creased her brow and outlined her eyes.

Angelo said, “We was trying to trap some mice.”

Sal added, “Tony and Angelo were hiding, and Stacy was on the bed. The mirror broke when he shot at the mouse, and then it cracked when they moved it.”

If looks could inflict serious pain, Sal would be a paraplegic. He put his hand over his mouth and turned his head.

Mother looked directly at me. “Shot at the mouse?”

There was no longer any sense in avoiding the truth, so I told her what had happened, holding as close to the truth as I could remember. For a long moment she didn’t move or speak. Time ticked away, second by long second. Finally, she said, “All right, get cleaned up for dinner. After we eat and do the dishes, everyone goes to bed immediately. I’ll decide what to do about this in the morning.”

It was unnaturally quiet in our bedroom that night. We each imagined our individual versions of the consequences in the morning. My imagination ran wild. We knew Mother wouldn’t hit us, like Grandma would, but I thought of being restricted to the house for the rest of my life, or maybe having to stay home and be forced to help Tony with his school work. None of the options I thought of seemed very pleasant.

Tony hissed a whisper. “What do you think she’ll do?”

“I don’t know, but it won’t help if she hears us talking after lights out.”

Angelo chipped in, “I didn’t think that stupid idea would work anyway. She knows we never clean our room without her telling us.”

“It’s a little late to think of that now. Okay, button up. We can worry about it in the morning.”

Sal said, “I told you guys that was a stupid idea.”

We all said, “Shut up, Sal.”

I said, “Let’s get some sleep.”

Giving that advice proved to be a lot easier than taking it. I stayed awake for hours, fretting about what the next day would bring.

On the way downstairs to breakfast, Angelo whispered, “What’s going to happen, Stacy?”

“I don’t know, but we’ll find out soon enough.”

“You guys are really going to get it.” Sal said, with a big smile on his face.

We went into the kitchen, sat in our accustomed places, and kept absolutely silent. Mother put cereal and milk on the table, and then poured a cup of hot coffee. She stood by the sink, drinking the coffee and smoking a cigarette. She said not a word about the mirror or the attempted deception. Angelo played with his cereal, but didn’t eat a bite. Tony kept his eyes on his bowl. I sipped at my milk. Sal grinned continuously, and squirmed all over his chair. We sneaked covert glances at each other, waiting for the inevitable.

When breakfast was finished, Mother collected the dishes, put them in the sink and said, “Get ready for school. We don’t have a lot of time.”

Mother left the room to finish dressing. I released a lungful of air. Tony asked, “She isn’t going to do anything?”

Sal said, “Man, you guys are so lucky. I thought you were really going to get it.”

“Not do anything? How do you feel right now?”

“Happy we’re not punished, but kind of ashamed too.”

“Me too.” Angelo said.

“I feel the same way.” I said. “Mom doesn’t hit us with things like grandma does. She doesn’t make us stay in our room unless we do something really bad, but sometimes, I think it might be easier if she did hit us. That goes away a lot faster.”

Gay Times and Guys in Dresses

Mother frequently had to work until fairly late at night. We were too young to be left to our own devices, and babysitters cost more than Mother could easily afford. However, there was a house next door to us that had a second story addition in the back. Six men and two women lived there. Mother made some sort of arrangement that involved their looking after us after school or weekend days when Mother had to work.

“Is Charlie and Tina coming over tonight?” Angelo asked.

“No,” Tony answered, “Tonight it’s Pauli and Lessa.”

“Oh, boy. I hope they wear that weird hair and funny pants.”

The guys often wore very long wigs that sometimes had flowers woven into the braids. The funny pants were form-fitting stretch material that looked like something a circus performer might wear. In the rear of the second floor rooms of their house, there was a small porch with a pair of clothes lines rigged to dry laundry. Some of the clothes were, to our young eyes, remarkable. Women’s panties in fluorescent orange, green, red or purple adorned the lines most weekdays. Petticoats and slippers were hung out daily. We almost never saw any men’s clothes.

Pauli and Lessa showed up on time and brought a dish of macaroni and cheese. Sal said, “Goody, I love macs and cheese.”

It was a meal we had up to three times a week when the guys sat with us. Both wore Capri pants and high heel shoes. Angelo asked, “How come you guys are always wearing ladies stuff?”

“Hey, you know Mother told us not to ask about that.” I said.

Pauli laughed. “It’s all right. We don’t mind.”

Lessa said, "This is what we do for a living. We dress like women and perform at the My 'O My club on the lake."

I asked, "You mean they pay you to dress up like ladies?"

"Well," Lessa said, "it's a bit more than that. We do acts and dance and sing. Tina does a comedy routine, and Cheri is a really good ballet dancer."

"Why don't they just get women to do it?"

"Well, Angelo, it's because we are guys who make out like we're women that they want to come to see us perform. People actually come from all over to see us."

Angelo considered Pauli's answer. "I guess if they want to see you do it and pay you for it, then it's okay."

"Maybe someday your mother will take you to see us; maybe on a weekend matinee when families come to see us work."

Tony said, "I don't think so. I'm not sure mother wants us to be too friendly with you guys."

I said, "Tony! That's not nice."

Lessa asked, "Why do you say that?"

"'cause she said not to believe everything you say and remember that we are not to ever dress in girl's things."

The both laughed. "I see. Well, you can tell your mother not to worry. If someone is born with a desire to be like us, they will be and if not, then they won't."

"Maybe you could show us some of your act." Angelo said.

"Let's ask your mother first. If she says okay, then you can come over one day when we're rehearsing and watch."

Regardless of what mother might have thought about their lifestyle, we all got along fairly well and the guys from next door came over a number of times to share in small parties at our house. Mother always hovered very near.

None of us connected the attitudes and mannerisms of our neighbors with what our classmates called “queers.” We thought that queers were some kind of depraved monsters who tried to get young boys to do things with them. Our innocence was brought home one day at school, however.

Louie Salino caught me in the school yard. “Hey, Stacy, do you hang out with those queers who live next door to you? Since you have a girl’s name, I guess you like to be with them a lot.”

“You’re stupid, George. Pauli, Tina, Cheri, and the rest are nice guys. They sit with us when Mother works late.”

“I knew you were queer! I knew it all the time. You got a queer name and you hang out with queers. Just wait until I tell all the other guys.”

Charlene, one of my classmates, asked me, “Is that true? Do you and your brothers really go with those queers that live next to you?”

“They’re not queers.”

“Yes, they are. My dad says they dress up like women and wear makeup and all. He said that from a distance, you can’t tell if they are women or men. Only queers do stuff like that.”

“Well, they’re not queers. They just do that because it’s what they do for a living. They’re dancers and singers and actors.”

She tilted her head, put her hands on her hips, and looked at me. “Stacy, those are queers. You better look out they don’t make you one too.”

She walked away, but when she was about fifteen feet away, she stopped and looked back at me for a minute. She shook her head, turned around, and walked off. Could she be right? Were they really queer? If they were, what did that mean to me? Pauli, Lessa, Tina and the others were neighbors, babysitters, and friends. I didn't think that just because others called them names made them any different. No matter how I felt about them, it disturbed me that the kids in school thought I might be a queer just because I was friendly with Pauli and them. I didn't stop seeing them or talking to them, but I tried to make sure no one noticed when I was with them around the house and the neighborhood.

Splitting Up

The century-old decrepit half double-shotgun house on Dauphine Street, bordering the lower French Quarter, might have been mouse central, but it was a step up from one of our previous accommodations. That dump, no one would call it home, was shared with a half dozen paternal relatives. This included a fat, drunken, common-law something or other who glued himself to a decomposing easy chair in what passed for a living room, and used a .22 revolver to shoot at mice, crickets, lizards and other vermin that used the plank-over-dirt floor as a thoroughfare. This made for an unusual décor. The cracked wood floor and crumbling lathe and plaster walls were peppered with white plaster cones and small caliber bullet holes. The air in that place was pervaded by a raw musty smell, and occasionally the odor of dead and decomposing rodents who had died in the walls of the house. We were not welcome, but our presence was suffered because we were family, and Sicilians revere family, even when a part of that family was disliked or even hated.

There was no privacy. My brothers and I lived in constant fear that if we so much as breathed too much air, the wrath of God would descend upon us. As my paternal grandmother told us time and again, “Children are to be seen as little as possible, and never, ever, to be heard.”

My mother countered, “My kids walk around this place like ghosts, afraid to make a sound. This is no way for children to live.”

Aunt Tess said, “If you don’t like it here, you can go live somewhere else. We never wanted you here in the first place. The only reason you’re here at all is because you’re married to my brother.”

“If I had somewhere else to go, I’d be out of here in a New York minute.”

“I hope it’s soon. We don’t have enough space around here without you and your brats, much less with them.”

“The minute, the very minute I can get out of here we’ll be gone in a heartbeat. I never wanted to be here anymore than you wanted me.”

The situation was due to my father walking out and abandoning us, causing extreme financial distress for Mother, but it was a situation that could not long endure. One morning, my three brothers and I were called to a family conference. Mother told us, “Look guys, we’re going to have to live apart for a while. Stacy, you’re going to aunt Lorraine’s. Tony, you go with Mr. Colby, and Angelo goes with Little Grandma.”

“What about Sal?” I asked

“He’ll stay with me.”

This was unexpected, to say the least. I found myself unable to respond. Sal smiled but Angelo and Tony wore looks that must have mirrored my own. Confusion, consternation and shock crossed their features. I could readily identify with those emotions.

I finally said, “Why do we have to split up? We’ve been doing okay. I can help more with the others.”

Mother passed her hand over my hair. “It’s only for a little while. Just until I can get a better job and we can have our own place again.” Mother’s reassurance did little to alleviate the concern we all felt, but there was nothing we could do about it.

So we were farmed out to friends and relatives until my mother could find the means to bring us back together. I stayed with my aunt Lorraine, mother’s sister, and her six kids in what had once been a neighborhood of cotton warehouses that dated to before the Civil War. Although almost never used to store cotton anymore, the century-old whitewashed red brick warehouses

stood immediately across the dirt street. A forklift and several trucks operated by and in the warehouse. A housing project lay short block in the other direction. Rusting railroad tracks bisected the broken, potted and unpaved street and it was not uncommon to have several freight cars parked virtually in our front yard, if one could call the small patch of hard dirt below the steps a front yard. Railroad cars occupying two thirds of the street were no great inconvenience, either to the neighbors or to us. Cavernous pot holes and huge slabs of up-tilted blacktop and oyster shells made the street virtually unusable and, besides, there was only one automobile on the entire block. That was the taxi my uncle drove for the Yellow Cab Company. It was usually parked at the corner barroom, the first and last stop of my uncle's day, every day.

My cousins and I enjoyed a fringe benefit of the railroad's use of the tracks to park empty freight cars in front of the house. We explored the rail cars, scrounging little bits of leftover freight or packing material to use as toys.

My cousin, Sylvia Ann, was particularly adept at scrambling into the empty cars and finding treasures. We approached one with the doors partially open. "Come on, Syl, I'll give you a boost." I said, holding my cupped hands for her to use as a stirrup.

She climbed into the car while I huffed and puffed, pulling myself up to the floor level so I could lever myself inside the musty-smelling freight car. Shredded string-like packing material, called excelsior, littered the floor to a depth of six inches. On her knees, disdainful of splinters and hidden objects, Sylvia dived into the piles of excelsior with both hands, pushing the light material aside to examine what might lie underneath.

She grunted and heaved something up from a pile of packing material. "Wow, Stacy, look at this one."

“Hey, that’s a really nice one.” She held a large piece of a broken paraffin wax block in her hands. Broken off chunks of the large three-inch thick rectangles of wax were a favorite. The railroad cars frequently contained tons of the wax blocks. The hard wax was the fundamental ingredient for making all kinds of imaginative toys from simple wax balls, to sculptured monsters and doll houses.

That particular piece of wax was, over a period of time, converted into a number of things, including some candles, wax balls, sculpted figures and shapes made by pouring melted wax into cans, boxes and anything else we thought might make an interesting shape or object. We usually melted the wax in a can set over a small fire made of excelsior and wood chips. There was one time however, when we wanted to make a bunch of things together. I said to Sylvia, “I don’t think the can is large enough to melt all that wax at once and we don’t have anything else.”

She said, “I have an idea. We can use the kitchen stove and one of mother’s old pots that she doesn’t use anymore.”

“Maybe we should ask her.”

She shook her head. “No need to do that, the pot just sits there and never gets used. She’ll never know we took it.”

I was not sure about that, but in the face of her certainty, I went along with the plan. There were no cabinets in the kitchen. Pots were stored in the oven, the broiler section of the stove, and under the sink. A curtain arranged around the freestanding sink provided an enclosed space for underneath storage. We didn’t find the pot in the stove, so we tackled the pile of pots and pans stored under the sink. We dug around and pulled several frying pans and pots out to get to the one we wanted. Naturally, it was on the bottom of the pile.

We lit the stove, put the pot on the burner and stuffed several big chunks of paraffin into the pot. Sylvia got a large stirring spoon and handed it to me. “Here, you keep it stirred so it doesn’t glob up in the middle.”

“Okay, what are you going to do?”

“I’m going outside to get the boxes so we can pour it right away when it’s melted.”

We had never worked with this much wax before, and that proved to be a source of trouble. When I tried to pour the molten wax into the small boxes, it ran over onto the stove. The wax was so hot, it caused the glue holding the boxes together to melt and the hot stuff poured out the cracks underneath the boxes.

“Oh, oh.” I looked at all the paraffin solidifying on the table top.

“Oh, no! What are we going to do?”

I thought for a moment. It suddenly occurred to me that the wax on the table was not a problem. “It’s okay, once it gets hard, we can just scrape it off.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded, “Yes, I’m positive.”

It worked out just that way. Once it was cold and hard, the paraffin just peeled off the enameled tabletop without a problem. The pot was a different story. We tried to scrape it off and that didn’t work. There was still a lot of wax stuck to the bottom and walls of the pot.

I had another idea. “Let’s heat the wax again and just pour it out. That should work.”

I suppose in a perfect world that would have been a solution. But it was not to be. The wax stubbornly continued to coat the side and bottom of the pot. All I achieved was to make it a little thinner.

When my aunt came home and found out, she raised hell with us and forbade us to use anything in the kitchen without her consent. She did manage to get the wax out of the pot, somehow. So it was not a total loss. In further wax molding sessions, we stuck to the tried and proven method of cans and small fires.

Seven kids jammed into one bedroom of the pre-World War One frame house necessitated we make-do with whatever came to hand. I was thrilled when I able to cadge an old wood apple crate, partitioned in the center to form two compartments, from the grocer around the corner. Those empty crates were much prized by everyone in the neighborhood, and used as containers, furniture, planters for small gardens, and to make scooters made with scrap lumber and old skates.

I haunted Mr. Joe at the grocery store for nearly two weeks. “Mr. Joe, I could really use an apple crate.”

“Yeah? What would you do with it? Make a scooter?”

“No, Sir. I need to make a cabinet for my clothes.”

He looked at me for a moment and then asked, “You know that everyone in the neighborhood wants those crates. Why should I give it to you?”

I thought about that for a moment. “If you give me one, I’ll work for you for a week after school.”

“And just what do you think you could do around here? Besides, you’re too young to work. It’s not allowed.”

“I could help clean up and maybe carry some groceries for some of the ladies when they have a lot of bags.”

The next day when I went to the store to ask again, Mr. Joe took me into the rear storage room. He pointed to a brand new looking apple crate. “You can have that one, but I expect you to come over every evening for a week and help Little Joey carry out the garbage and sweep up the back sidewalk.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll be here.”

I carried the crate back to the house and Sylvia said, “Wow, you got one. I didn’t think you would ever get it. How did you do it?”

I set the crate down and put a hand on it. “I just offered to work for him after school for all of next week. I guess I made a good deal.”

Antonio, Sylvia’s brother said, “Man you really did. I wish I could get one like that. I been asking for a long time.”

I said, “Well, this is the only one he had, but if I see one around I’ll tell him you would like to have it.”

I carefully cleaned the crate out, used a small scrap of used sandpaper to smooth out splinters and rough spots, and brought it into the house. Stood on end with a strip of threadbare faded towel tacked across the front to provide a curtain in lieu of doors, it became a combination dresser and closet, containing everything I possessed. The upper compartment held my shirts and one spare pair of trousers. The bottom compartment was used for shoes, socks, and underwear. The top made a nice little table top for anything I might empty from my pockets at night. Sylvia made a cloth top for it from part of an old bed sheet.

We kids slept on two mattresses on the floor. That might seem cramped and unpleasant, however, I have to say that my cousins and I had a ball most nights. We could talk and giggle under the covers until the adults went to bed. That typically happened around midnight after the

non-stop card games ended. Played on the kitchen table, the games were always accompanied by beer and loud curses. The principal game was a local brand of rapid-fire Cajun madness pronounced Boo-ray, otherwise known as Pitty-Pat, and it was responsible for most of the loud noises coming from the kitchen. We could always tell when my uncle was losing. The air was filled with slurred exclamations such as, “Goddamn! Shit! How the hell did you get that?” And an occasional “If you weren’t my wife I’d punch you in the mouth.” We frequently heard my uncle yell out, “You guys must be cheating. I never win a pot. You’d think I’d win at least one by accident if nothing else.” The bedroom, and the entire house, smelled of stale cigarette smoke and beer all night.

Our makeshift sleeping arrangements had another useful function; the floor of the old shotgun house was the coolest place to be on hot summer nights since air conditioning wasn’t even a dream, and the old electric fan set in a kitchen window was both inadequate and unreliable. The houses had been designed long before electricity, to allow for cooling from natural air flow under the floors, through the attic, and doors and windows. We would leave the front and rear doors open, with just the screen door closed to keep out a few of the ever-present bugs and mosquitoes. This allowed a little breeze to flow through the house and made summer nights not only livable, but mostly pleasant.

Sylvia Ann and I were lying on a blanket just in front of the front door one night. A small breeze flowed through the house and was just cool enough for us to put a sheet over us for cover to keep warm. We were looking through the screen at the street and talking as we usually did every night until we fell asleep. The single street light on the block was located at the corner halfway down the block, so the light in the street outside was very dim. Lying there together, we could imagine all kinds of things out there.

Sylvia grabbed my arm and asked, “What’s that?”

“What’s what?”

“There” she pointed, “something is moving over there.”

A half moon provided just enough light to see a shape moving along the rail track. I stared at it for a moment. “I think it’s just one of the stray cats.”

“It’s too big to be a cat.”

“It just looks big because of the light. I’m sure it’s just a cat.”

She had her arm wrapped around mine and she was as close to me as she could get. “I’m scared. It doesn’t look like a cat. It looks like some kind of big animal.”

I laughed. “No, it isn’t a big animal. It’s okay.”

She hit me on the shoulder. “Don’t laugh at me. I’m scared of things like that.”

“I’m not laughing at you. You’re my favorite cousin.”

She looked at me and said, “You’re mine too. I hope we will always be together.”

I shook my head. “I guess someday Mother will come and get me to go back home with her.” “Maybe I can go too.”

“I don’t know, but we could ask Mother. She likes you a lot. It’s almost like you’re her daughter.”

“It would really be nice if we could stay together.”

“We’ll see.”

Of course, after a year or so, Mother did take me back to live with her and my brothers. I asked, “Mother, Sylvia was wondering if she could come with me and stay with us for a while?”

Mother took Sylvia's hand and said, "You know I think that would be really nice, but it isn't possible right now. Maybe a little later when we are settled better, you can come and spend the summer with us."

Sylvia looked at the floor. "Okay, but I would really love to stay with you."

"I'd love that too, but it just isn't possible right now."

I felt sad about leaving Sylvia, but I was happy to be going home again.

Midnight Moves

“Get up and get dressed. We’re leaving.”

Awakened from a sound sleep, I asked, “What time is it? I’m tired. Do we have to get up right now?”

“Yes, hurry and get dressed. We have to go.”

A couple of guys I didn’t know, mother said they were friends from the diner where she worked part-time, were there to help. “Hey guys,” they said to us, “grab some of the light stuff and carry it out to the car, okay?”

Sal was still asleep, so one of the men carried him out to the car and put him on the back seat. Mother wrapped a small blanket around him. Tony, Angelo and I pitched in and carried lamps, small boxes, loose clothing and other odds and ends out to two cars and a small truck parked on the sidewalk outside the front door. We were packed and out in less than two hours. The house on Dauphine Street, which I called mouse central, was a great improvement over most of what had gone before, but I was not unhappy to leave it when we made a midnight move. It was just one more in a series of midnight moves.

Those moves prevented landlords from seizing our meager furniture to satisfy overdue rent payments, but they were a bit rough on sleep.

Our next abode was a house on Frenchman Street, less than a mile away, where we again lived with L’il grandma. In terms of discipline, living with my grandparents was like walking a spike-lined narrow tunnel. As long as we stayed right down the middle, things were fine, but the slightest deviation from that rigid straight line could bring heavy retribution.

One thing about our return was greeted by all of us with enthusiasm. Every Sunday, and most weekday afternoons, we again had the treat originated years before; hot sweet tea and buttered fresh French bread. When the bread came out of the oven, the house would fill with aromas that sent hunger pains running through my stomach.

One summer Sunday afternoon, just after my grandmother took the fresh baked bread out of the oven, I was sitting on the floor of my bedroom with my back to the wall reading a book, as usual. I heard my grandmother's voice in the kitchen. "What are you doing in that bread? That's for dinner tonight. Get out of there." Tony had snatched a small piece of French bread and came running into the room. He skidded around the bed, flopped on the floor and scooted underneath. Grandmother, hot on his heels with a stick in her hand, tried to reach down and get to him under the bed but was unsuccessful. I looked up from my book. "What are you looking at?" She demanded, furious!

"Nothing, I'm just reading."

She said, "Don't smart-mouth me," and then whacked me across the back with the stick. Even if innocent as an angel, it was dangerous to be around my grandmother when she was on a rampage. If she was unable to get who she was after, the nearest brother would do.

Tony came out from under the bed and snickered. "Ha, ha, she got you instead of me."

I was too shocked to answer him right away. A sudden rage hit me. I jumped up and grabbed him. "I got hit because you did something."

"That's too bad. I got hit for you before." He took a swing at me, I ducked.

He held me in a vice grip until I wriggled out. We wrestled on the floor until we heard the sound of heels hitting the hardwood floor. Grandma was coming. We got up and scampered out the door and into the woodshed in the back yard.

Tony said, “Wow that was a close one.”

We both laughed. “Why do you always get into stuff?”

Tony shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess things just happen. I don’t do anywhere near what Sal does. He’s always getting us into trouble.

He was right. Sal seemed to live and breathe trouble. He was always into something or other. The down side of that was that we frequently all suffered for his transgressions. The week before, we had been forbidden to go to the movies because Sal spilled a bowl of oatmeal on the floor.

Tony asked, “Do you think grandma hates us?”

I shook my head. “No. I think she just gets upset sometimes. Mother says she really loves us.”

Tony looked at me a moment as if deciding whether or not to believe me; then he said, “Boy, I hope she doesn’t get to loving us any more than she already does.”

We stayed in the Frenchman Street house nearly two years, until my mother reconciled with my long-absent father who had apparently been living on and off with his first wife and son. A house painter by trade, he had a small business that may or may not have been successful. It was a matter of pure speculation since we saw neither him nor his paycheck during the years he was gone and we didn’t know or care where he was.

He one day drove around a corner and met a larger truck going the other way. Requiring extended bed rest and care for massive injuries sustained in the wreck, he returned to my mother after his first wife told him she wasn’t about to take care of a semi-invalid. For whatever reason,

Mother took him in and over a period of a year or so, supported him and nursed him back to health.

My brothers and I viewed his return with high alarm. Tony asked me, “Do you think he’ll stay?”

Angelo was more practical, he asked, “Is he going to die?”

“I don’t know if he is going to stay or not. Mom says he is, at least until he gets better.”

Sal just looked at us with a beginning of tears in his eyes. Angelo said, “I don’t think I want him to stay. He’s going to be trouble.”

I agreed.

I remembered the time I had lived with my father and his first wife for a few months. Based on that experience, I felt that, in my case at least, Angelo’s concern would turn out to be justified. The few months I lived with his other family stuck in memory like it was part of me.

My father’s family and his first wife in particular, always referred to me as “the little bastard.” “Go tell the little bastard to come in and eat.” Or sometimes, “Look you little bastard, you wait out there until your brother is done, then you can come in.” The brother she referred to was her son, my half-brother Guglielmo, Junior.

I tried my best to limit my exposure to anyone in that house, but especially to my half-brother. I was playing in the side alley one day and spied something white under the house, which like most in the city, was set on pillars of concrete blocks. I crawled under the house and found a small toy stove. Apparently it had belonged to one of the neighborhood girls and had somehow made its way under the house. I spent most of the afternoon cleaning it up and setting it up to play with. Junior, who was two years older than me, saw me playing with the toy and screamed and cried. His mother came out of the house and asked, “What’s going on here?”

“He’s got my stove, and won’t give it back.”

I said, “It isn’t his. I found it under the house.”

“If you found it under my house, then it belongs to this family and not to you. Give it to Junior.”

“No. It isn’t his. I found it.”

She reached over and grabbed the stove, wrenched it out of my hands, and handed it to Junior. He took the toy and stuck his tongue out at me. Even though I was only four years old, and he was two years older, I couldn’t take that so I lunged at him. He backed away, causing me to miss. His mother grabbed me by the collar and slapped me in the face.

“All right, that’s it. You are punished for the rest of the week. Go to your room and go to bed, right now.”

I glared at Junior. “I’ll get you for this. You just wait and see.”

She said, “Wait until your father gets home. I’m going to tell him what a spoiled brat you are.”

“He isn’t my father.”

She slapped me across the mouth again and it was all I could do to not cry, but I wasn’t about to let them see me do so. Thankfully, a month or so after that episode, I was back with Mother again.

The house on Frenchman street had a side yard and a shed in the rear filled with older furniture and bric-a-brac collected over a period of years. It was a modified version of a shotgun house in that the front room and the next two bedrooms were arranged serially. Just behind them, what passed for a family room and a large hall comprised the middle of the house with the

bathroom behind the front bedrooms and just before the family room. A sizeable side porch was arranged just outside the center hall.

A big country kitchen was next in line with a small bedroom behind that. Little Grandmother slept in the front room. Mother had the next room, we kids had the room just before the family room and Big Grandma slept in the rear room.

It was about this time that my father, mostly recovered from his injuries, returned to his former ways. He was never able to get along with my grandmothers. They always saw right through his lies and excuses. He would disappear for a couple of days and then come back, usually smelling of booze and/or strange perfume, and raise hell with my mother. On those occasions we were sent into the bedroom, or outside when weather permitted no matter what time of the day or night it was. Sobs and tears would often follow loud voices and threats, clearly heard through thin walls. "Goddamnit, no woman is going to tell me what to do. Where I go and what I do is my business."

"As long as you are living in my house, you will respect my daughter."

"Your daughter is just like you, a slut and a whore."

My grandmother always waded in on my mother's side. She grabbed a walking cane and brandished it at my father. "Get out of my house right now, before I call the police and send you back to jail where you belong."

"This is none of your business. She's my wife and I'll do what I want. You stick your nose in my business and you'll get hurt."

Mother said, "Stay out of it, Mama. I'll handle this."

"Handle nothing, I'm calling the police."

He slammed out of the house, and we did not see him again for nearly a week. Whenever I asked, Mother would explain to me that this behavior had to do with his Sicilian background, and was simply to be expected. Many of our Italian relatives appeared to have some implicit understanding that it was the way of things for a Sicilian husband to act as my father did. That never washed with me. I couldn't stand his abuse of my mother and of us, and I could never reconcile his actions and words to my perception of what a husband and father should be. We kids had an opportunity to expand our range of experience in this neighborhood, which was predominantly white. It seemed kind of strange to have so many white kids living around us. Before, the only time we had a chance to be with white kids our age was in school.

There was a Golden Gloves boxing club situated not far from the house. Tony decided that he wanted to be a boxer, and somehow talked Mother in to buying two pair of boxing gloves for kids. Regardless of the expense, Mother somehow found a way to get them. He and I would don shorts, put on the gloves, spread a blanket on the ground to serve as a ring, and proceed to punch at each other like a pair of runaway windmills. The gloves were very large and almost pillow-like, so it was not likely that we would hurt each other. Even so, a good punch could sting.

Tony caught me a good one on the nose, and I retaliated by hitting him with the side of the glove, where it was thin. I knew that would hurt. Tony took the glove off his right hand and started flailing at me. I was holding my gloved hands across my face, and keeping him off me as best I could. He swung and missed and I pushed him. He tripped and fell down hard on his butt. He sat there for a minute and then started crying. Mother came running out of the house. She took one look at the situation and immediately began to chew me out for taking advantage of my

younger brother. “All right, give me those gloves. Stacy, go to your room. Tony, come with me and let’s see what’s hurt.”

For my part, I was accused without cause and decided there just isn’t any justice in the world, or at least, not at our house, and definitely not for me. That was the end of boxing, although Tony went to the Golden Gloves club and talked one of the trainers into giving him lessons. However, shortly after we moved again and that spelled the end of Tony’s aspirations to become a heavyweight boxing champion.

Although not readily apparent to my brothers or me, we were moving up in the world. Together once more as a family, even if that did include my father, we relocated to what passed for an up-scale government housing project called the Mirabeau. It was still a housing project for poverty cases, but it was nicer than the ones downtown, and it certainly had a much better class of tenants than those found in the central city. No doubt it was the result of having to pay rent in the amount of sixteen dollars a month for a three-bedroom apartment. That was a small fortune to families in our income bracket. The Mirabeau was located near Lake Pontchartrain, not far from the now defunct New Orleans Naval Air Station.

It was in the same general area where we had lived years earlier. Located immediately behind the Naval Air Station, the earlier house was a World War II era duplex built to provide low-rent housing for servicemen and their families assigned to the Naval Air Station, or any of the several other military facilities in the area. During the war, mother worked in defense plants. First building PBY flying boats for Consolidated Vultee’s aircraft manufacturing plant on the lakefront, then helping to build a C-47 cargo plane for the Higgins company, famed for its landing craft and PT-boats, such as the PT-109 of John F. Kennedy fame.

During those war years, mother would leave the house every day at dawn or a little after, and get home near or after dark. We would get to school on our own, and wait for her at home each evening. She worked long hours and I guess put in a bunch of overtime too, but she was never too tired or too late to fix dinner and see to our school needs.

Mother was, for the most part, self-educated in that she didn't have an opportunity to finish high school or go to college. Yet, she always helped us with our assignments. One evening, Tony was sitting on the couch while I was reading a book. Mother came in from work and asked, "Have you all done your homework?"

"Sure mom, long ago." I answered.

Tony said, "No, I don't understand that stupid assignment and I don't think I need it anyway."

Mother must have been tired as it was already close to dark, but she said, "All right get your books and I'll give you a hand with it."

For the next hour and a half or so she went over every one of his assignments until she was sure he understood the work for each subject.

I had, on several occasions, attempted to help Tony, but he always ran out of patience and would just get up and leave. Mom was the only person he would sit still for to learn his lessons.

Living so close to the Naval Air Station was a wonderful experience for me. Each day I would walk the few blocks from our apartment to the Naval Air Station's rear fence to spend as much time as possible with my face pressed against the page link wire. Positioned directly in the flight path at the end of the north-south runway, I could watch the gull winged F4U Corsair fighters and the large single-engine TBF Avenger torpedo-bombers taking off and landing until it got too dark to see. Actually, I would have stayed long after dark, if only I could have gotten

Mother to let me. The sound of the powerful engines throbbed in my chest, turbulent air from their wings washed over me, I could smell the hot exhaust of the massive 2,200 horsepower radial engines as the planes passed mere feet over my head. The experience sent a thrill racing through me that has lived with me throughout my life.

By the time we moved into the Mirabeau, the war had been over for a few years, but the Naval Air Station was still operating. I was eleven years old, and old enough to get a paper route. In order to be around the planes, I selected the route that included the Naval Air Station, even though it was the longest, least desirable, and earned the smallest profit of any route in the district. My last stop every evening would be the NAS. I could go into the officer's lounge, talk to the pilots and watch them playing pool. They tolerated my presence and some of them actually spoke to me, almost as if I belonged. Although this schedule assured I got home well past dark every evening, it was well worth it in my view.

Although I didn't think it could get much better, one Saturday afternoon became a day that would live in my memory evermore. I finished my route early and was talking to a couple of the pilots in the recreation room. One of them was always friendly to me and took my questions about flying seriously and did his best to answer me in terms I could understand. He was Lieutenant Junior Grade Tom Grady. On this Saturday I summoned all my courage and asked, "Lt. Grady, I'm not allowed on the flight line without an escort. Would you take me? I'd really love to see some of the planes close up."

I held my breath waiting for his answer. My heart nearly stopped when he frowned, but then he smiled and said, "Sure, why not?" and took me out to the line where two squadrons of planes were parked. He lifted me up on the wing of a Corsair and slid the canopy back. I was actually looking into the cockpit! I was able to reach in and touch the leather backrest and some

of the controls. I inhaled an odor that was a combination of hot oil, hydraulic fluid, gasoline, leather and metal. It smelled as sweet to me as expensive perfume.

“Go on, step into the cockpit.”

I stared at him to make sure he wasn't just ribbing me. He smiled and said, “Go on just climb in.”

I stepped over the side of the plane and put one foot on the leather seat. Then I put my other foot in and slid down until I was sitting on the seat. My feet barely touched the rudder pedals, and I could see only a small line over the instrument panel, but it was a realization of my most fantastic dream. I sat in that plane for half an hour touching the controls, levers, and switches I knew only from books, inhaling the odors and asking a thousand questions about every switch, lever and control. One hand on the control stick, and the other on the throttle, I was transported to a world of imagination. I could almost feel the air rushing past the open cockpit and the engine throbbing through my entire being. I lived in a simultaneous world of reality and fantasy. When I finally, reluctantly, climbed out of that cockpit and left the base that afternoon, I knew I was hooked for life.

Back in the Bachelor Officer's Quarters lounge, Lt. Grady went into his room and came back with a large sheet of paper. It was a photo print of the cockpit of an F4U Corsair. He handed it to me.

“For me? I can keep it.”

He rubbed my head. “Sure, I can always get another one. You can take this one home with you.”

I folded it and put it very carefully in my newspaper tote bag and patted the sides to make sure it was snugly secure. That poster was to live on the wall of my room until I returned from

the service and got married years later. It wasn't until I was halfway home that I realized I had forgotten to say thanks for Lt. Grady's wonderful gift. A month or so after that, it nearly broke my heart to learn that we would be leaving the lakeside house.

We didn't understand that the next move would be our last. Somehow, Mother had, with the help of our great-uncle's veteran's benefit, arranged to buy a house. We would have a home of our own.

Mother tried to explain it to us. "It's going to be really nice; we won't have to move anymore. We'll have our own home and will stay there from now on. You'll go to the same schools all the time and have friends."

Angelo asked, "How will we get to school?"

"You, Tony, and Sal will take a school bus and Stacy will ride the city bus and go to high school in the city, just like he did before."

Tony said, "I'll be in high school in another year."

"Yes, and then you can go with Stacy."

I was accustomed to taking the New Orleans Transit bus to school, and so the thought of taking another one didn't matter. I was to find out that in St. Bernard Parish, where the new house was located, taking a bus was not such a simple thing. The bus was scheduled to pass by every second hour, but it rarely kept to that schedule and sometimes missed a trip completely, leaving people standing and waiting for the bus for two hours or more.

The bus did not run on Sunday at all, and if we were to go to church with Grandma, which Mother liked to do as much as possible, it meant Mother talking my father into driving us, or walking the three miles to the Orleans Parish line by Jackson Barracks and taking the St. Claude bus to the Frenchman Street house. Unlike our previous neighborhoods in the city, there

were no small shops and local stores nearby. We had to drive or take a bus to go anywhere or do anything.

One thing was incomprehensible to us, no matter how Mother explained it, the concept of staying in one place, living in the same house all the time, and not moving was just too strange for us to absorb, but we were to learn that it marked a change in everything.

Changes

Outside of the immediate family, my life was fairly miserable on a day-to-day basis. I was cursed with somewhat higher than average intelligence and did well in school. Well, at least I made good grades and was skipped two levels in elementary school. That, combined with a one-year early start, meant I was always the youngest kid in my class and usually the smallest since every other boy in my class was three to four years older. Being a “brain,” a “teacher’s pet” and not very physical, made me the favored target of every bully in the school. Even the kids the bullies usually picked on attacked me because I was more of a nothing than they. It didn’t help matters that my name was Stacy, or that my mother was a devoutly non-violent person who admonished me to not fight on pain of punishment when I got home. The natural result was I had to run and hide or get hell kicked out of me nearly every day.

Two things that changed everything happened at this time in my life. When I was nine years old, I discovered the library. It became a haven, a secure and snug world where I could be anything, go anywhere, or be anyone my imagination could dream up.

“Stacy, don’t you think it would be nicer to play outside with your friends? It’s a beautiful summer day outside.”

“I know, Miss Betty, but I like it here. I have more fun here than I do out there.”

Betty was a junior librarian. She was probably in her early twenties, had blue eyes, wore small square glasses, and kept her hair tied up in a bun. I don’t imagine she would be considered a striking beauty by most standards, but she became my personal angel.

Thanks to her, and my willingness to help around the library, I was able to have unlimited access to everything, including the restricted reference shelves. I became a fixture throughout the summer, and the librarians treated me almost as one of them. I roamed worlds I had never known

existed. I read fiction, non-fiction, stories about pirates and space travel, biology and algebra, physics and medicine. However, it was the books about travel and adventure that grabbed my interest the most. Through those books, I was able to journey around the world, other worlds, and the universe without leaving the air conditioned comfort of the library.

I spent my days swept away from my ordinary miserable world to places and times that ignited a yearning and desire in me. I read *God is My Co-pilot*, by Robert Lee Scott, Jr., an Army Air Force pilot who flew with Claire Chennault's Flying Tigers in China and Burma. I lived in the cockpit of his P-40 Warhawk, and felt the adrenaline rushing through my veins as I read his exploits and followed him through his combat career in China.

I read every book about flying I could find, from the early flights of the Wright brothers to the latest issues of magazines about airplanes and flight. Ever since my experience at the Naval Air Station a couple of years before, I knew that whatever it took, I would find a way to fly. Just after my thirteenth birthday, I found a way to at least be closer to the aircraft and pilots I admired.

About this same time, my mother bought me a small, used portable typewriter for my thirteenth birthday. In the library, I discovered the world of fiction and learned some of the fundamental tenets of the craft at a time when I had a machine with which I could indulge a new-born desire and drive to write. I immediately set out to teach myself to type and create the Great American Novel.

The library became my home away from home after school. Nearly every day of the summer, except for trumpet lessons and Sunday, I was there when the doors opened at nine in the morning and left when they closed at nine in the evening. I read with a voracious appetite. I read everything from Mark Twain and Uncle Remus, Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, to

Shakespeare and Voltaire. Then I discovered Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke, along with others like Ray Bradbury and Robert Heinlein. I lived in a world of literature, science, science fiction and fantasy. At night I wrote. I began typing my first full manuscript. It was a labor that would last three years, and fill more than four hundred single-spaced pages. I chose a tale of post-apocalyptic America, many years before such stories were popular, or even written. This world of my imagination and creation became far preferable to the one I lived in and shared with real people. The characters I created became more familiar and felt more like family to me than did my real family. Sometimes I would drift in imagination so deeply, that I could not discern where the imaginary world ended and the real world began.

The early nineteen-fifties witnessed a time of great change in the world at large. Exciting things were happening every day, and the news was full of new wonders. We got a television receiver, one of the first in the neighborhood. Now I had a rival to my books and the library. I would rush home from school or my three times a week music lessons so as not to miss anything on the television.

I could easily walk from the Frenchman street house to the library. Mother asked, “Are you boys finished with your homework?”

“Yes ma’am, almost. I’m helping Tony with his history lesson, and Angelo is helping Sal with his arithmetic.”

“Well, hurry up. Dinner is almost ready.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Tony said, “How much more of this stuff do I have to learn? What good is it anyway? I don’t see where learning history is going to help me, I mean, the only people I know who even care about it is teachers.”

“Maybe you’ll become a teacher,” I said.

That brought a laugh from Angelo. Tony said, “Yeah, and people will go to the moon and Mars.”

“One day people will walk on the moon, and maybe travel to Mars and the other planets too.”

“You read too much of that science fiction stuff.” Angelo said. “No one is going to the moon.”

“We’re making progress with high altitude rockets,” I returned.

Tony snickered, “Yeah, when they don’t blow up.”

He had a point, but my faith in the future of rocketry was undiminished. I had recently joined the British Interplanetary Society and The American Rocket Society, as a junior member as I was only thirteen, and read everything they wrote with pleasure and greed rivaling that of an anticipated banana split.

Unlike a few years before, where mealtimes were leisurely and we could talk to each other, we always hurried through meals and homework to sit in a darkened room with mother, grandmother, and father to stare at magical images cavorting on a ten-inch black and white screen. Like most of America at the time, pictures of dancing cigarette packs, Howdy Doody, and Captain Video and the Space Rangers mesmerized us. Edward R. Murrow would intone somber news of the war in Korea each evening to be followed by The Original Amateur Hour or The Milton Berle show.

Great things were happening all around me, but my immediate world stayed much the same. The Jesuits who ran the high school I attended had little sense of humor and no tolerance whatsoever for an underage whiz kid who was also the greatest smart-ass in the school. Admitted

to the prestigious and highly rated school by dint of my mother's persuasive powers and a partial scholarship gained by achieving the second highest score ever recorded on their competitive admittance exam, I was slated for what was euphemistically called the academic track. This translated into six periods of class every day instead of the normal five, all of which were honors level which meant I had more assignments than regular students, and was held to a higher standard of performance. For instance, where the other students took either English or English Literature, I had both plus Latin and French to accompany Trigonometry, Geometry and Algebra. Additionally, there were the usual courses in Sociology, Geography, History, Religion, and Music. One might imagine that to be a full plate, but I also managed to find time for band, writing, and even went out for track one year where I threw the javelin for a high school record. That was a one-time fluke, since never before, nor ever after, did I throw anywhere near that distance. I also had the distinction of being the slowest runner on the team, so my sojourn into high school athletics was aborted after that one semester.

Catholic high school under the Jesuits guaranteed several things: an excellent education for those who could handle it, a highly competitive sports program, cultural enlightenment, and a lot of after-school instruction in boxing for violations of school rules. I could have become a middleweight contender with all the extra lessons I accrued.

It was simply impossible for me to pass up an opportunity to slip in some kind of smart-ass remark, or pull some kind of zany prank, whenever an opportunity arose. Brother Adolfo, the school principal, was my homeroom teacher, my teacher for ancient history, and the boxing team coach.

I was reading a passage out loud in class relating the modern-day lighting of the Olympic competition flame as a descendant of rituals in ancient Greece. When I reached a paragraph that

described the runner actually lighting the torch, I paused. The passage read: “The runner thrust the torch into the brazier.” Brother Adolfo looked up in surprise, then examined the passage and warned me, “Stacy, don’t even think about it. I’ll have you in extra hours for a month.”

I smiled and continued to read, “The runner thrust his torch into the brassiere.”

The whole class broke into laughter. Brother Adolfo literally threw the book at me from half way across the room, barely missing my head, and made good on his promise of after hours’ instruction. My jaw was sore for a month after, but it was worth it.

On another occasion, someone planted a homemade stink bomb in the air conditioning duct. A small roll of celluloid film was set into the metal duct and a candle was placed in the middle of the film and lighted. When the fire hit the film it burned almost explosively, emitting an incredibly pungent odor that rapidly spread throughout the school, thanks to the large air conditioning fan. The entire building had to be evacuated for several hours.

The principal and the prefect of discipline didn’t even bother to look for anyone else. I was called into the principal’s office.

“Well, Mr. Garavolia, let’s have it.”

I looked at the principal with what I hoped was an innocent look and asked, “Have what, sir?”

“Don’t bother denying it. We know you put that stink bomb in the air conditioner.”

“Why do you think I did it?”

The prefect answered. “You’re about the only one smart enough to figure that one out, and you’re the only one dumb enough to try something like that.”

I remained silent. My innocent face did not save me. I was admonished and given another month of extra instruction. I felt that it was worth it, too.

In other areas, things were going a little better. The band director, Brother Michael, asked me to stay after practice one Tuesday afternoon. When all the others had left the band room, he called me to his desk.

“You have been doing very well lately, and your playing has improved quite a bit since last semester.”

“Mother found a new teacher and he has helped me a lot, especially with classical music things.”

“As I said, the improvement shows and that’s why I am promoting you to first chair in the trumpet section.”

“First chair? What about Bob? He’s been first chair for three years.”

Brother Michael nodded. “Yes, but this is his last semester and I have other things for him to do to help with the band. He will be my assistant for orchestra.”

“Okay. Gee, thanks, I never expected this.”

“You earned it, but remember, you will have more responsibility and you’ll help your section in practice and tutor them with their playing.”

“Yes, sir.”

“It also means no more messing around and no more pranks. You have to set an example for others. You need to be a leader.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll do my best.”

“I know you will. That’s all for now.”

I left the band room feeling as though I had just won something grand and sweet. I had not even considered that I might one day be first chair. I knew that I played well, but I didn’t

imagine myself as a leader of anything, particularly not part of the band. I wondered how the other guys would take the news. It didn't take long to find out.

“Hey, Stacy, I hear you got first chair. Is that true?”

“Yeah, Brother Michael told me yesterday.”

Billy looked at me as though he was appraising a piece of fruit suspected to be rotting.

“So, you got any new things you want to put in the band?”

“No, I'm just going to follow whatever Brother Michael wants me to do to help with the band and my section.”

“A lot of the guys aren't going to like it. Everybody likes Bob.”

“How about you Billy? Do you like it or not?”

He shrugged. “I don't know. You play pretty good, so I guess I'll wait and see.”

The next band practice was the following afternoon, Thursday. When I came into the room, most of the guys were already there. I thought I was a few minutes early, but they had gotten there before me. Bob gestured me to the first chair. When I got there he stuck out his hand. “Congratulations, I'm sure you'll do a great job.”

I took his hand and smiled. “Thanks, Bob. I'll do my best.”

A few of the guys clapped their hands but most simply looked at me. Brother Michael came in and looked around. “Well, what's the occasion? The last time so many of you were early was when we were to march in the Rex parade last year.”

He looked around, but no one said anything. He went to the rostrum and rapped on the music stand with his baton. “All right, tune up and let's get started.”

The guys in the trumpet section looked at me. I picked up my horn and listened to the piano note Brother Michael was playing and tuned my trumpet to match it. Then the other guys

tuned their horns to mine. Once we started to play, I forgot all about first chair and the others and played as perfectly as I could.

Within a few days, everything fell into place and I was accepted in my new position, and began to be comfortable in a leadership role for the first time although, in a foretaste of the future, I was never accepted by all.

Girls and Other Insanities

This was a point in my life too, when girls became objects of interest other than simply something to be avoided. There were two girls in particular. One was a slightly overweight girl next door who suffered a limp from a bout with polio when she was an infant. Lilly was the older of two sisters. Lilly and her younger sister, Melissa, who was much the prettier of the two, liked to hang around with Tony and me. One night I was donning my band uniform to go to a football game when Mother called me. Lilly, her mother and my mother were in the living room. Lilly was dressed as if going on a date and her mother seemed angry. I stared at the assemblage with a degree of puzzlement.

Mother asked me, “Stacy, did you tell Lilly that you would take her to the game tonight?”

I was astonished. This was all news to me. I didn’t date, and it was strictly forbidden for band members to take a date to games where we played. Besides, if I were to ask anyone, it would be Melissa, not Lilly. “No, of course not. You know band members aren’t allowed to take girls with the band.”

“That’s what I just explained to Lilly and her mother.”

Mother looked at Lilly who sat on our couch with tears streaming down her cheeks. Lilly’s mother, who was obviously mad as hell, consoled her daughter and just glared at me. I stood in total confusion, feeling like a fool. Mother said, “You must have somehow led her to believe you wanted her to go with you, so you will take Lilly to the game, and take her for sodas or shakes afterwards.”

“Mother, I can’t take a girl to the game. Brother Michael will roast me.”

“You heard me, the game and then sodas or shakes after.” She handed me a five dollar bill.

I was trapped. I knew I hadn't said anything to lead Lilly to believe we were going out together, but there it was, and I was stuck with it. Lilly's tears disappeared, and a smile that the Cheshire cat would envy spread across her face. We took the bus across town to the City Park stadium where the game was scheduled. Lilly was all smiles and chattered in a non-stop stream. I sat quietly and said almost nothing. I dreaded facing Brother Michael when we arrived. Leaving the bus we had to walk a little over two blocks to the stadium. Lilly grabbed my hand and held on. When we approached the area where the band was assembling, some of the guys whistled and let out cat-calls when they saw Lilly. Brother Michael glared at me and crooked his hand, summoning me to where he was standing.

"Would you like to explain yourself, Mr. Garavolia?"

"I had no choice. My mother made me bring her."

"You had no choice. That's it? That's your excuse?"

I put my head down. "Yes, Sir."

"She is not to sit in the band section."

"No, Sir."

"Take her in and get her seated, then return here. We will discuss this further on Monday."

I sighed, "Yes, Sir."

Lilly sat alongside the band area, about five seats away from where I was, waving and calling to me incessantly. The drum major glared at me. The guys sitting near me all tittered, laughed and taunted me. Brother Michael, the band director frowned and had his own opinion of all this. In any case, he made his feelings eminently clear to me the next school day. He awarded me ten hours of "extra instruction" for breaking the rules by bringing a girl to the game. I had

just received my first, but certainly not the last lesson in feminine wiles. I had a talk with Lilly afterwards.

“You know I didn’t promise to take you to the game. Why did you say I did?”

“I just wanted to go out with you. I didn’t think you would ever ask me, so I made it up. Wasn’t it fun having a burger and shake? Didn’t you have a good time with me?”

“Oh yeah, a great time. I have detention for a month, Brother Michael is mad at me, I am a bigger joke than ever with the guys, and even Mother thinks I lied about taking you to the game. Sure, a really good time, Lilly.”

“I’m sorry you got in trouble, but I’m not sorry about making you take me out.”

I had no answer for that. Lilly and her sister continued to be friends, but I kept a distance between me and Lilly from that time on.

The other girl lived at the end of the projects toward the lake, about a block from our unit. She was a slender blonde named Leslie. Totally obsessed with dancing, she had a particular attraction to ballet. By the time she was thirteen, her life was already dedicated to ballet. She explained this to me in great detail when I talked to her about going together. “Oh God, Stacy. Look, I like you a lot and we really have fun together. I love being with you, but I can’t have a regular boyfriend and concentrate on dancing too. I’m going to be a principal dancer. I can’t do that and have time for a boyfriend too.”

“I don’t see why just because you want to dance, that means you can’t go out with me, I mean, I do a lot of things but I still can have time to be with you.”

“It isn’t the same thing. Dancing requires a lot of concentration and I just can’t have anything interfere with that.”

“Well, can’t we at least go out now and then?”

“I think it would be better if we didn’t.”

Later that evening, Mother noticed something was bothering me. She asked, “What’s the matter? You look like you just lost your only friend.”

“It’s Leslie. She says she can’t go with me because it would interfere with her dancing. It’s bad enough to lose a girl to another guy, but to lose one because she would rather dance? I just don’t get it.”

“It seems to me that if she thinks more of dancing than she does of you, then there’s nothing there for you to lose.”

Mother’s philosophy aside, I learned another lesson and endured my first heartache. I discovered that there are some things in life more important than hormones, even for a teenage girl.

Airplanes and Flying

A year later, I dropped out of the Catholic high school and enrolled in a trade school that offered an aviation department where I could get a high school diploma and would be able to work on real aircraft ranging from little Piper Cubs to WWII fighters, cargo planes, and a huge PBY flying boat like the kind my mother had built during the war. It was an opportunity to learn everything there was to know about aircraft and advance my chances of going to flight school. By turning my back on the high school, I also gave up a guaranteed appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis. Looking back, that was probably a good decision. I almost certainly would never have survived the hazing, harassment and sheer idiocy of the first year at the Academy. However, working on aircraft did not mean I gave up my desire and goal of flying them. I would simply find another way, and in fact, I did. Shortly after my first semester there, I began to fly while at the trade school.

It might be more accurate to say that my flying career actually began a few years earlier when we lived in the house on the abandoned school grounds with my grandmothers. I found a book at the library that described the physics of flight, including wing design. Making copious notes, I designed a pair of wings that I felt sure I could build from materials I had access to. One fence of the demolished school had a fairly large stand of tall bamboo. Being hollow, bamboo is light and very strong; excellent wing spar material. So I set about building my wings. Using strong twine to give the wing formers the necessary curved shape, I attached them to the twin main spars by winding strong twine around them, and then covered the entire wing with material from old bed sheets. I talked my grandmother into sewing the seams I needed. She was always happy to go along with my projects, because she felt that curiosity fostered learning. She never

questioned why I might need two six-foot pillow covers, which is what the wing covers resembled.

I assembled the wings and stretched the covers as tight as I could get them. Real fabric wings were coated with multiple coats of lacquer to make them stiff. I didn't have access to lacquer, so I used a can of old enamel paint I found in the woodshed. When painted the wings looked stiff, but, as I was soon to find out, looking stiff did not equate to being stiff.

Finally, with the wings finished, I had only to wait for the right wind conditions. I would haul the two six-foot sections up to the roof of the chicken coop, join them together there with four bolts, and rig the harness that would attach the wings to my shoulders.

At last the day arrived. The wind was blowing at about ten to fifteen knots directly into the chicken coop; perfect. I got Tony to help me haul the awkward wing sections up to the roof.

Tony said, "I don't know about this. I think you're going to break your neck and Mom will be mad as hell at me for helping you."

"I'm not going to get hurt. It's only a seven foot drop. We've jumped off the roof before and we didn't get hurt."

"Yeah, but we didn't have all that stuff on our backs."

"I'm not going to get hurt. I know what I'm doing."

"You always say that, and things always go wrong."

"Nothing's going to go wrong. I've got this all figured out."

"Yeah, right."

I grabbed the wing section Tony was handing up. "Come on up here and help me get this stuff on."

Tony climbed up to the roof. The eight foot corrugated steel panels bowed under our combined weight, but we knew from past experience that they would hold. While we were bolting the wings together and attaching the harness, Tony asked, “Suppose it doesn’t work? What then?”

“It will work, but if it doesn’t, then I’ll know what to do to make it work the next time.”

“If you don’t break your neck.”

I squatted down and Tony lifted the wings up so that I could get into the harness. I tied the straps and pulled them as tight as I could get them. Slipping both arms through a pair of loops, I reached out and grabbed onto two rope grips spaced half way out on the wings under surface. I was ready.

I moved to the edge of the roof. The wind was exerting a fairly strong force on the wings and it was difficult to keep facing into the wind as the wings, catching the wind, wanted to turn and twist my body.

“I’m ready.” I told Tony.

“I still don’t think this is a good idea.”

Feeling for just the right gust of wind, I waited for a moment and then jumped off the roof. The wings worked perfectly. I sailed out over the yard, toward the vegetable garden, about twenty yards away. Suddenly a gust of crosswind caught the wings and twisted me around and over the top. I slammed into the ground, on my back, and felt an immense pain in my shoulder and right ankle. I was groaning pretty loudly, and Tony came running over. He took one look and ran to the house to get help.

Mother had to leave work to meet me at Charity Hospital. I had suffered a dislocated shoulder and a severe sprain in the right ankle. The emergency room doctor looked at me and asked, “You look familiar. Do I know you?”

“Could be, sir. I’ve been here before.”

Mother said, “Too many times.”

After a series of painful X-Rays were taken, I was led into a treatment room and a nurse applied a large bandage around my shoulder. She pulled it so tight, I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to breathe.

“Ouch, does that thing have to be that tight?”

“It does if you want to be able to lie down without screaming.”

“Oh. Okay.”

When we were on the bus going home, Mother was very quiet for the longest time. After she asked for the twentieth time if I was still in pain, she said, “I want your word. No more wings or airplanes or anything that has anything to do with jumping off roofs.”

I objected. “But, Mom, the wings worked. It was a bad wind that caught me off guard. I know how to fix that.”

She looked at me with her no-nonsense look and repeated, “Your word. No more flying.”

I just nodded my head, feeling very down and morose, but then I brightened up. I had a thought. She didn’t say I couldn’t fix the wings and try something else. Maybe Buddy, our large mixed breed Labrador dog, could be a test pilot.

Fortunately, several years later, when I was attending a trade school and taking courses in professional aircraft mechanics, the no flying restriction was removed with the condition that any

and all such flying was to be done in a properly constructed aircraft, and with a licensed pilot in control.

J.T., one of my instructors, was a licensed pilot and a flight instructor. After I got to know him, he agreed that I could fly with him whenever the occasion permitted. Although, since I was not yet sixteen years old, and therefore was not able to legally log the flying hours, I began to learn to fly.

Summer Pops and Other Gigs

By the time I was fifteen, playing music was a major interest in my life, second only to flying, and slightly ahead of girls. I played in the school's marching band, with the two school orchestral groups that played on special occasions and for school plays. I took lessons three times a week with a private music teacher who had a studio downtown. Every Tuesday and Thursday I would leave school and take the bus to the Canal Street studio, play for an hour or so, and then take another bus home. For the most part, I practiced scales and variations that involved increasingly more complex and difficult runs. Mr. Clark, my music teacher, also had me playing selections from the classics. I particularly liked playing parts of *Carmen*, "The Virgin de la Macarena," or the fanfare for the bull fights. I also liked to play Ravel's "Bolero," and Debussy's "Claire de Lune." I began to play other brass instruments: the baritone, tuba, French horn, and trombone.

At home, I had to use the mute to soften the sound of the trumpet my mother had gone in hock for a year and a half to provide, so that I didn't overly disturb my grandmothers and the rest of the family. My grandmothers always seemed to find some selection or other that I would have to get sheet music for and play for them. I don't think I will ever forget one of Big Grandma's favorites; "Cruising down the River (on a Sunday Afternoon)". I played that song so often, that I wonder I didn't wear the notes off the page. Li'l Grandma fell in love with a ditty called "Lavender Blue," and that became another permanent fixture in my repertoire.

Rock and Roll, or Rock-A-Billy as it was known then, was just making an appearance and had not yet taken over the popular music scene. Most of the songs heard on the radio were either sentimental vocals or big band instrumentals of a type that had been popular all through the WWII years.

I would sneak my trumpet out of the house on Wednesday evenings sometimes, go to the black Baptist church around the corner, and play there accompanied by an elderly female pianist, and a black man, Aaron, who played guitar like it was a part of his soul.

“Hey, boy where you been at? Ain’t seen you ‘round in a while.”

“Hi, Aaron. Got caught again, and had to stay in my room for a week after school, except for going to practice.”

“Got caught for what?”

“Being late.”

“How come you always late like that?”

“Dream Room.”

“Ahuh, boy your age got no business on the Street by hisself.”

“How old were you when you were playing on Bourbon Street?”

“Dat’s different. You ain’t no colored boy.”

“Don’t have to be colored to play music.”

“You know wells I do, your momma don’t want you messing ‘round with this kind of music; your grandma nother.”

“I like all kinds of music, but I really get into jazz and blues.”

“Your momma find out you going down to Bourbon Street, she get into you, and you get the blues all right, you be locked up in your room for a couple of years.”

“No reason for her to find out.”

“Ahuh, well, time we get in there and play some for the folk so they get their praying done.”

The music we played for the church was based on traditional religious music, “Halleluah,” “Great Getting Up Morning,” “Rock of Ages,” “The Old Wooden Cross,” and others like that, but it was played fast and up-beat, spiced with jazz runs and riffs. I had a ball, even though I got my butt chewed every time my mother or grandmother found out about it.

“Where have you been? Your mother’s been looking for you the last hour or so.”

“I was practicing my music.”

“Out on the street? I checked the house and the yard and you weren’t there.”

I looked at the ground. “I was at the church around the corner.”

“How many times do I have to tell you not to hang around those black Baptists? You’re Catholic, and I don’t want you having anything to do with Baptists or any other of those heathen religions.”

“I don’t have anything to do with their religion, I just play music.”

“Don’t back-talk me. I said you’re not to go there, understand?”

I sighed, “Yes, Ma’am.”

“You’re restricted to the house for the next two weeks.”

I was restricted to the house more times than I can remember, but sooner or later, I was always able to get out again.

Every now and then, whenever I thought I could get away with it, I would walk from the practice studio on Canal Street to Bourbon Street in the French Quarter, or Vieux Carre as it was called locally, and go to a place called the Dream Room. This was an empty room with a couple of dozen chairs, a piano, and no other furnishings. Musicians would drop in, sit around, talk, drink, smoke, and jam together. More often than not, the air was filled with a combination of cigar, cigarette, and marijuana fog. Mostly the music was Dixieland Jazz or Rhythm and Blues

played the way it is found only in New Orleans or on Beale Street in Memphis. The place was always jam packed with musicians, locals, and tourists. There was no way to know from one night to the next who might drop in. Sharkey, a famous New Orleans jazz band leader was frequently seen there as was Al Hirt, an up and coming trumpeter, Louis Prima, who had his own night club on the Street, Pete Fountain, the clarinetist who had his own band, and Fats Domino and his brother Freddy were regulars before they became household names with the recording of “Blue Monday.”

Everyone who was anyone in the national music scene would stop by whenever they were in the city. It was a lively wonderland and on several occasions, because I got there early and before most of the guys showed up, I was able to sit in and play a couple of sets. Playing with musicians who were already legends in the world of Jazz, was, for a fifteen year old music wannabe, a never to be forgotten experience. I always caught hell when I got home for being so late, but it was worth the occasional restriction to the house or being banished to my room for a night or two.

One memorable Thursday evening, I was sitting in with a group of four others and playing Saint James Infirmary, one of the blues songs I particularly liked. We finished the song and I gave my seat to another trumpet player, who I instantly recognized. It was Louis “Satchmo” Armstrong. I sat enthralled while he played five numbers. When he finished, I went up to him and said, “That was really great. I wish I could play like that.”

He looked at me and said, “You play real good, but I don’t think you ever going to be a jazz player.”

It was several seconds before I could say anything. I asked, “why not?”

“Like I said, you play real good, but it’s the kind of playing goes with a big orchestra and long hair music, not jazz.”

“I don’t understand. What’s the difference?”

He shook his head. “Takes more than just playing the notes right and keeping time like on the sheet. You got to put your soul into the music. I don’t hear that when you play.”

I felt like I had been hit with something and didn’t really understand what he meant, but I listened, took the advice to heart, and tried to understand it, but the words made me feel like someone had taken away my only ice cream cone. I had been playing since I was seven years old, when Mother enrolled me in a school band and sent me to private lessons, and had never felt so inept. A moment before I had been full of joy, one of the gang, happy to be able to play with seasoned professionals who were already legends in their field. Now, I felt like a kid who got caught playing hooky from school. I sat down in one of the chairs while others played and tried to hear in their playing what he had told me. After almost an hour, I could only shake my head. I still didn’t get it. I packed up my horn and left. It felt like the trip home lasted hours instead of the fifteen minutes it actually took. Although I wasn’t sure exactly what Armstrong had meant, I heeded his words and every time I played, I tried to emulate what I thought it meant. That practice served me well a few months later

In the summer of my fifteenth year, the New Orleans Cultural Association put together the money to promote a special summer concert in City Park at the Peristyle, a kind of gazebo-like, round, open stage made of concrete and modeled after ancient Greek architecture, even sporting tall Ionic columns. Although it was called the summer pops concert, there was little popular music played, unless Mozart, Wagner, and Beethoven were to suddenly be considered popular music. A section of the New Orleans philharmonic orchestra played regularly and, in

addition, there were guest artists. In this year, a competition was to be held for local musicians to audition for a spot on the program.

When I heard about the auditions, I decided to try out for the concert. At fifteen years old, I was the youngest person to audition by at least five years. I don't know why I thought I might be able to make it, but failure never entered my mind. I auditioned with about twenty or so other trumpet players. We were asked to play an unrehearsed piece of music provided by the concert people. This was the first cut. The audition turned out to be a four hour marathon of playing progressively more difficult variations on the piece until only three of us remained.

At this point, they called the three of us in: a man called Alton, who was at least thirty years old. He wore rimless glasses and had receding hair which gave him a sort of balding in front look. The other candidate was an attractive young woman named Susan. I couldn't judge her age, but she seemed about twenty one or so. Her hair was pulled up tight in back with a bow from which trailed a long fall of shimmering golden brown hair. She sat straight up in her chair and seemed a little nervous.

I felt like a long skinny kid and wondered how the judges would feel about that. Alton looked professional. Susan was quite pretty and seemed confident, if a bit nervous. I was wearing my only jacket, a fairly loose fitting black blazer that almost matched my black pants, and one of two ties I owned wrapped around the neck of my only long sleeve white shirt. My reflection in the glass of the entrance door didn't fill me with confidence in my appearance. For the first time in my life, I felt what it was like to be poor.

One of the judges, said, "We would like each of you to select a piece of your own choice to play. It should be something to show what you can do."

I didn't have to think about it. There is a piece, written for trumpet specifically for that purpose. It allows the greatest possible freedom of expression. It has seven variations, double and triple-tongue passages, and lightning fast riffs and runs that test every area of a trumpeter's ability to play.

I held up my hand and the judge asked, "Yes? Do you have something in mind?"

"Yes, sir. I'll play Trumpeter's Holiday."

Susan nodded. "That's my choice, too."

Alton looked at each of us, shook his head, and said, "all right, I'll make it unanimous. Trumpeter's Holiday."

We drew straws for order of performance. Each of us would play individually while the other two waited in the hall until called into the studio to play. Alton drew the short straw and was to play first.

He asked, "Could we change the order? I don't have the sheet music with me and will have to go get it."

I opened my trumpet case and said, "I have it. You can use mine."

He took it and nodded his thanks. Susan and I sat outside and listened. He was good, but I smiled a little when I heard a slip and a couple of slides on the runs. While he was playing, I looked at Susan, who was at least five years older than me. I smiled and said, "Hi."

She just smiled and turned her attention to Alton's rendition, which we could hear through the closed door.

Alton finished, came out of the studio, returned my music, sat down, and wiped his brow with a large handkerchief.

Susan was called in and played next, and as far as I could tell, she didn't make a single mistake. She was very good. I would have to go some to beat her.

I waited impatiently for her to finish so that I could get in and show what I could do.

When she came out, I said, "That was great. You're really good."

Alton added, "Not bad."

She said, "Thanks," and sat down to wait.

I was called. When I got into the room, the oldest judge asked, "Are you ready?"

I nodded, and then said, "Yes, sir."

He waved a hand, indicating I was to go. Something seemed to be moving in my stomach. I was surprised, because I had never before felt nervous about playing. I put my horn to my lips, closed my eyes, and started to play. By the end of the first bar, the stomach quivers stopped, and calm settled over me. It was as though the music flowed from my very soul into the trumpet. I ripped through the first three variations and then hit the triple tongue passages. I felt like I was flying; lifted and soaring on waves of music. My fingers flew over the keys, keeping pace with the wildly fast runs. Suddenly, I came to the end and finished on a long flourish. It felt like only a few seconds had passed.

The center judge said, "That was very nice. Now, if you'll just wait outside, we'll have a decision in a few minutes."

When I went into the hall, Alton and Susan stared at me and didn't say a word. We waited. Alton held his horn in one hand, and continuously wiped it with a soft cloth. Susan sat quietly, biting on her fingernails. I put my trumpet in the case, sat it alongside my chair, folded my hands across my stomach, and waited. I knew I had performed well, but as time passed, I

fidgeted around, continuously changed my position on the chair, folded and unfolded my arms, and slouched down in the chair. This sense of anxiety was completely unexpected.

After what seemed like a very long time, they called us in. The older judge indicated that we were to sit in three chairs that had been arranged side-by-side, facing the judges.

When we were seated, he said, “You are all very talented, and it was a tough decision. However, here is how we ranked your performances. Mr. Alton, you finished in third place.” The older guy just nodded.

“Miss Lanier, you are the alternate and will take first place if for any reason Mr. Garavolia cannot perform.” He turned to me and smiled, “Congratulations, Mr. Garavolia.”

Although I had not expected to lose, I had somehow not considered winning. For a moment, I didn’t comprehend, and didn’t say anything until the judge said, “Young man, you’ve won. Do you understand?”

I nodded, and then remembered my manners. “Yes, sir, I understand.” Turning to the other judges I added, “Thank you all.”

“Good. Have you selected a solo piece to play?”

“No, sir, not yet. I’ll ask my teacher to help me find something.”

“That will be fine, but we need to know by the end of next week for printing the announcement and the posters.”

Posters! It finally dawned on me what winning meant. I was to be a featured soloist in the summer pops concert in a little more than three weeks.

Susan did not smile, but offered her hand and said, “Congratulations.”

Alton merely nodded and sort of waved his hand in my direction.

When I told Mr. Clark, my music teacher, he was ecstatic. He said, “We must find just the right piece for you.” He hauled out a dog-eared copy of a sheet music catalog and said, “Hmm, yes, something from the Vandercook series.” He thumbed through some pages and then said, “Ah, here. This is perfect. You will play Lyra.”

Lyra was one of a number of pieces in the series named after stars and stellar constellations. They were intended for professional concert performers.

Two days later, I had the sheet music in my hands, and when I looked at it, I said, “This looks like a pretty difficult piece. There are at least a half dozen key changes.”

“Yes, yes, but practice will make it perfect for you.”

After nearly a week of practice, I wasn’t close to getting it perfect. My frustration was making me angry. I told Mother, “I don’t know what made Mr. Clark pick this piece. I’m not getting anywhere with it, and he’s not much help. I’m never going to get this thing right.”

She said, “Let me see what I can do.”

Somehow or other, although she had never met him, she managed to talk Al Hirt, the famous jazz trumpeter, into coaching me. I couldn’t believe it, and couldn’t wait to work with him. My first session was three days away, and I practiced for several hours every day. I wanted him to see that I was serious and had some talent. The day finally arrived and he showed up at the house. He smiled at Mother and shook hands with me.

He looked at me curiously for a moment and asked, “You look familiar. Have we met somewhere?”

My stomach dropped to my feet. I hoped he wouldn’t remember seeing me at the Dream Room and blurt it out in front of Mother and Little Grandma. I answered. “Could be, sir. I sometimes walk down Bourbon Street after practice with my regular teacher.”

“Oh. That’s it.” Then he smiled. I nearly panicked. He smiled again and improvised, “I must have seen you when I was going to work sometime or other.”

I had to remind myself to breathe.

Little Grandmother said, “Mr. Hirt, would you like a little tea and some cookies?”

“Thank you, but no Ma’am. I think we need to get started.”

“All right, but if you change your mind, there’s plenty there.”

We settled in the living room. He said, “Let’s see what we have here.”

I handed him the sheet music and he looked it over. “Hmm, you picked a tough one, didn’t you?”

“Mr. Clark picked it.”

“Okay, go ahead and play. Let’s see how far you’ve gotten.”

I had never been accused of having a lack of confidence, but suddenly I was worried about what he might think of me. For the first time in my life, I was in the presence of someone I admired who would judge me critically. Also for the first time, I felt like I might not be good enough. I played the first two parts and he said, “Okay, good. Let’s see that.”

He looked at the music and said, “Look, you have a triple eighth here, then a full note followed by a descending chromatic run in eighths. Here’s what you are doing.” He put his own horn to his lips and played exactly as I had. Then he said, “Here’s what you should be doing.” Then he played it again. It didn’t seem that different, but I heard it, and got what he was trying to show me.

I played it again, the way he had shown me.

“That’s it. You’re getting it.”

I couldn't help smiling. I began to feel that this was doable. My confidence rose at least twenty points. We spent the rest of the hour like that, he demonstrating and me doing my best to imitate him. At the end of the hour, I felt great.

He was supposed to return that Friday afternoon for the next session. We got a phone call on Thursday evening, while I was practicing. Mother told me, "That was Mr. Hirt. He's been offered a job in Los Angeles and is leaving immediately."

Mother frowned. Everything was closing in around me. After only one lesson, I was again without a coach. I slammed my horn down on the bed. "What now? What else can go wrong? How can I ever do this?"

"Don't worry, I have someone else in mind."

Someone else turned out to be a woman Mother worked with at the telephone company: Joyce. She was a part-time musician with the New Orleans Philharmonic Orchestra, but had to work as a telephone operator because the Philharmonic didn't pay her a regular salary. Joyce had been trained in a school for the arts and had studied in a New York conservatory. There was probably very little she did not know about music, and her traditional classic schooling showed in her efforts to coach me. She was very good. However, where Al Hirt had been laid back and casual, Joyce was formal, very demanding, and very strict.

"No, that is not the way to interpret this passage. Can't you see the relationship of this bar to the one after it? They must be complementary. Now, do it again, but get it right this time."

I played it again. "Better, but you still aren't seeing the way these passages are linked. Here, listen." She played the section and, although I listened as close as I could, I couldn't tell the difference. I played it again and again, until she was satisfied. It went that way four times a week for two weeks, but at the end I knew that I was ready to play.

The day finally arrived. I had to wear black trousers, a white shirt and tie and a black jacket, although that seemed to be a lot of clothes to wear outside in the July heat. Mother fussed over my hair and clucked at a small cowlick that refused to lie flat. Mother and I took the bus to City Park. She was dressed in one of her best dresses and I felt a little self-conscious wearing a suit and carrying my suitcase size trumpet case. I had a feeling that everyone was staring at me on the bus.

We left the bus and started to walk to the where a path would lead us to the Peristyle. Mother stopped suddenly and said, “Look, there’s a restaurant over there. We have some time, so let’s get a drink, okay?”

I shrugged. I didn’t particularly want anything. I just wanted to get to the park and get ready to play. When we were seated in the restaurant with a pair of iced teas, Mother asked, “How do you feel? Are you nervous?”

I shook my head. “No. I just want to get there and play. I hate all this waiting around.”

She smiled. “I would say that’s a sign of being nervous.”

I shook my head. “It’s not nervousness I can’t wait to get up there and play.”

She smiled again, “I see.” She ran her hand over my head to try to smooth down the stubborn lick of hair.

We got to the Peristyle and a lady took me by the hand. “Mr. Garavolia, you can come with me into the Casino and wait until you are up to play. You are fifth on the list and will play just after the orchestra plays their Mozart piece, all right?”

I nodded, “Yes, I understand.”

I took a seat and opened my trumpet case. I took out the sheet music and looked it over. Someone sat down next to me. I looked up and was surprised to see Susan.

“Hi, wow, it’s nice to see somebody I recognize.”

She said, “Me too. How do you feel? Are you nervous?”

“No, I’m fine. Are you playing today too?”

She smiled. “Yes, I’m playing in a quartet with those guys over there.” She pointed to three men sitting in a corner.

“That’s great. I’m glad you made it. You’re really good.”

She smiled. “They called me a couple of days after the audition and asked me to fill in for their trumpet player.” She looked at me for a second and said, “You know, I thought I had it won until you played. I’ve never heard anyone play the Lullaby like that.”

I felt my cheeks warming. “Thanks. I don’t know how it was better than what you did, though. You were perfect.”

“I guess you had more soul than I did that day.”

I couldn’t help letting a little smile escape.

After two others and Susan’s group played, I heard the Orchestra begin one of the rondos from Mozart’s Salzburg Concerto. I was up next. I picked up my trumpet, put the mute in and ran through a few chromatic scales to warm up. The woman who had escorted me into the holding area beckoned and I went outside to wait for my introduction. After a small smattering of applause, I walked up the stairs and went on stage. I looked around at all the people seated around the Peristyle, and smiled, just as Joyce had coached me to do. I picked up the horn, closed my eyes and let the music flow. After the first few bars, I settled into the rhythm of the piece and felt the familiar sensation of floating, and then soaring on the wings of the notes. My mind, body, and soul were tied to the rhythm, and I rode the waves of the composition. When the piece ended, I got a standing ovation from the two hundred or so people in the audience, and a full

two-column write up in the following day's newspaper. I read the piece at least a dozen times. It said, "Mr. Garavolia, aside from being the youngest soloist in the history of the summer concerts, captivated the audience with a rendition of his trumpet solo, Vega. Regardless of future young performers, Mr. Garavolia has set the mark." The article was complete with four photos. For a short time, I was a local hero of sorts.

For about three days, I felt great with everyone congratulating me, and even a couple of kids asking for an autograph. It felt almost as good as flying. The one sour note in the whole thing was my father's comment that now I would have an even bigger swelled head than before. Even that couldn't damp my spirits as I warmed myself in the afterglow of the performance. However, nothing lasts forever and soon enough life-as-usual intervened and everything was back to normal.

Automobiles and Chalmette

After my father returned and we moved to the Mirabeau, our financial situation improved to the point where buying a house became possible with the help of my uncle's G.I. benefits. The house was located in Chalmette, a suburb in the adjacent St. Bernard Parish. To me, it was just a house in the boonies. It was one of only three houses, three miles east of the city, built in the middle of what had been a large corn field converted to a housing development. The suburban housing development showed no early signs of growth. That's probably why the house cost only a bit over ten thousand dollars. It was another step up the economic ladder, and this time I felt I knew what it meant; we were getting out of poverty stricken neighborhoods and the projects, and might even have a chance at being a regular family.

We left the city in my father's 1950 Studebaker two-door coupe. Mother and Father sat up front with Tony, Sal, and me in the back. Angelo rode his bicycle the five miles from the city to the new house. We passed the old Army camp, Fort Jackson which, since the end of the second world war, was used by the Louisiana National Guard, and it was like a line drawn on a map. The camp bordered the Parish line between Orleans Parish and Saint Bernard Parish. Houses, packed shoulder to shoulder on the New Orleans side of the line disappeared to scattered buildings and weed grown open spaces. The further away from the city we got, the more sparse buildings and signs of civilization became.

"Wow, look at all the cows." Tony exclaimed.

Sal asked, "Where are all the houses?"

"There aren't many houses out here. We're out in the boondocks." I answered.

"Where are we going to live if there aren't any houses?"

"We'll live in a house."

“Oh.” After a pause, Sal asked, “Is ours the only house out here?”

“I don’t know. I guess there are others. We’ll see in a little while.”

We passed fields with cows, and Tony pointed to a round top metal structure. “Hey, that looks like an airplane hangar.”

I looked. He was right. It was a hangar. I saw a wind sock hanging from the peak of the rounded roof. “Hey, Mom, is this an airport?” I asked.

“This used to be the Joy airport. I don’t think it’s used much anymore.”

I eagerly examined what I could see of the place. A nearly abandoned civilian airfield with two sod runways met my gaze. I saw a single bi-plane crop duster sitting half in and half out of the hangar.

For the first time since we had begun the journey, I felt a stirring of interest. Airfield, old or not, half abandoned or not, meant airplanes and it was within walking distance of our new house.

We arrived at the house, one of only three on the whole street. Yes, I decided, this was definitely the sticks.

I asked, “How are we going to get to school or into town?”

Mother said, “There’s a bus. Stacy, you’ll ride with your uncle Carlo. The rest of you will ride the school bus and go to school here.” I was not especially happy about riding with Uncle Carlo as he was from my father’s side of the family and only tolerated me because I was family.

Angelo said, “There’s nothing here. No stores or anything. How will we get groceries and things?”

“There’s a market not far. We’ll take the car and go once a week to shop.”

I looked at Angelo, and he looked back. I shook my head. He said, “I don’t think I’m going to like this place.”

The house sat on what had been a fairly large farm. A small store was more than a quarter of a mile away, on the highway, but nothing else close by. I began to agree with Angelo.

“Where does the bus run, and how often?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but we’ll find out. The St. Bernard bus goes to the city limits, and then we take the regular city buses.”

We discovered that there was only one bus, and its reliability was spotty. With unreliable transport to the city, we frequently walked the three miles to the city limits where we could catch the St. Claude bus into town.

I felt that we were stuck in the middle of the woods. A large canal ran just a hundred feet from the house, and it divided where houses were being built from jungle-like woodland. We could hear and see wild animals across the canal.

We had been in the house less than a week and were still unpacking when Angelo ran into the house, nearly out of breath. “There’s a big alligator in the canal!”

Tony and I ran back to the canal with him. We didn’t see the alligator, but we did see a fairly large black water moccasin swimming in the water. A shiver ran down my back.

Despite the disadvantage of location, the house in Chalmette did have a few things going for it. It was a modern house with central heating provided by a floor furnace in the middle of the house, and a couple of window unit air conditioners. Another feature that we appreciated was that its three bedrooms provided semi-private quarters for the first time in our lives. Mother and my father had the master bedroom, Angelo and Sal shared one bedroom, and Tony and I had the other.

When we moved into the new house, I was still going to the Catholic High School. An uncle lived a short distance away, and I usually caught a ride with him. He would drop me off and I would walk about seven blocks to school. A major problem with this plan was that I had to wait outside for him at the highway corner a quarter mile from the house at six thirty in the morning. Although there was no other house reasonably close by, I was not alone. Massive hordes of mosquitoes attacked me every morning. I once asked Carlo if he could pick me up at the house so that I might wait inside and evade the mosquitoes. He just looked at me in the same manner one might look at a crazy person who had asked to be taken to Mars.

About a year or so after we moved in, Kaiser Aluminum built a massive plant, the largest aluminum reduction plant in the world at the time, on the outskirts of the town, just a half-mile from our house. Construction crews, breaking ground for the new plant, found a windfall of history. When bulldozers started leveling the land for construction, they unearthed large numbers of old cannon balls, rusted bayonets, soldiers uniform gear, muskets, and bullets. A small army of archeologists, professors, and college students, flocked in to collect and preserve whatever could be found. The plant was constructed on a site straddling the battlefield where the Battle of New Orleans had been fought, and where Andrew Jackson, with the help of a pirate named Jean LaFitte, and a couple of hundred citizens of New Orleans, defeated a British army of four thousand in the last battle of the war of 1812. Tony and I would go to the area on weekends and search the ground for spent bullets. We found about a dozen or so, British and American, covered with black dirt and white lead sulfate.

My father went to work for Kaiser in their paint department, and earned a whopping hundred and twenty-five dollars a week. After a year with Kaiser, he had a position as a shop foreman which paid even more. One weekly pay check was more money than we had previously

seen in a month with Mother and Father both working. We were rich. One major change that came with our new found family wealth was the purchase of a brand new 1955 Plymouth four door sedan. The car was huge compared to the little Studebaker coupe my father owned before.

Painted bright yellow, it sported a hood that, seen from behind the wheel, looked as wide as a football field. This caused an amusing incident one day. Mother was driving Tony and me into town to get him to football practice and me to band rehearsal. It was the first time she had driven the car into the city. In order to get downtown, we had to cross the Industrial Canal bridge. This is a drawbridge with one narrow lane on either side of a steel pillar central support. Mother drove up the approach and suddenly stopped just before the bridge. The sudden and un-signalized stop was greeted with enthusiasm by the cars behind us.

I asked, "What's wrong? Why are we stopping?"

"It's too wide. It will never fit through this bridge."

"Mother, the other cars are getting through. We'll make it."

"Those cars aren't as wide as this one. It won't fit."

By now a huge symphony of car horns were registering their opinion of the situation. I had a suggestion. "I'll get out and guide you across. If it looks like it won't fit, we'll pull over, let the other cars out, and cross over to the other side and go back."

She thought about that a moment and said, "No. I don't want you out there on that bridge with all this traffic. I'll make it; I'll just go slow."

True to her word she literally inched across the span. Although she never had quite that severe an attack of bridge phobia again, she always approached that particular bridge span with some trepidation.

My father was one of several thousand workers hired by the new Kaiser plant, and the housing tract soon mushroomed. In short order we had several houses on our street, and with the growth came improved sewage and paved streets. Along with the new houses came new neighbors. It felt strange that there were no black people or other minorities in the entire subdivision. Although it wasn't the same as the closeness of neighbors we had known in the city, we made friends and most everyone got along at first. However within a year or so, petty jealousies and fights between kids caused rifts and made for alignments and cliques. This was something new to us. Before, everyone was in the same situation and everyone was pretty much equal, regardless of income or race.

The house to our right was owned by a professional couple who considered themselves the aristocrats of the neighborhood and affected a better-than-you attitude. Our neighbors to the left continuously complained about Tony and me working on cars in our driveway and the street in front of our house. I was attending the trade school in aviation mechanics then, and Tony had a natural talent for auto mechanics. The neighbors also bitched about our dog, a little cocker spaniel that was extremely protective of us and the house. She would bark and growl at anyone who came close to either us or the house. We ignored both the left and the right.

From Tony's point of view, one of the major benefits of the minor flood of new neighbors was an influx of teen age girls. There was always at least one, and sometimes two or three, hanging around the house virtually all the time. I was still suffering from my recent encounters with girls and tried to stay away from them for a while. It was not to be. There was one girl that Tony was particularly fond of. He went out on dates with her on a fairly regular basis.

Tony and I had part-time jobs and decided to jointly buy a car. I was almost sixteen and had a driver's license. Tony, just a couple of months away from his fifteenth birthday, was just beginning to learn to drive. Mother agreed to put the car in her name and we bought a 1938 Plymouth sedan that was not in running condition. It had the virtues of being easily affordable, that is within our fifty dollar limit, and, due to the simplicity of its construction, easy and cheap to repair and keep running.

The first thing the car needed was a head gasket for the engine. Blown head gaskets on the old Plymouth six cylinder engines was a common fault, and something we would use to make money by buying old Plymouths, reconditioning them and selling them for three times what they cost us. It wouldn't make us rich, but the labor was free and it earned us some spending money.

My father arrived when I was in the middle of working on the engine.

“What are you doing to that car?”

“Replacing the blown head gasket and resurfacing the valves so they'll seat better.”

“What makes you think you can do all of that?”

“If I can rebuild a thirty-six cylinder aircraft engine, I damn sure can repair a simple six cylinder car motor.”

“You don't know what the hell you're doing. I'll probably have to pay someone to haul it away when you can't get it back together.”

“I'll get it back together, and it will run like brand new.”

“Smart ass punk kid, you think you're so goddamn smart. You're still just a kid and you don't know shit about fixing cars and you don't know shit about living.”

“I suppose you do, huh? What do you know besides disappearing and screwing around on Mom?”

“What I do is none of your business.”

“It’s my business when it hurts Mom.”

“Keep your nose out of my business or I’ll kick your ass all over this neighborhood.”

I felt rage building, but I knew it would hurt Mother if I got into it with him, so I just shrugged and turned my back on him.

“Yeah, that’s right, just turn away like a little coward. You’ll never be a man.”

“If being a man means being like you, you’re right, that will never happen.”

He started to say something but then walked away and went into the house. It wouldn’t be the last time we nearly got into a fight.

After two weeks of after school and after part-time job work, the car was back together and running fairly well. With Tony’s help, I installed a new set of tires and brakes. We had just finished getting it cleaned up, including compounding and polishing the relatively undamaged black paint, and making sure that everything worked and that the car was now in good running order, when Tony came to me with a request.

“Hey, Stacy, now that we’ve got it running, how about taking me and Marian to the drive in tonight? There’s a scary monster movie playing.”

“Yeah, and what do I do while you two are having fun, go for a walk?”

“Well, you could take Sophie.”

Sophie was one of Marian’s sisters. She was nice looking, but only thirteen. I said, “Right, thanks a bunch. I’ll pass.”

Tony thought for a minute and said, “Wait a minute.” He ducked inside the kitchen and a few minutes later, he called me. “Stacy, come here for a minute.”

I went to the kitchen, where he was talking on the phone. He said, “I’m talking to Marian. How about if she can get her friend, Rose, to go as your date?”

I had seen Rose only once. She was my age, slender and had a cute face. I didn’t really know anything else about her, but Tony was nearly pleading with me, and I didn’t mind the thought of taking a girl out, even though so far my luck with girls had not been anything to brag about.

“All right, but only for this one time.”

“Sure, just to go to the show. I’ll even pay for the tickets.”

I passed the rest of the day doing small touch up work on the car. Around six-thirty, Tony came outside. “Hey, you going to get ready? It’s almost time to go.”

“The drive-in doesn’t open for another hour and a half. It only takes twenty minutes to get there. What’s the rush?”

“We can pick up the girls, go to the Frostop and get something to eat and drink, and then go to the drive-in.”

I gathered the cleaning stuff I had been using and said, “All right, I’ll get ready, but it seems like you’re in a hell of a hurry just for a movie date.”

“Marian’s special. I like her a lot.”

“That’s what you say about all the girls you go out with.”

“No, I mean she’s really special, not like the others.”

“Oh, I see. I guess you’re going steady, huh?”

He didn't answer and when I looked, his milk white cheeks were flushed. "Aha, so you are going steady with her."

"Nah, it's just that, like I said, I feel different about her."

I dropped the cleaning stuff and grabbed him around the head. I rubbed his head with my knuckles.

"Hey, come on. I just got my hair right, now I've got to do it all over again."

I laughed and went into the bathroom to clean up.

Marian and Rose lived in the same neighborhood, a little over a half mile from us, toward the city. The school they attended was virtually across the street from their houses. Like me, Tony went to high school in the city. He attended a Catholic high school, different from the one I attended. The schools were also arch rivals in athletics, scholarship, and even in the annual band competitions.

Rose was at Marian's house and they both came out when we pulled up to Marian's house. Marian introduced me to her friend. "Hi Stacy, this is my friend Rose."

"Hi Rose." I took her hand and she smiled.

"Hi."

I drove to the Frostop burger place and we got a bag of hamburgers, French fries, and ice cream cones. We piled back into the car and headed across town to the outdoor theater. We arrived at the drive-in, went to the concession building and got popcorn and drinks. We had a bag of hamburgers and ice cream cups in the car. Tony and Marian wasted no time in getting to the serious side of the business. I sat in front with Rose, feeling awkward and not knowing what to do. I didn't know her well enough to be familiar, so I tried polite conversation.

"How do you like school?"

“It’s okay.”

“Do you get along with your parents pretty good?”

“Yeah, they’re okay.”

“What do you like to do?”

“I don’t know. Hang out with Marian, go to movies, go shopping.”

“Do you have a regular boyfriend?”

“No.”

“I would have thought you did.”

“Why?”

“Well, you’re really cute and have a nice figure.”

“You really think so?”

“Well, yeah.”

She smiled and scooted over so that her leg was hard against mine. I could feel the warmth of her skin through my slacks.

“Would you like another drink? I could go get one.”

She smiled again and took my hand. She draped my arm around her shoulder and snuggled against me.

We stayed that way for a half hour or so. She put her free hand on my leg and I turned to her. I took her face in my hand and kissed her. At first she returned the kiss and then I pushed my tongue against her lips.

She jumped away and slapped me.

“What the hell was that for?”

“You’re going too far.”

“All I did was kiss you.”

“You tried to tongue me. I don’t do that. This is just a movie date. You’re not my boy friend and we’re not going steady.”

“I’m sorry. I thought that was what you wanted to do.”

“Well it isn’t. I’m not that kind of girl.”

She folded her arms and leaned against the door. We didn’t speak ten words from that time until I dropped her off at her house.

Marian fumed, “I can’t believe you did that. I get you a date with my best friend and you do something like that.”

“It wasn’t all that big a deal.”

She turned to Tony. “Take me home. This is the last time I’m ever going out with your brother, and I’ll never get him another date.”

On the way home, Tony couldn’t stop laughing. “All right, what the hell’s so funny?”

“You are. You can’t tell the difference when a girl just wants to flirt and when she wants to be serious. With all your smarts, you don’t know a damn thing about girls.”

I felt angry and ashamed at the same time. I guess Tony was right. I had just struck out for the third time in a row with girls. I decided that I could do without girls for the foreseeable future.

More Girls and Taboos

A month or so after the episode with Rose, Li'l Grandma fell very ill and was hospitalized. She had suffered a heart attack and would be in the hospital for at least two weeks. Mother was working, and Aunt Lorraine lived clear across town and had her huge brood to look after, including a totally alcoholic husband. Mother agreed to sit with Grandma for two nights a week, but Lorraine said she could only make it one night on the weekend, maybe.

Mother approached me. "Stacy, I know it's asking a lot, but could you stay with Grandma a few nights a week? You can drive here and be able to go to school directly from the hospital in the morning. You can get some sleep while you're here, and get your homework done at the same time."

"Three nights a week? For how many weeks?"

"Two, maybe three. I don't think any more than that."

I was silent for a moment. Mother said, "I know how you feel about hospitals, but there's no one else. I couldn't trust Tony, and Angelo and Sal are too young. The hospital wouldn't allow them to stay."

I doubted if Mother, or anyone else, knew how I felt about hospitals. I hated them and avoided them anytime I could. Every time I passed near a hospital it brought back memories of broken bones, neglect, pain and indifference.

I looked at Mother and she had tears in her eyes. "Okay, if it's just for a couple of weeks, I guess I can do it."

"I'm sure it will be all right. The time will go by before you know it. I can't tell you how much this means a lot to me."

It was decided that Mother would stay on Monday and Friday, I would take Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, aunt Lorraine would stay on Saturday and we would work out Sunday.

The second night I was on duty there, I stepped out onto the small balcony shared by four adjacent rooms. Grandma was sleeping soundly, it was about one in the morning and there was a soft breeze blowing. I struck a light and began to smoke a cigarette. Another door opened next to where I was. A young girl stepped out and said, "Hi, can I get a light? I saw you come out here."

"Sure." I snapped out my lighter and flipped it open. When I held the light for her, I noticed that she had a nice smile.

She stepped back and said, "Thanks. I've been dying for a smoke for the past two hours, but I'm not supposed to leave the room and there're no matches there."

She looked at me and then stuck out her right hand. "Hi, I'm Deborah. Actually, it's Deborah Greenberg."

I took her hand. It felt smooth and warm. "I'm Stacy, Stacy Garavolia, but I prefer to be called Mark."

"Why? Stacy is a nice name. It sets you apart." She looked closely at my face. "I think it fits you. It's an elegant name."

That was the first time I had heard anyone say that my name was anything other than something to be made fun of or laughed at. Deborah interested me. I moved back to where the light from Grandma's room illuminated us.

She was slightly plump, but not overly so. She stood about eight inches shorter than me, but then, since I was six feet two inches tall, most girls did. When she smiled, her whole face seemed to light up. She smiled at me. "Well, do I pass inspection?"

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to stare. I guess that’s not very good manners.”

She reached out and put her hand on my arm. “That’s okay, I don’t mind. I’m looking at you, too.”

“Really? And what are you seeing?”

“A very tall and interesting guy.”

I laughed and she smiled again. “So, what are you doing here?”

“My grandmother is sick. She’s been here a week or so. Someone has to stay with her, so I get to do it four nights a week. My mother does it on the weekend.”

“Yeah, me too. My grandma will be in here for another two weeks or so. I stay with her three nights a week.”

“Well, I guess we’ll be seeing a lot of each other then.”

“For a couple of weeks anyway.”

She looked around and then said, “You know, we could pull a chair out here and sit and talk. We can see inside the rooms if we pull the curtains back, so we can keep an eye on them from out here.”

I looked around and said, “Yeah, that’s a good idea.” I pulled a visitor’s chair out of Grandma’s room and Deborah did the same from her side.

We talked about school, family, the city, things we liked and things we didn’t like. I was surprised to learn that she loved reading. She was the first girl I had ever known, other than my friends at the library, who liked to read.

I asked, “What kind of books do you like?”

“I just like to read, but the ones I like most are the stories like Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights and things like that.”

“Oh, the old classics.”

“Have you read them?”

I nodded. “Yes, and a lot of others from that period, including Edgar Allan Poe.”

“I like Poe too, but he’s scary.”

I laughed. “Yeah, I guess some of his stuff can be scary.”

We talked about books we had both read for some time. It seemed no time at all that the Eastern sky started to get light. The morning nurses came in and checked our grandmothers. The nurse on my side saw us outside and smiled.

The next two nights passed the same way, then I didn’t see Deborah again until I returned the following Tuesday.

Perhaps it was the warm night, or maybe just the coziness of the two of us wrapped in the protection of the night. More likely it was simply teenage hormones, but whatever the reason, we began to pet explore each other on the darkened balcony four stories above the ground. We kissed and caressed each other. A nurse entered the room behind us, and we quickly moved apart. When the nurse left, we sat in silence for a while.

“Wow, that was something.” I said.

Deborah smiled, “Yes, it was pretty nice.”

“Would you like to do some more?”

“No, it’s almost time for the nurses to come in and do the morning stuff.”

“Yeah, I didn’t realize it was so late.”

Deborah laughed. “Like they say, time flies when you’re having fun.”

A nurse stuck her head out of my grandmother’s room and said, “We’ll be taking care of your grandmother now. I’m afraid you’ll have to step out of the room for a while.”

“Oh, okay.”

Deborah touched my hand and said, “It’s okay, I’ll see you tonight, right?”

“Yeah, I’ll be here.”

Later that morning, at school, I sat in class and took notes like I was on auto pilot.

Somehow combustion theory, fuel mixture ratios, and the intricacies of the internal workings of complex carburetors couldn’t hold my interest. I answered a couple of questions directed to me without actually hearing my answer. It must have been correct, because no one said anything. I moved through the shop work without knowing what I had accomplished, if anything.

“Hey, Stacy, how about giving me a hand here? We’re supposed to be partners on this engine so how about getting with it.”

My shop partner, Alan, was holding a large cylinder and trying to align it for installation on a nine cylinder radial engine. I grabbed the cylinder and held it while he snapped a ring compressor around the piston. I said, “Sorry, I’m a little out of it today.”

“I noticed. You sat through class like a zombie. I thought you were asleep until I saw your pen moving.”

“I just got some things on my mind.”

“Things, huh? You got a girlfriend or something?”

“Why do you think it’s a girlfriend?”

He snickered, “Aha, I knew it. There are hundreds of girls out there. No need to get stuck on just one.”

Alan was one of the Korean War veterans in the class. He and I got along pretty well, which is why we wound up as shop partners. At twenty one years old, he was among the

youngest of the vets, and closest to my age. I respected him and envied his casual outlook on everything, but I couldn't understand his cavalier attitude toward girls.

I got through the day and finally made it to the hospital. Deborah wasn't there. I frowned. She was usually there ahead of me. Grandma was feeling better and we talked for an hour or so. Mother came in with my brothers and they stayed for a while, and then left. I paced around the room, went out on the balcony and looked into the next room, but she wasn't there. I talked to one of the nurses for a few minutes and then sat on the balcony. The clock hands seemed almost frozen. Around eleven o'clock, Deborah showed up. She poked her head out of the door and said, "Hi, I need to talk to my grandmother for a while, but I'll be out there in a bit."

I smiled and said, "Great. I was getting worried that you wouldn't be here."

She smiled in return. "I'll tell you about it in a minute." She ducked back into her grandmother's room.

Midnight came and went. I fidgeted on the balcony. I smoked three cigarettes until Deborah finally came out onto the balcony. She leaned over and kissed me lightly. "Sorry I was late, but my brother had to rehearse for his bar mitzvah in synagogue. My mother and father went with him, so I had to watch my younger sister until they came back. Then we had dinner, and I couldn't get here until just now."

"No big thing. You're here now."

We sat next to each other for a few minutes and then Deborah got up and sat on my lap. We kissed and touched, and things accelerated, as they had the night before. My head was light and there was a ringing in my brain. We moved without conscious thought and put the chair cushions on the floor. We were lying on the cushions and suddenly we were coupling. We fumbled and couldn't get it right, and then suddenly it all fell into place and **we made love there**

on the balcony with only a half moon to see us. (Are they both virgins? If so, this needs to be a longer scene.)

We dressed and I put the cushions back on the chairs. I felt a deep sense of guilt, and I couldn't say anything for a while. Deborah must have been undergoing similar thoughts, because she was very quiet also. I said, "That was really great wasn't it?"

"Yes, I guess so, but I can't believe we did that."

"Me neither, but it was nice." I took her hand.

She smiled. "Yes, after a little it was." Then she said, "My grandmother said they're releasing her tomorrow. She's going home."

"Oh." I knew intellectually one or both of our grandmothers would be going home eventually, but it hadn't occurred to me that it might happen so soon. "Well, why don't you give me your phone number and address. I'll call, and we can go to a movie or the beach or something."

She looked down at the floor.

"What's wrong? I only said we could go on a date."

"No, we can't."

"Why not?"

"My parents wouldn't allow it."

"Your parents? Why not? They don't even know me."

"I told them about meeting you here, and that we got along really well. They said I was not to see you outside of the hospital, and to keep my distance here."

"Why would they say that?"

"Because you're Christian."

“So?”

“We’re Jews.”

“So?”

She sighed. “I can’t go out with any boy who is not of my faith.”

“That’s stupid. Maybe if I met them and talked to them, they would change their mind.”

“No, they wouldn’t. They are very strict about that.”

“We can see each other without telling them. They don’t have to know anything about it.”

“I couldn’t lie about that, and if they found out, it would hurt them.”

I held her hand and tried to think of some argument that might work.

She smiled again, “It’s not like we’re in love or something. I know it’s just because we’re here. If we had met somewhere else, none of this would have happened.”

There was nothing I could say or do to change her mind. I never saw her again after that night. I talked to my mother about it the next day.

“Mom, I told you I met this girl, Deborah, at the hospital and I thought we might like to go out or something but she said her parents wouldn’t allow her to go with me.”

“Not allow her to go with you? Why not? Did you say or do something to make them not like you?”

“No, I never met them. She said it was because she’s Jewish and I’m not.”

“You want to go out with a Jewish girl?”

“I want to go out with a girl I met and like.”

“You can’t go out with a Jew.”

“What do you mean?”

“I will not have you associating with Jews and that’s final.”

“What? What are you so angry about? Why not?”

“They’re different. We don’t associate with Jews.”

“What the hell does her religion have to do with whether or not I can go out with her?”

“Don’t you curse at me. We don’t have anything to do with Jews, especially Jew girls, and that’s all there is to it.”

“Why? What’s wrong with them?”

“I know them. I worked for them, and I’m telling you they’re no good. They’re sneaky and they hate us.”

“I still don’t see what that has to do with my going out with a girl.”

“You are not to have anything more to do with that Jew girl, and that’s all I’m going to say about it.”

Mother left the room, and I just sat on the bed. I felt a sense of bewilderment. Where did all that hate come from? Mother and Grandma had often told us not to associate with black people or Puerto Ricans, but not with the vehemence and hatred that seemed to jump out of her at the thought of my dating a Jewish girl. It was my first taste of discrimination against a people because of their religion, but it was not to be my last. I began to wonder if there was something wrong with me. I was apparently the only one in my circle of family, acquaintances, and friends who couldn’t justify being prejudiced against someone because of their color or religion.

A One Arm Paper Hanger and Welder

I had changed schools and was attending what was called a Technical Trades Institute to study aircraft mechanics. One thing did not change. Even though I was now attending a mostly adult school, I was still the brain of the class, and at fifteen years old, the youngest guy in the whole department, and still unable to fight worth a damn, so I continued to be the butt of every joke and slur around. I might have thought that all those boxing lessons, so generously provided by Brother Adolfo, would have taught me something about the manly art of self defense, but all it taught me was how to cover up my face and take a punch. Things were made worse by the fact that I was fifteen, and many of the guys in the school were Korean War veterans. Most of them were only five or six years older than me, but their war experience made that a very large gap indeed.

I loved working on the planes, overhauling the engines, putting new fabric on the older planes and welding or riveting panels and struts on the larger ones. Sometimes, on break or lunch time, I would climb into one of the planes and just sit in it. Because the school had been used to train U.S. Army Air Force mechanics during World War II, we inherited two P-40 Warhawk fighter planes, several AT-6 and BT 13 military trainers, a huge PBY flying boat, and a surplus C-47 cargo plane, along with a couple of smaller twin engine Beechcraft C-45's. We also had a dozen or so small light civilian aircraft dating from the 1920s to the present. Some of the planes were on loan for use in maintenance and repair classes, but most were owned by the school. I had an opportunity to fly some of the smaller planes. As far as the technical aspects of school went, things could not have been better.

I excelled in all aspects of aircraft work until an unfortunate accident made it difficult to keep up. Taking a between-classes break one morning, I was with several of my classmates in

the main building just before machine shop class. In a semi-enclosed storage area where machines were kept that needed repair, my buddies and I were sneaking a forbidden smoke between classes. I was standing alongside an old letterpress printing machine, and drinking a soda. My right hand rested on the machine.

Robert, one of the guys from the welding department, was looking over the machine with some interest. He mused, “I wonder what’s wrong with this press?”

I answered, “Who knows? Hell, everything in this school is older than we are. It could be damn near anything.”

Robert experimentally pressed the foot treadle, causing the machine to cycle. The pressure plate came up suddenly and trapped my hand between the plate and the recess for the type holder. The guys all got excited and pored all over the press, trying to figure out how to get me loose.

It hurt like hell but I said, “Hey, no problem, calm down and try turning the wheel backwards.” It was a good idea, but this is when we discovered why the press was in the shop for repairs. Little Al said, “Damn, it’s jammed and it won’t go back. Looks like there’re only four bolts holding it on. We’ll have to take the frame apart and remove the plate.”

By this time my hand was getting very cold, beginning to swell and turning black and blue. I said, “Okay, someone go to the shop and get a toolbox. I’ll just hang around here and wait until you get back.”

Little Al took off to get the tools, Jerry headed for the welding shop to get a cutting rig. That left me with three of the other guys examining the machine to see if some other way might work. At this point, Robert said, “Hey, I see a way to do this.” And without further explanation he stepped on the treadle again, running the press through its full cycle. In a way, he was right.

That did get my hand free of the press. Unfortunately, it also crushed every bone in my hand across the knuckles, and came damn close to severing all the fingers of my right hand.

The school called my mother to inform her that her eldest son had once more suffered broken bones and would require hospital care. This was far from the first time my mother and I could be found sitting in the emergency room of the public hospital. Along with a hundred other economically strapped patients in Charity Hospital's waiting room, I sat on a hard wood bench for several hours with a towel wrapped around my hand. This did nothing whatsoever to assuage the pain, which was by then so bad I was unable to think of anything else. At last we did see a doctor who, after consultation with his peers, decided the best course of events would be to simply amputate the hand. This was obviously a less than acceptable solution, so mother decided to seek help in the private medical sector. There we found a doctor who said, "Well, I think I can save the hand, but it's not likely you'll ever regain much use in it."

"Look, Doc," I replied with teenage bravado, "you worry about saving the hand, I'll worry about using it."

His next words were predictable. "This is going to hurt a little and you'll feel some pressure in the hand."

Pressure! Ha! It felt like he was probing inside the hand with white-hot pokers. I didn't scream or even cry, but to this day I don't know how I managed that. I guess it was fifteen-year-old machismo, or something like that. Maybe I just didn't want to start bawling in front of my mother and the doctor. Maybe it was just that the pain was so intense it overloaded my senses and didn't register in its full ferocity. In any event, in a matter of four and a half hours, he cleaned the wound, reset the bones and stitched and wired the hand together again. A cast was

fitted that reached from my fingertips to my shoulder. For the better part of the next year I walked around with my right arm in a cast and bent at ninety degrees.

My welding instructor took one look at the cast and said, “Well, looks like that’s it for this class. You need both hands to weld, and you only have one good one.”

“I can still get the job done, even with a cast.”

He shook his head. “No, I don’t see any way you can do it. You’ll just have to drop this class until next year.”

I explained, “If I drop the class, I can’t finish my airframe requirement. That means I won’t pass half of the course and will have to repeat it all. Give me a shot. I’m sure I can do the work.”

He shook his head again, but conceded, “All right, you have a test on overhead perpendicular fish-mouth welds this week. If you can pass that, I’ll consider it.”

Overhead gas welding is not the easiest thing in the world, even with two good hands, and aircraft welding is both precise and very exacting. I used every minute I could in the welding shop and I stayed after school until dark three days in a row practicing. I drilled a small hole in the cast where it covered my fingers. I used my left hand to operate the drill bit, taking care to not inadvertently drill through a finger with the sharp bit. Then I stuck a welding rod through the hole and forced a finger against it to hold it in place. That worked astonishingly well, and the cast created an unexpected benefit. It provided a rock solid base when I wedged it against the tubular frame. I passed the test by lying on my back and using my improvised welding rod holder held across the tubular frame as support. I finished that year’s welding course with a passing grade, although it was far below my usual perfect “A.”

There were similar difficulties to be overcome in machine shop and in doing the actual airframe work too, but I managed to get through all of it, with my partner, Alan's help. I made a passing grade, albeit lower than normal.

At last the day arrived when I would have the cast removed. I sat in the doctor's office while he did the usual examination, then he said, "Well, let's get to the clinic room and take this thing off." I knew what to expect, since this was the third cast on this arm and far from the first cast I had worn, but even so I felt a twinge when he picked up the rotary saw and turned it on. I knew that, because of its design, it would not cut flesh but when the little blade screamed into the cast I flinched. When he pried the cast off, I was shocked to see how my arm was shrunken to almost nothing and the skin was covered with an ugly brown something or other.

Taking my elbow in one hand and wrist in the other he said, "This might hurt a bit" and he moved the arm so as to straighten it. Pain raced through my arm like a lightning bolt.

"Jesus Christ!" I yelled. "That hurts like hell."

"Stacy! You know better than to use that kind of language." Mother was blushing and frowning at the same time.

"Sorry, Mother, but it hurts like hell." I flinched again when the doctor moved the arm a little more.

After ten minutes of eternity, the torture stopped. I could move the arm a few inches without immense pain, but that was all.

The doctor nodded, "That's pretty good. Better than I expected. I'll put a sling on the arm, and you can practice moving it a little at a time until you can get it straight. It might take some time, and it will hurt some more, but you have to move it."

"Then I'll be able to use it like before?"

He frowned. “No, I don’t think you will ever have much use in that hand, but practicing moving it will give you some mobility there.”

I just nodded and tried to wipe the tears from my eyes as unobtrusively as I could.

A couple of months after the cast was removed, I was back in full swing at school. I was able to move the arm through its full range. The right hand, although fairly useless, seemed to be improving with use. It was impossible to hold so much as a cigarette in that hand, but I managed with it. I was standing around the hangar after classes dismissed, when J.T. the head of the airframe department called out to me. “Hey, Stacy, bring the truck into the hangar.”

The truck was, like most everything else we had, a retired WWII vehicle. It was a flat bed Semi-trailer mostly used for heavy hauling. Because my father forbade me to drive the family car, I had never driven a car, and this monster had a thirteen-speed split-shift transmission. In addition to that, it did not have a modern synchro-mesh transmission, but rather one that needed to be double clutched between gears. That meant clutching to take it out a gear, revving the engine to the required matching rpm to shift, and then clutching again to get into the next gear. If engine speed and transmission speed were not matched, the sound of grinding gears could be heard for a quarter mile or more.

I replied, “I don’t know how to drive a truck.”

“Bull shit. If you can fly a plane, you can damn sure drive a truck. Now get in that truck and bring it into the hangar.”

I did as instructed and got into the truck. I had a pretty good idea of how things worked, and had no trouble starting the engine and getting it into first gear, after all the shift pattern was illustrated on a placard on the dash board. So far so good. But things started to go bad as soon as I started to let out the clutch. First, I let the clutch out too fast and stalled the engine. This

happened the first three times I tried to get the truck to move. The fact that I had to use only my left hand to shift and to steer didn't help. Resting my right arm on the steering wheel worked as long as I didn't have to turn it, but then it was a chore to get from the shift lever to the steering wheel and coordinate everything. Meantime, J.T. was standing by the hangar doors, hands on hips, waiting to close them and lock up. He yelled out, "Come on, son, get it in gear and get it in here."

Fourth time lucky. I let the clutch out slowly and the truck bucked and jumped, but started moving forward. My heart was pounding, I could feel sweat on my forehead, even though it was a fairly cool day, my hands were shaking, and my mouth was dry as cotton. In short, I was scared half to death. I horsed the wheel around and headed into the hangar, jolting and jumping. There was a clear spot reserved for parking the truck. I steered toward it. Aircraft were packed tightly on either side of the space I was threading the truck into.

J.T., watching from the rear, yelled, "Okay, that's it. Stop there."

I took my foot off the accelerator and reached for the brakes while trying to push down on the clutch at the same time. It didn't work. My feet were confused and I missed the brake. The truck was moving pretty slow, but it was a large truck with a lot of inertial momentum. I finally got the truck stopped, but not before I hit the right wing of one of the planes, crushing the wing tip. It was a vintage aircraft that belonged to J.T. and we had finished restoring it only a month earlier.

As a result of that incident, J.T. took me out to Lakefront Drive, a wide curving road that fronted Lake Pontchartrain, during the lunch hour every day for a month. My right hand, needed to operate the shift, was still mostly useless, but improving slowly with time and use. J.T. had me

drive the truck back and forth along the lakefront road until I could handle it without a miss, including backing and turning around.

J.T. was, in many ways, like a surrogate father to me in those days. Perhaps it was because I was the youngest student in the department, or maybe it was a shared burning passion for everything that flew. J.T. also got me started with real flying. We had a very narrow strip of runway that was little more than a dirt and pebble road made for us by the National Guard Airfield Construction Battalion. It was about fifteen hundred feet long and only twenty feet or so wide. Appropriately enough, it ended at a very large cemetery that adjoined the school property. We would occasionally fly some of the smaller planes from there. J.T. took me up several times in either a piper Cub, or a Stinson Voyager. We had acquired the planes by donations. They were obsolete, but they flew well and provided lots of practical hands-on experience in the course.

One afternoon, J.T. approached me and asked, “You got anything special on this afternoon?”

“No, just home after class.”

“Okay, let’s go. You can take a ride with me.”

“Sure.”

One of the other instructors drove the semi, and J.T. and I went along as passengers. I didn’t have to ask what was up, about the only time we needed the truck and so much manpower was to pick up a plane J.T. had located somewhere. We drove about an hour out into the countryside and pulled into a farm yard. Housed in a tumble-down shack, with chickens roosting in it, both tires flat, and weeds growing up all around and through it, was a relatively late model Piper J5 aircraft. It was a total mess.

We stopped and got out of the truck to appraise the aircraft. I said, “Jesus, what a mess.”

J.T. said, "It's not all that bad. I've seen a lot worse."

Paul, the other guy with us, just laughed.

I wondered what J.T. would consider bad, if this was his idea of not so bad.

Paul asked, "We going to load this thing, or just stand around and look at it?"

"Let's see if we can get it going." J.T. replied.

I just looked at J.T. Get it going? Was he nuts?

Taking a tool box out of the truck we set to work removing the engine cowl. We pulled the spark plugs and found them in relatively good shape. J.T. checked out the engine and told me, "drain the gas out of the gas tank and put fresh gas in the tank. I opened the drain and let the fuel drain into the dry dirt. When no more came out, I said, "Let's raise the tail and make sure it's all out. We lifted the tail, and another quart or so dripped out.

Going to the truck I grabbed two five gallon gas cans and fueled the Piper's tanks with the fresh gasoline. By this time, J.T. had finished his inspection of the engine and was turning the propeller over by hand. He turned it until he was satisfied he had gotten oil onto all the crankshaft parts and the prop was turning smoothly. The throttle cable was frozen solid and we couldn't get it to function, so J.T. ran a coat hanger wire through a hole in the instrument panel, through the firewall, and hooked it onto the carburetor. Next, we tried to start the engine. J.T. put me in the plane while he flipped the propeller by hand to start the engine. To my great surprise, after a dozen or so tries, the engine sputtered into life and after a minute or so, ran pretty smoothly.

Next, Paul and I attacked the tires while J.T. worked on getting the flight controls to work. We didn't have spare inner tubes or tires, so we pulled the rotted rubber tubes out and stuffed the tires with as much straw and grass as we could force into the space. The first try was

not quite up to snuff. The tires sat flat on the ground, so we removed the wheels again and forced even more grass and straw into the tires until we could barely get the tires on over the rims, but at least the tires sat a bit above dead flat.

J.T. had cut some small holes in the wing fabric so could get to the pulleys over which the control cables ran. He worked the pulleys loose and lubricated them. He then taped over the holes he had cut into the wing surfaces. He did the same with the Cables running to the tail controls, and then tested them. They worked fairly well. The wheels sat satisfactorily high, even though they were far from round where they contacted the ground.

Once more I was inside the plane while J.T. started the engine. This time, I was in the back seat. The engine started first time, and J.T. climbed into the front seat. We had removed the door and put it in the truck, so only our safety belts held us in the plane. J.T. advanced the throttle and taxied to a long meadow. He pushed the coat hanger all the way forward, and we rolled along the bumpy ground. After what seemed an awfully long time, the plane bumped into the air. I wasn't sure whether I should cheer or cry, but we were airborne and on our way home. The ninety-five horsepower engine ran smoothly, but my heart fluttered at every burp or change in the engines rhythm. I was afraid that it would stop at any moment. We were over the city, and I could see the school and the airstrip ahead.

J.T. lined up an approach and, constantly playing with the improvised throttle, got us over the strip. We landed a bit hard, and while running down the runway, the rotted rubber on the right tire shredded and peeled off the rim. The right wheel dug into the clam shells and dirt and spun the little plane around in a sickening ground loop turn. The plane heeled over and the right wingtip struck the ground. We climbed out of the plane and J.T. checked out the wing. "Not too bad," was his only comment.

He turned to me and said, “Get the tractor. We’ll tow her into the hanger.”

I did as instructed. When the other instructors and students saw the plane the following Monday, they all offered the same opinion. “J.T. has to be nuts to try to fly that thing anywhere, and you got to be even more nuts to go with him.”

For a month or so, I bathed in local glory and notoriety. Then the incident was forgotten and things returned to normal. Over the next year or so, the Piper Cub was restored to its original glory and turned out to be one of the favorite planes for the staff and those of us who could fly. J.T. and the other instructors used it a lot to fly to the two major airports in the area; Moisant Airfield, which became the international airport, and Lakefront, a large private airport on Lake Pontchartrain. I logged nearly twenty hours in the spry little plane, and loved flying it. Perhaps because of my personal involvement with it, the Piper became my favorite plane among those we used at the school.

I often went to J.T.’s house on weekends. I thought his wife, Cheryl, was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen. She knew I loved fresh French-fried potatoes, and would have a bowl full of them each time I was at their house. J.T. and I would talk about airplanes, flying, and football. Cheryl would often join us. She was pretty knowledgeable about airplanes and flying. I was not surprised to discover that she had a private pilot’s license.

In the winter, we watched whatever game we could find on one of the three television channels. Cheryl would sit and offer whatever input she thought appropriate. She would frequently sit between J.T. and me on the large couch. The touch of her thigh on mine sometimes caused me to feel embarrassed at the physical reaction I had to her close presence. After the first time I was there, and I explained how I felt about my father, she no longer asked about my family. I sometimes felt that J.T. was more like a father to me than my own, anyway. They had

no children of their own, and I think Cheryl and J.T. probably thought of me as sort of a quasi-adopted son.

Several years later, I was at sea, off the coast of Guam when I received a letter from Mother. It included a newspaper clipping telling that J.T. had been killed in a stupid accident while flying some oil company VIPs to the Gulf Coast in a seaplane. According to eye-witnesses, the plane took off normally from the Mississippi River dock, turned to the left, and then just went into the levee along the river. All the occupants were killed. I took my trumpet, went to the bow of the ship and sat there, playing blues tunes until it got dark and I had to go to get ready for my watch. As much as I thought about it, I just couldn't picture J.T. dead. There was a sense of unreality, as though I was reading one of the stories in the books I loved. For the next several months, I walked around only half there, my mind wrapped in memories.

A short time later, I got a telegram at sea. My father had died. The Navy offered me time off and transportation to attend the funeral. I declined. Had they made the same offer to attend J.T.'s funeral, I would have taken it in a New York minute.

The End of the Beginning

After my sixteenth birthday, things went from bad to worse between my father and me. Sooner or later, as the saying goes in New Orleans, that had to end up bad. Sure enough, that day arrived.

It began when I wanted to enlist in the National Guard some months before with a view to transferring to the regular Navy when I was old enough to qualify for the Naval Aviation Cadet program. My father immediately quashed the idea. Although he was living with us permanently at this time, and felt that since he was the major contributor to our financial well being, he believed that like his forefathers he was the master of the household and could therefore dictate our lives. I did not agree.

He said, “You don’t need to join any goddamn Army or Navy. You ain’t lost nothing there and you won’t gain nothing there. I’m damn sure not signing anything.”

“It’s my decision, not yours. I can damn well join if I want to.”

“Not until you’re eighteen, and that’s another year and a half. Until then, you need me to sign and you can forget that.”

“What the hell’s the matter with you? You don’t like me and you don’t really want me around here anyway.”

“Cause you think you’re so goddamn smart and everyone else is dumb. You think you know the answer to everything, but you’re still just a snot nose kid and it’s time you learn that some things you just can’t do.”

“I’ll find a way without you, you can bet your ass on it.”

“That’s exactly what I mean you little bastard. You think you can do anything, well this is one thing you won’t do ‘cause I won’t let you.”

I left, slamming the door behind me. There would never be a time when I would accept him as my father. Even though he and Mother were reconciled, and he was living with us full time after she had nursed him through a series of heart attacks, he still spent more than one night with his first wife and his girlfriends. His treatment of Mother, and his denial of me, fostered an abiding rage within me. It manifested itself anytime I had to interact with the other side of the family. They didn't speak to me and I ignored them as much as possible. He was right about one thing. When I checked with the recruiter, I found out that I did need his signature to get into the Guard, and I needed to get into the Guard in order to have a shot at the Navy.

That was one obstacle. I also had a problem with my feet because I was born with pronated ankles and therefore the proud possessor of the flattest feet seen this side of a Looney Tunes cartoon. I soon discovered that flat feet were a major detriment to enlistment into any branch of the military services. The Navy recruiter said that they would certainly reject my bid for early enlistment.

I had an ace in the hole, however. As Korea wound down, combat service units had been released to return home. One of those was a local National Guard outfit, an Airfield Construction Battalion of the Army Combat Engineers, attached to the U.S. Air Force. When the unit rotated home from Korean service, about two-thirds of the regiment dropped out or resigned. I suppose they figured two full-time wars in one lifetime were enough. As a result, the greatly understaffed unit would take any breathing male over the age of 16, if he had parental consent. My prior service with the Air Force Auxiliary would also help. I calculated, correctly as it turned out, that if I was already in a military unit, they would take me in the Navy on a transfer basis. All I had to do was wait until I reached seventeen and a half years old to qualify for a transfer, and then

eighteen to make it to flight school. I had it all figured out. Right. My father had virtually killed that idea in the womb.

I went to the National Guard headquarters at Jackson Barracks on the Orleans-St. Bernard Parish line and spoke to the recruiting sergeant.

“Well son, your dad’s right. You have to have parental consent to get in. There’s no way around that until you’re eighteen years old. Sorry.”

“He’s just my father, not my dad.”

“Oh.”

“Well, thanks anyway, Sergeant.” I started to get up and leave when a thought hit me. “Wait a minute, you said parental consent. Does that mean it has to be the father?”

“It usually is. Hold on a minute, I’ll look it up.”

He referred to a large book for several minutes. He nodded and then said, “Actually it says that generally both parents should sign, but in extraordinary circumstances, one parent can provide sufficient permission. It doesn’t specify father, guardian, or mother. Do you think your mother will sign for you?”

“I don’t know. She’s not exactly happy about me wanting to join any military service. She’s especially not happy with my plan to eventually be a military pilot and fly, but I’ll talk to her and see if I can work it out.”

A few days later, when I thought she might be more receptive, I broached the subject. “You know I want to join the National Guard, right?”

“I know, and you know I’m not in favor of it.”

“Yes, but it’s the only chance I’ll have to get enough training and flying time to be a professional pilot. It just costs too much money to get all the flying time and certificates.”

“I’m not thrilled with the idea of your flying either.”

“I know, but it’s what I want to do and somehow or other, I will find a way to do it. It would be faster, less expensive, and safer to do it in a military flight school, but one way or another, I’m going to fly.”

“I don’t guess I am going to get my way in this, am I?”

“No. Flying is my dream and my life. No matter what it takes, I am going to fly.”

Mother looked at me for a long moment, sighed, and said, “Let me think about it for a bit. Your father will have a fit if I go over his head and sign for you.”

“To hell with what he wants. It isn’t his life.”

“It would be nice if just once you two could be civil to each other.”

“There’s about as much chance of that as it is for it to snow in Hell on Easter morning.”

The following Monday, Mother accompanied me to the National Guard barracks and signed permission papers for me to enlist. As predicted, my father hit the ceiling and yelled and cursed me and Mother for an hour. Then he stormed out of the house and didn’t return for two days. I could see that Mother was hurt, but it was a small victory in a long fight and although I felt sad for Mother, I was elated that I was finally on my way to having my own life.

Over the next six months, neither my father nor I spoke a civil word to each other. We lived in the same house, but avoided being in the same room whenever possible. Mother tried to mediate, but it only earned her more verbal abuse from my father. It seemed like something was brewing and I felt a blow-up was sure to come.

One Saturday, nearly six months after my seventeenth birthday, I came home some time after noon from some function at the National Guard regiment. I don’t even remember today what it was that I had to do there, but it made me late getting home for lunch.

I asked, "Hi, Mom, anything left to eat? I'm kind of hungry."

"I've got some spaghetti and sauce I can warm up for you. Get cleaned up and I'll have it ready when you finish."

"Sounds great. Be back in a minute."

I returned to find my father in the kitchen arguing with Mother. "What's the matter, he can't make it to eat on time like the rest of us? He can do without until dinner if he can't be here when the rest of us eat."

I started to reply but my mother cut me off. "That's my son, and if he wants to eat, now or two hours from now, I'll get him something to eat." She looked at me and set a plate of spaghetti on the table. "You be quiet, sit down, and eat." She was obviously trying to avoid an all out argument.

It might have worked, but then he said, "Yeah, that's right, take up for the little bastard. You always did take his part over mine."

I guess it hit a nerve. I stood up took the plate of spaghetti and threw it at him. I shouted, "Here, if it's all that fucking important to you, take the goddamn spaghetti!"

He started to come at me. "I'll kick your ass all over this house. Who the hell do you think you are?"

Mother nearly screamed, "What's the matter with you two? Can't you even be civil at the table?"

"The little bastard needs to learn some manners. I've had enough of his back talk and I'm just the one to teach him some."

This time I was not about to back down, I was five inches taller, about the same weight, and had learned a hell of a lot about fighting in the previous year with the Guard. If my mother

had not stepped in between us and physically forced us apart, there is not a doubt in my mind there would have been blood on the kitchen floor that day.

Several days later I signed up for the regular Navy with a guarantee of assignment to Flight school through the Naval Aviation Cadet program, known in Navy parlance as Navcad. Since I was still under age, I needed parental consent. Of course, my father refused to sign the papers, so my mother talked to the recruiter and made it possible for me to enlist with her signature alone.

Mother talked to me later that evening. “I hate to see you go, and I’m going to miss you, but you’re right, it’s the only way to get away from your father, and if you don’t get away, I think it will end up bad.”

“I won’t be gone forever. I get leave after boot camp, and a month every year, so I’ll be seeing you.”

“You’re still determined to go to that flying school?”

“Yes. That’s the main reason I wanted to join the Navy. They have guaranteed me flying school, and you know that’s the only thing I’ve ever really wanted to do.”

“I’m just afraid for you. So many people get hurt and killed in those things.”

I laughed. “It’s not like I’ll be doing any combat flying, Mother. There’s no war going on.”

“No, not now, but who knows? There always seems to be a war somewhere and we always seem to get into it.”

“I’ll be careful, okay?”

“You don’t know the meaning of the word, but at least try.”

“I’ll make it a point.”

She smiled, but I knew she was far from happy with the situation.

Two weeks later I looked out the window of the Greyhound bus that would take me to San Diego and the U.S. Navy Recruit Training Depot. Mother and Tony stood on the concrete apron of the terminal area. Tony looked somehow envious while Mother had tears in her eyes. I wished I could touch her and allow her to see how I felt about leaving. On one hand, I felt a thrill of excitement and a lightness of spirit I had felt before only when flying. On the other, a small well of sadness touched my heart at leaving.

The driver announced our departure and the bus backed slowly into a departure lane, and then headed out into the street. Just as we started moving a girl sat down alongside me. I was occupied with waving goodbye to Mother and Tony and didn't notice her until we were moving down Tulane Avenue on our way to highway 90. She was attractive and about my age. I nodded hello and she smiled.

"Are you going all the way to San Diego?" She asked.

"Yeah, I'm going to the Navy training depot there."

"Oh, you're a sailor?"

I smiled. "Not yet but I guess I will be in a couple of months."

"That's great. I live in San Diego, or rather about five miles outside of the city in a town called Montgomery." She extended her hand. "My name is Michelle."

I took the hand and was surprised at how warm it felt. "I'm Stacy, but I prefer to be called Mark."

"Stacy is a nice name."

I avoided a direct answer. "Maybe we'll see each other around town."

She laughed. "It's a pretty big city and there are about ten thousand sailors there."

“Well, you never know.”

She dug in her purse and handed me a card. “well, just in case, here is how you can find me.” I looked at it and laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“Not funny, amusing. It must be fate.”

“Why?”

“Your family owns a flying service?”

“Yes, at Montgomery Field.”

“In that case I can almost guarantee I will see you again. I love to fly.”

“Great. I’ll look forward to it.” She put her hand on my leg and smiled again.

I looked out the window. Although already feeling the twinges of separation from everything I knew, I thought it wouldn’t be all that bad. I already had at least one friend. It might hit me with more force later that I was leaving the only family I had, and the only life I knew, but for now I was too happy and excited to be on my way to the adventure I felt sure awaited me. The next important phase of my life had begun and although I never looked back, I knew it was a major turning point. Military service was, and is, a rite of passage into manhood, and so it would be for me.

But that’s a whole other story.

Vita:

Warren Graffeo, a native of New Orleans, LA, is a professor of Writing and English at Texas A&M International University in the border town of Laredo, Texas. He has had two stage plays produced with a third anticipated next year, one chapbook of poetry published, numerous individual poetry pieces, one novel, and one recent short story. He is presently working on another stage play, a non-fiction book, a screenplay, and looking to place the eight novels he has completed to date. A world traveler, he has experience in Radio and Television broadcast, University teaching, has been a corporate executive, and a professional pilot.