

Alex F. Las Casas was born in Italy, immigrated to America and served in World War Two's armed forces. He earned his undergraduate degrees at Northern Illinois University and the University of Wisconsin. He performed with several Symphony Orchestras, was involved in directing, arranging, composing, and teaching both privately and in the public schools. He enjoys traveling with his wife and enjoys his children and grandchildren.

DEFINING MOMENTS

DEFINING MOMENTS



by ALEX F. LAS CASAS

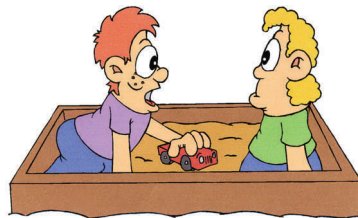
by ALEX F. LAS CASAS



Defining Moments

By

Alex Las Casas



1. PROLOGUE
2. LAND OF MILK AND HONEY
3. LOST AND FOUND
4. WHAT'S IN A NAME
5. SPARE THE ROD
6. MOTHER'S DELIGHT
7. THE TOURNAMENT
8. THE INVITATION
9. NUTIN' TA LUZ
10. THE BULLY
11. THE WINDY CITY HOP
12. A SWEET REFRAIN
13. SWEET REVENGE
14. REINDEER TIME
15. TRAIN TO SPAIN
16. MAMA MIA
17. PAPA
18. FAMILY

I respectfully dedicate this book to the memory of Dr. Charles Baker who was a source of inspiration to me as my college piano teacher. He was a Harvard graduate, concert pianist, teacher and gentleman. He was my mentor and role model. Although he has been gone for many years, his memory is always with me.



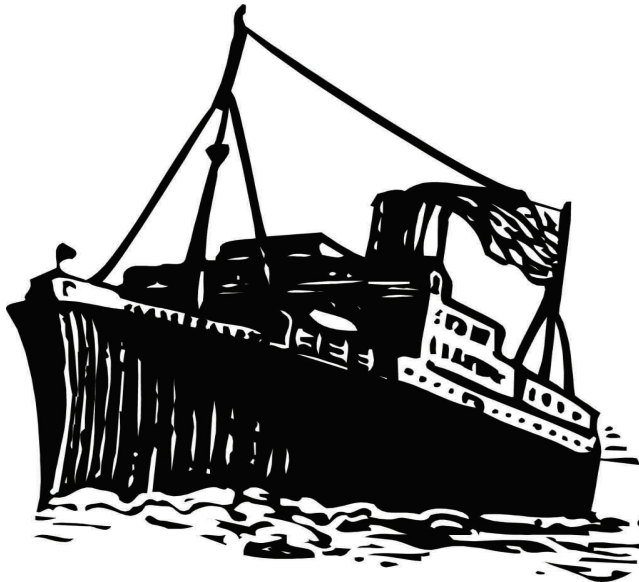
In everyone's life there is a tapestry of experiences that remains in our memory bank. They are indelibly embedded in our mind. I believe they may have a profound effect on who and what we are.

Although the circumstances and conditions of my own experiences may differ, somewhat, from yours, perhaps the resulting feelings and attitudes may strike a familiar chord.

I have attempted to relate some of my most memorable anecdotes that, I'm sure, affected many of my attitudes and helped shape my life. These were, for me, some of the most impressionable events on this journey of life. Each happened in a different time and place.



Land of Milk And Honey



It was a beautiful, sun-shinny day in spring. Waiting in the harbor was the vessel that would take us to America to begin a new life. Several of my aunts and uncles and both sets of grandparents were there to wish us “Buon Viaggio.” Awaiting this long journey were my parents, my sister and I. At four years of age, I didn’t quite understand why everyone was in tears. Deep down, they may have realized they would never see each other again. Indeed, it would be fifty years before I would see any of them once more.

It was soon time to board ship. After many hugs and kisses, we made our way onto the crowded deck.. As the ship pulled away from the dock, we waved frantically to each other until we were no longer visible. We slowly made our way through the crowd to our third class accommodations. They were not luxurious by any stretch of the imagination. Packed, drab, and smelly might have been a mild description of this tortured old tub. In such



close proximity, one had to be cautious to stay in good health, for if any illness should be detected upon arrival, there was a good chance of being rejected and denied entry. This would result in being returned to your homeland.

It was a long trip from Palermo to Ellis Island. Upon arrival, we were inspected for any physical contagious condition and quickly assigned sleeping quarters. Men were separated from the women. We slept on crude bunks in large dormitories. The next morning, after showering and undergoing further physical inspection, we were reunited with our families. We were now allowed to enter the “Land of the free, and the home of the brave.”

Although we arrived just in time for the depression, our spirits were not dampened in the least. Even though this condition seemed to cause great concern among the natives, it didn't faze us at all. We'd always been poor, so we were already in style.

On shore, we were met and greeted by relatives with more hugs and kisses, and tears of joy. After several days of reunion and hospitality, we boarded a train and proceeded to our destination, Rockford, Illinois. It seemed like forever, but we finally arrived and were greeted by my father's two brothers who had preceded us here by a few years. They handled our luggage and we crowded into my uncle John's Model A. This was my first automobile ride. It was a short trip to my uncle's house. It was a two-story structure with no indoor plumbing. For water, there was a well with a hand pump. My uncles were bachelors who were luckier than most, in that they had jobs. Uncle John worked in a foundry while Uncle Joe worked in a wood cabinet shop. They were loving, kind and generous. We lived together for several months and then my father was able to get us out of this cramped up condition. We moved into an upper apartment of a two family house. Although this had indoor plumbing and running water it was without electricity. Since we had no electrical appliances, this setback did not concern us much. For light in the evening,



we had a lantern that came with the apartment. This single kerosene lamp was our only means of illumination at night. It was, however, especially dangerous in the middle of the night, when one got up to go to the bathroom. Since it was located next to the stairway, you fell down the stairs if you turned too soon, making contact with the steps instead of the bathroom door.

My sister had been attending St. Anthony's Grade School. My mother soon decided to enroll me in a pre-school nearby, called St. Elizabeth's Center. Having never been away from home alone, this prospect frightened me to no end. Early every morning, one of the good sisters from St. Elizabeth's would walk through the neighborhood, collecting her crew for the morning's journey. They chattered as they strolled along. The dark draped leader smiled at each parent while she collected each of the little cherubs as she went. Each child would fall in line as they paraded through the neighborhood in a column of twos. None of them knew me, and I knew none of them, which added to my trepidation. "Who or what was this creature

dressed in this long, black garb? Why was she being followed by this trail of children? Where were they going and why? Would I ever come back? If so, when? Was this punishment for not drinking my milk, which I disliked?"

I felt like a lamb being led to slaughter. As we marched along, I gradually lagged behind, until I was at the end of this trail of tykes. I lay back farther and farther, and when I thought no one would notice, I made good my escape. I felt very relieved, and proud of having saved myself from God knows what fate awaited these unsuspecting kids.

Unwittingly, I took a wrong turn, whereupon I came to a neighborhood park. Somewhat exhausted from this ordeal, I decided to rest a while on one of the park swings. Since there was no one else there, I apparently had the swings and slides all to myself. I entertained myself for a couple of hours. I began thinking it must be lunch time, when all of a sudden, here comes a playmate, a boy about my age who came from somewhere across the street. He approached and uttered a few words I had never heard before. They were probably some greeting. I, in turn, greeted him with words

he had never heard. I understood no English, and he didn't comprehend any Italian. Whenever I said anything, he laughed and seemed to mock me. Even though this upset me, I tried to ignore him. He boarded the swing next to mine and continued to laugh and speak in this unintelligible tongue. He soon thought it was fun to bump my swing with his. Whenever I asked him to cease this aggressive behavior, he laughed at the sound of my words. I dismounted and slapped his leg with my open hand. He retaliated by kicking me from his perch on the swing. I, in turn, pushed him with both hands, causing him to fall backwards to the ground. I don't think he was injured, but he ran off crying. I took this as a signal for me to "scram." I ran out of the park, down the block and inadvertently made some correct turns leading me to the refuge of my home.

My mother greeted me with the usual inquisition. "Did you have fun? Did you make friends? Did you behave?" I, of course gave the response she wanted to hear. Obviously, the lady in black had gotten to my mom,

because the next morning, the routine changed dramatically. When the procession of pupils came around, the dark cloaked leader put me in front of the parade and held me by the hand. What treachery! There was no escaping now. We soon arrived at our destination, a corner building with a fenced in playground. Nearby was a large sandbox surrounding a large tree. We were led down the basement level of an old stone building. The cement floor held rows of chairs where we sat while a lady with a nice smile led us in prayer and read to us from a book. We were then led in singing, what I later learned were nursery rhymes. Needless to say, this all meant little to me due to the language barrier. Then it happened! The milk! An elderly gentleman entered with a large container of milk. Each of us was handed a tin cup into which was poured the dreaded white liquid. It all became crystal clear, now. This is what it was all about. If you don't drink your milk at home, you get sent here for rehabilitation. Fortunately, each of us was also given a cracker, which delighted my pallet after reluctantly downing the snow-white brew.

After this tasty morsel, we lined up in single file, and marched around the playground. The lucky little boy at the head of the group carried a small flag of the “Stars and Stripes.” Obviously, a reward for some reason. Perhaps, he drank two cups of milk.

Following our prescribed parade, we were handed toy pales and shovels to be used in the sandbox. This was great fun. As I labored in the sand, minding my own business, one of the other boys decided to trade shovels with me. I refused, whereupon he tried to take it away from me. In the ensuing struggle, he fell face first in the sand. He came up crying, spitting and sputtering sand in every direction. Suddenly, one of the “Dark Crusaders” came running to the rescue. I didn’t understand what was said, but I was obviously vilified, quickly punished with a firm shaking, slapped on my behind, and banished from the “Land of Sand.” When I later got home, my parents were given the “official” report of my behavior. My mother gave me

more pats on my posterior, followed by a mild tongue lashing. The irony of it all was that many of these same playmates with whom I’d had so much misunderstanding, were to become life long friends.



Lost and Found



It was an early Sunday morning. In the distance one could hear the church bells toll, calling parishioners to early mass. It was the feast day of Saint Anthony, our patron saint. There would be lots of celebrating that day in his honor. A live band would be playing in front of the church after the last mass. Saint Ambrose Social Club would serve dinner, sandwiches, pop, and popcorn. In the evening there would be a boci tournament and dancing. It was a great opportunity to be with neighbors, friends, and relatives and enjoy the festivities.

These affairs helped greatly to relieve the anxieties of the depression. People seemed to have a need that was fulfilled by getting together and exchanging feelings, experiences, and most importantly, news from family and friends who were still back in the “Old Country”. Photos were passed around, and letters quoted from. Since we

were the most recently arrived, many inquired of us the latest events of loved ones left behind. And, since many of our hometown's people had immigrated to Rockford, my parents seemed to have news and many tales to recount for any and all who approached us.

But, all this would come later. Right now, the early morning sun was introducing a beautiful, warm, summer day. Suddenly, a sound I had never heard before entered the air. It started out very faintly and gradually grew in volume so that it became more and more distinct. My first impression was that someone had a radio tuned in a little louder than usual, but as it grew in intensity, I realized it was something grander than a radio broadcast.

I ran to the corner and looked to my right. I saw nothing that could explain those sweet sounds to my ears. I glanced to my left, and there in the distance, some two or more blocks away, appeared a band marching toward me. I stood there entranced as they approached nearer and nearer until they were in full view. I stared as the

drummers drummed, and the cymbals clanged; the shiny brass horns blared, and the woodwinds sang as fingers tickled them. I was in complete awe to say the least. I had never before seen a real live marching band. Like in "The Pied Piper", I followed them up one street and down another as they marched throughout the neighborhood. They finally came to a halt on a street I had never been before. Never had I wandered off, alone, like this before. I looked for any familiar landmark, and saw none. I realized what seemed traumatic for me: I was lost. I didn't panic, however. I was aware that my home was somewhere nearby. I remembered it was three blocks from Saint Anthon's Church so I knew I could find my way from there. I started walking, hoping I could find a familiar street. I had no idea of direction. I randomly turned up one street and down another looking for that familiar bell tower whose tones so gently awoke me that morning.

I was growing more and more apprehensive. Gradually, I came to a corner grocery store. I walked in and greeted

the proprietor in Italian, which he fully understood being Italian himself. I asked him where Saint Anthony's Church was. With loud laughter and a large grin, he pointed kitty-corner from where we stood, and there it was, in all its splendor. I was at that moment, the happiest child on the planet. From there I ran as if I was being chased, all the way home. I slowed down for no one and stopped for nothing.

When I arrived home, I raced inside and was so thrilled at seeing my mother busy in the kitchen, cooking another one of her delicious Sunday lunches. She asked why I was running. In my almost breathless voice I said, "Nienti" (nothing).

She asked, "Dove hai stato?" (Where have you been?) I responded, "N'sono posto." (No place.) I felt if I answered truthfully, I would be painfully punished for leaving home alone. My parents had one consequence for any rule infraction..... pain. The fear and terror I had experienced was punishment enough, I felt. Needless to

say, I never again broke this rule.

At the same time, the thrill and fascination of this morning sojourn left such a lasting impression on me, that music became an obsession and life-long career. As the years passed, I had the pleasure of playing and marching with that same band, marching up and down those same streets that had become so familiar to me. I'm very hard pressed to recall how I could have been lost in those surroundings that became so dear to me. Surroundings that hold such precious memories so deeply imbedded in my brain.

The old neighborhood has changed a great deal over these many years. Being the area of the lower economic echelon has not changed, however. The homes are older and show great signs of wear and disrepair. Some are boarded up. Others are gone, leaving empty lots of grass, weeds and fields of dandelions. On many a Sunday morning, if I stand on that familiar corner and listen quietly, I can almost hear those sweet strains of martial music fill the air.

Although it saddens me, somewhat, to realize the old Italian Band is not going to come strutting down the street again. I relive that wonderful experience that so thrilled me and had such a positive effect on me. It was great growing up in that time and place when life seemed full of simple pleasures. I was lost that summer morning long ago, but I found a wonderment that stayed with me forever.



What's in a Name



How could a name get you into so much trouble ? According to Italian custom, I was named after my paternal grandfather, Calogero . In Italy, this name was very common, but here, my classmates seemed to have some difficulty in pronouncing it. In school, most of the nuns pronounced my name Calo”gero instead of Ca”logero. My friends called me by my nickname, Calikyo.

It was a familiar school day at Saint Anthony’s Grammar School. Sister was doing her routine note taking in her large books that lay on top of her gigantic desk, while I was doing my usual scribbling on paper. I glanced at the big clock on the wall from time to time. I thought it might be broken, since it didn't seem to move after what felt like long periods of time. At last, that sweet moment in time did arrive. My favorite time of morning — RECESS.. We put down our pencils and waited joyfully on the edge of our seats. All eyes were on Sister who also seemed to breathe a sigh of relief . She reached across her desk and gently

sounded the little silver bell which signaled us to stand as she adroitly led us in a short prayer . She sounded the bell a second time after which we lined up in single file. She then took her place at the head of the line of anxious scholars. With bell in hand, she led us outdoors to the playground behind the school building . The area was swarming with children from various grades . We mixed and mingled playing skip rope , marbles , tag , crack the whip , lead the way out , and other familiar children's games . Over to one side, a small group of boys and girls were standing together chatting and laughing .One of them beckoned me over . I approached, recognized Anthony , a third grade boy who often delighted in teasing me . Anthony addressed me with his familiar taunt (K-ka lee- kee-yo) after which all the children around him laughed . Feeling embarrassed, I turned and started to walk away . Momentarily glancing back , I noticed Anthony had turned his back to me . I quickly spun around , ran and jumped on his back . We both fell to the ground . Uninjured, he got up and hovered over me spewing verbal threats . I said nothing . He followed up by pushing me on the shoulder with one hand. I fell against a fence that was behind me . Taking a step forward , he grabbed me by the

shoulders with both hands . I instinctively responded with a couple of body punches to the belly, at which time he let loose of me, crying and screaming . Sister came on the run, immediately singled me out as the culprit , gave me a slap on my behind , and sentenced me to stand against the building . She called me a “ Heathen “ and a “ Brazen Boy .)” I had not heard these terms before , but I suspected they were not complimentary . Some of Anthony's friends teased me as I stood in my place of confinement . They were quick to inform Sister as to the “ facts “ in this matter. Their version made Anthony the poor victim and me the vile villain . In a few minutes Sister sounded her trusty bell calling all members of her class to line up . I remained at my post as I was previously commanded , while the others filed into the building . In a short time one of my classmates came running out to retrieve me . When I entered the room, all were seated quietly . Every eye was on me . I headed for my seat when, all of a sudden, Sister's voice boomed , “ Come here , you bold child . “ As I approached, I could see she was very angry . To say the least . In her hand was her favorite weapon — a thick yardstick . When I got to within striking distance , she barked, “ Assume the position . “ I had never before heard this expression and was not

sure what my posture should be . She repeated her command. Again, I did not react .

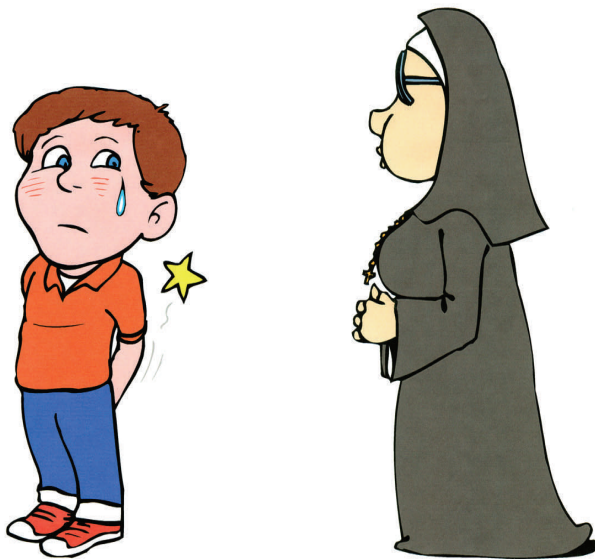
A classmate seated nearby whispered “ Grab your ankles . “ At this point I realized her intention and knew I could not comply with her request which she kept repeating . I felt I could not live down the humiliation of being struck on my bottom with the entire class looking on . With each sound of her voice , I retreated slowly . Soon, I could go no further . My back was against the wall . I racked my brain for a way out . I considered making a break for the door , but I would have had to go past her . I also thought of crying so she might have pity on me . I did the only thing that came to my mind next . I extended my right hand in the familiar punishment mode . Her right arm reared back and her stick came booming down like thunder on my palm. . Noticing she was not yet appeased, I retracted my wounded digits and stretched out my left hand for a repeat performance .

It was a relief to hear her say, “ Take your seat, you brazen lad.” As I headed for my seat, Sister’s voice rang out behind me,

“Young man, did you forget something?”

I stopped in my tracks , turned around, and gave the designated response , “ Thank you, Sister .” As I proceeded to my seat, the silence was deafening . No one stirred or spoke a word . As I took my place, the boy behind me approvingly gave me a couple of soft pats on my shoulder . This helped make the pain in my hands bearable. Sister gently laid her pain-weapon on her desk , turned to the class and said “ Let us all stand and say three Hail Mary’s for the salvation of Calogero’ s immortal soul . “ We all stood along side our desks , while Sister led us in this prayerful scene. No one ever referred to this event again . This was not the first “ school problem “ in my life , nor would it be the last .

Spare the Rod



Saint Anthony's Elementary School was the focal point of much of my childhood. The Franciscan Nuns were dedicated, talented and strict to a fault. There were many rules and expectations, but mainly one consequence.... pain. Every Sister had her own favorite weapon. Some used a ruler. Some used a stick. Others swung a paddle. Sister Mary Clare, the first grade teacher was the exception. She preferred the time out method. That resulted in isolation in the custodian's closet, a place where Mr. Sarno kept his supplies. I have vivid memories of that small but dark area. I remember well one day in particular. I don't recall what crime I committed, but I remember the sentence. I was banished to Mr. Sarno's dungeon, as we kids called it. What was most memorable about this event was the fact that Sister forgot me in that dark room with no windows. I rested on a cardboard box,

and after a while, I fell fast asleep. In the meantime, the school day ended and everyone vacated the building as was usual. I was awakened by the sound of the doorknob turning. There stood Mr. Sarno. Looking surprised, he said, “What are you doing in here, son? School has been out for an hour. You better beat it home. Your mamma is going to be worried.”

I hurried out of the building, ran down the street three blocks to my home where my mother was waiting for me in the doorway. When asked where I’d been, I said I had stopped on the way to play with a classmate. To tell her I had gotten in trouble in school would have been a huge mistake. Parents did not react too kindly when hearing their offspring misbehaved anywhere, particularly in school.

Sister Mary Dominic had the reputation for being the strictest disciplinarian in the entire school. She taught both the third and fourth grades. I had the dubious honor of being under her tutelage in both grades. Being

disciplined by her was almost a daily affair for me.

Sister Mary Dominic had many rules and requirements which made it very easy to displease her. This phenomenon was quickly accompanied by pain, which she dispensed with great skill using a tapered stick. It was a colorful weapon of red, white and blue measuring some two and a half feet in length.

The morning always started with her faintly ringing the bell that sat on her desk. She did this by pressing a button located on top of the instrument giving that familiar classroom ring. We would respond immediately with complete and instant silence. She would then give her bell a second ring, whereupon we stood up alongside our desks at attention, placed our right hand over our heart and, in unison, recited the Pledge Of Allegiance, facing the flag which hung above the chalkboard. Sister would then sound her bell once again. This was the signal for each to join our hands just below our chin and recite The Lord’s Prayer, once again, in unison. Upon completion of this daily ritual, Sister would again use her bell to signal

us to be seated.

Next, came her first verbal command, “All those who do not have their arithmetic homework line up along the south wall.” This area was located on our left. Sister could then pick up her colorful weapon and position herself at the head of the column of offenders. This was followed by reaching with her left hand, grasping the end of the large sleeve of her garment draping her right arm. She deftly tossed it over her shoulder exposing her arm, which was covered by a white undergarment while in her right hand glistened the “tri colored avenger”. You waited your turn in single file for a dose of the medicine that was intended to cure “homeworkitus”. Sister dispensed this dosage by whacking you on your opened palms, spelling arithmetic on each outstretched appendage. As she completed attending each patient, you were required to say, “Thank you, Sister.”

I recall the pain being so severe, that the only relief was achieved by placing my hands under my thighs and pressing as hard as I could against the seat. For more

serious infractions, Sister might call for reinforcements. This was done by sending a student to summon Father Simon. He was a giant of a man who seemingly possessed superhuman strength. I wondered if he didn’t formerly play linebacker for Notre Dame.

He would clasp his hands around your head, or shoulders and with great ease, lift you to his face level, whereupon he would recite a litany on the loss of Heaven and the pains of hell. All the time, the strong smell of garlic fumes smothered your face and almost anesthetized you. When your feet once again touched terra ferma, he would ask, “Now, what do you have to say to Sister?”

You would then respond, “I’m sorry, Sister. I won’t do it again.” Then, to complete the ritual, you had to turn to the “dark-clothed avenger” and say, “Thank you, Father.”

One of the most vivid memories of Sister’s colorful cane occurred one winter morning when I was late for school. The snow was deep that day. I had no snow boots and no

gloves. My hands and feet were so cold they were quasi-numb. I entered the room. All heads turned toward me with a frightful gaze. Sister growled, “You’re late, young man. Step over here.” I knew the drill. It was to hold out my hands and have late spelled on my icy fingers. This I did. Sister rolled back her sleeve, wound up and let fly that mother of matriculation. As it came in contact with my ice-cold palms, I was surprised the pain was less than I expected due to their frigid condition. She spelled out late on my left hand and then proceeded to play the same tune on my right. Just as she reached the final note, her trusty “colored cane” broke in two. One end remained in her hand. The other half flew to the ceiling, I bounced off the light fixture chain, ricocheted off the wall and fell harmlessly to the floor. Students gasped with opened mouths. Then the silence became deafening. Sister’s mouth remained open. She was motionless as if in a trance. I walked over to where the “dead stick” lay, picked it up with my numb hand, walked back to Sister and handed her the “demised demon.” I looked at her and said softly, “Thank you, Sister.”



Mother's Delight

As a child, one of my favorite pastimes was visiting my cousin Mario. He was my age and since his parents were both of Italian descent, they spoke Italian as well as English. They were more fortunate than most, since they enjoyed living in a large two-story house. They were not affected by the on-going depression since my uncle had the good fortune of having a job, a rarity in that time. They had a car, nice clothes, and fine furniture. Mario had many toys, which I enjoyed at every opportunity. I, with my two younger brothers Vince and Joe, spent many enjoyable hours on his tricycles, wagons and sled.

Mario was an only child who was spoiled by a doting mother. In her eyes, he could do no wrong and many of his antics and childish exploits were viewed as prodigious.

On one of our visits to Mario, my brothers and I proposed playing cops and robbers or cowboys and Indians. Either game required toy guns. "I've got a lot of toys, but I don't have any toy guns" Mario said. I wasn't surprised since I figured Aunt Lena probably wouldn't approve.

"Mario, does your mom have any clothes pins?" I inquired.

"Yes, there's a basket full on the side porch." We took two a piece. When they were hooked together, they served well as a gun. With a little vocal sound affect, these harmless toys provided all the fire power a tot needed.

While we ran around the yard laughing and shouting and whooping it up, Aunt Lena heard us shooting our clothespins. She ran out chastising us for "acting like a bunch of hoodlums." Her remarks were directed at my brothers and me. "You're going to grow up to be

gangsters. You boys are a bad influence on my Mario."

Mario said nothing while standing there posing like a victim. She rewarded him with a Popsicle, while chasing us home.

One winter day, my brothers and I decided to visit our favorite playmate, cousin Mario, especially since he had a sled in his arsenal of toys. Mario was glad to play with us, but as usual, we had to play by his rules. He was the only one who could ride solo on his sled. We could only ride by joining him in "flopping". In flopping, the solo rider runs with sled in hand and flops on the sled. The second rider waits some twenty feet away and flops on the rider as he goes by. We all took turns flopping Mario who always insisted on being the solo rider. I somehow convinced Mario to let me be the solo rider so he could be the flopper.

Running as fast as I could with sled held firmly in



hand, I dove onto the sleek chariot as Mario stood in position ready to join me on the speedy slider. Just as he was about to dive on, I suddenly, and purposely, Swerved away from him just enough for him to miss his target and land face first in the snow. He got to his feet screaming and crying. My brothers and I stood laughing profusely.

His wails of woe did not go unanswered. Aunt Lena heard the alarm and responded in great haste. What followed was quite predictable. While hugging and consoling her cool kid, she recited her familiar litany reaffirming us as certified villains and future gangsters. Mario was uninjured except for his pride. He stood wrapped in his mother's arms, grinning while she berated us. Once again we were chased home.

On the way my youngest brother, Joe, asked "why does she always say we're going to be gangsters when we grow up?"

"I guess she thinks if you play cops and robbers, you'll be

a gangster when you grow up," I answered.

Vince retorted sarcastically, "Yea, like if you eat eggs, you might grow up to be a chicken."

One day it was announced that my brothers and I were invited to cousin Mario's house to hear the results of fourteen lessons on the piano. It was a beautiful summer afternoon. Too warm to be indoors, but as this was a command performance, we sat in his living room as instructed while Aunt Lena introduced the future great pianist of the world, "Sir Mario the Great."

He took his place at the keyboard and gave a rendition of the most disorganized set of notes ever assembled in one room. It was a performance only a mother could love. It was an event that only by its brevity brought this torture to a merciful end. Aunt Lena looked smilingly as she led us in a round of applause. She walked over to the performer and congratulated his effort with a big kiss on the cheek. She said in a proud voice, "My son is going to be famous as well as handsome. He could be a great

musician or maybe a movie star.” She wiped some perspiration from her brow with her hands as she said, “Boys, it’s so warm in here, perhaps you’d be more comfortable in that cool breeze out on the porch.”

As she disappeared into the kitchen, I mockingly said, “So, you’re going to be a movie star, huh!?”

Vince added quickly, “ya, maybe you’ll be one of The Three Stooges!”

We were laughing as we exited onto the porch. Just then Aunt Lena came out with a platter containing four cookies and four apples. “Here, boys, maybe you’d like a little something to snack on”, she said. She laid the plate on the rail and walked back into the house. Mario was quick to grab the largest cookie and largest apple. My brothers and I were unaccustomed to treats between meals so this was a special delight for us. We savored the occasion by taking tiny bites of the cookie so each delicious morsel would last.

Mario, on the other hand, gobbled up his as quickly as he could and then, insisted we each give him a piece of ours. We refused, whereupon he threatened to tell his mom we had been teasing him. We acquiesced. Another score for cousin Mario.

Mario controlled many childhood events by virtue of his material possessions and an overly protective mother to help enforce his many whims and wishes. This served him well during much of his childhood, but as time moved on and economic conditions improved, the playing field leveled itself off. As time passed on our relationship slowly waned.

After these many years, Aunt Lena’s prediction of gangster-hood never came to fruition. My brothers and I each earned college degrees. We served our country in the armed forces. Each of us followed successful professional careers, and enjoy marriage and family life. Mario moved out of state after high school. Aunt Lena lives in a high-rise facility. My brothers and I visit her often.

The Tournament



Marbles was the game of the day during the depression years. Every self-respecting lad carried a number of the solid spheres in his pocket, ready to meet the challenge of any of his peers. This shoot-out of marbles was a daily affair. In a separate pocket, he kept a special marble that was never to be risked in a game. This was his “Shootin’ shooter.” If he was successful, it became his “Lucky shootin’ shooter.” Since the game required a dirt floor, alleys were the usual venue. The game became extremely popular.

Using a stick, a ring was drawn on the ground, about five feet in diameter. Each boy places the same number of marbles in the center. Using his shootin’ shooter, each participant tries to knock as many marbles out of the ring as he can. These he gets to keep. If, while taking his turn,

The Tournament

he is unsuccessful, it becomes the next player's turn. On the other hand, as long as he is successful, he continues his turn until he misses. He can shoot from any place behind the ring. When shooting, the shooter is held between the thumb and forefinger. He takes aim, knuckles touching the ground, and flicks the shooter with his thumb. If, in the process of knocking a marble out of the pot, his shooter remains inside the ring, he may take his ensuing shot from his position in the ring or from anywhere outside the ring. Now, here is an important point. If, while taking his turn, he fails to knock out a marble, and his shooter fails to clear the ring, he must leave it there, where it may be a target for his opponent. If the opponent knocks the left shooter out of the ring, the game ends and the said opponent wins all the marbles left in the ring.

I was twelve years old and a better than average player. There came a time when a marble tournament was being held at South Park, a neighborhood hangout. The big event was being held on a Saturday morning. The

appointed day arrived. It was a typical sun shiny day. Several of my friends stopped by my house with their spherical treasures in their pockets and together we walked to the park.

The event attracted many participants and more than a few spectators. Several games were held at the same time in an elimination process. I played my heart out and managed to survive some very close games. It finally came down to me having to play the final game against an older boy of fifteen, the other survivor. Phil Cicero had a reputation for being a very skilled marble player. It was said when he took his shot, his shooter resembled a bullet coming out of a gun barrel. That's how he got his nickname "Gunner." I knew I was in for the game of my life. We were introduced to each other. Gunner shook my hand as he said, "You're the kid that lives on West Street."

"Ya", I replied.

“My cousin lives two doors away from ya” he remarked.

“Ya, I know.”

He glanced around as he said, “Looks like a lot of your friends are here rootin’ for ya. Well, here’s the thing, kid. Some of my buddies are here, too. Ya know? So, expect no favors. Got that?” I felt too intimidated to give a response. He sounded like he was apologizing for the way he was going to pound me into the ground.

Some of my friends gathered around me and attempted to reassure me. Frank said, “Don’t let him scare ya. You can take him. Your lucky shootin’ shooter’s workin’ for ya. Ain’t it?”

“Ya, but I got a little nick on it.”

“What!” He exclaimed. “Ya can’t use that. Here, take mine. It’s a peach.”

“No.” I insisted. “I’m gonna keep goin’ with mine.”

“Are ya sure? Mine’s a real sticker.”

“It’s O.K., Frank. This is my lucky shooter. We’ll make it.”

“O.K. beat this palooka!”

After handshakes and pats on the back from our rooters, Gunner and I were formally introduced to the crowd. We shook hands and assumed our places. A coin was tossed, while I was instructed to call it. I called it and lost. Gunner took his position on his right knee. He held his shooting shooter deftly between his thumb and forefinger. In one motion he wrapped his remaining fingers smartly and swiftly around his palm, while with a flick of his thumb, propelled his lucky marble toward the center of the ring. Instead of attempting to break up the pot, and thus dispersing the marbles, he aimed at one on the outer edge, therefore, keeping the pot intact. He continued his play again, assuming his original position. Maintaining

the same strategy, he went for another marble from the edge of the group.

He continued in this same mode, shot after shot, each time without disturbing the main group. He finally had retrieved four of the original ten and needed only two more to give him a simple majority, which would give him a victory. His friends shouted and cheered him on with each adroit shot. Now, going for his fifth glossy pill, he got a little careless and his shooter glanced off its target, moving it ever so slightly. At last it was my turn. My friends and well wishers cheered and shouted encouraging remarks as I approached the ring. I took my position on my right knee, and remained still for a moment. The silence was deafening. After momentary reflection, I stood up. I decided to forego my shot and to bowl-in, instead. I tossed my shooter into the ring, slowly, so that it nestled in the midst of the pot of glistening throng. Now it was up to him. I counted on him being tempted to go after my shooter. If he were successful, he'd win instantly. It would not be an easy shot, for my shooter was bunched in with the other

marbles. It called for a lot of precision, a powerful delivery, and a lot of luck. His friends bellowed howls of bravura as he took his place on bended knee. He appeared to be in no hurry. He seemed calm, savoring the moment. Studying the situation, he slowly ran his tongue across his lower lip, tightened his grip, and let his marble fly with tremendous velocity. It struck the middle of the pot, sending marbles in every direction. Lucky for me, none cleared the ring, including his shooter. They were widely spread out. Now the situation had reversed itself in my favor. He was in the same predicament I was just in, and it was my turn. If I could knock his shooter out of the ring, I would emerge the victor. There was, however, one major problem. Unfortunately, his shooter was near the edge of the ring, while mine was near the edge on the opposite side. It would be a long shot for me. If I could stay cool and collected, this shot could do it for me. I'd made shots like this many times before.

I didn't care about the prize, whatever it was. Victory in this moment would be prize enough for me. The

The Tournament

admiration from friends; the affirmation from peers; the satisfaction that comes from overcoming obstacles and emerging victorious over a worthy adversary. These thoughts and feelings were swirling through my brain. I tried to concentrate on this all-important moment, as I felt my heart pounding in my chest. My mouth felt dry like I could spit cotton. As I wiped my shooter on my shirt, a cloud of silence swept over the anxious throng. A soft voice said, "Give him room."

I hunkered down on my knee, took careful aim, and with a flick of my thumb, my trusty spheroid flew across the ring. The silence was suddenly shattered with gasps of "Ooh" and "Aah!" My shooter had flown speedily across the ring missing its target completely. I froze in disbelief. Gunner's fans cheered loudly as he quickly took his position and proceeded to clear the ring.

While Gunner's friends smothered him with compliments and congratulations, mine tried to console me with kind phrases and comforting remarks. It was a picture of "The

thrill of victory, and the agony of defeat." I tried as hard as I could to hide my disappointment.

Now came the awarding of the prize - a beautiful five by twelve inch metal box of orange and blue. When the lid was lifted, there was displayed a most colorful array of marbles. Gunner took me by surprise by walking over to me and saying "Good game, kid!" As he shook my hand, he held up the colorful prize, lifted the lid and said, "Pick out a shootin' shooter, kid."

"Thanks, Phil, "I said with a smile."

He grinned and retorted, "My friends call me Gunner."



The Invitation



Poverty was the order of the day during the “Great Depression.” My parents, siblings, and I were living in a four-family flat that had no central heating, no rugs on the floors, no furniture except in the kitchen and bedrooms. The dining room contained an old radio, a pot-bellied stove, and an old upright piano that was given to us by a neighbor. Although we had a living room, there was no furniture in it. The kitchen had a bare wood floor.

In a large family, where poverty was prevalent, food, as with other desired commodities, was never an over abundant item. Therefore, one was seldom late for a meal. Silverware was also a scarcity at our kitchen table. We were one fork short in our arsenal of eating utensils. My mother had a small wooden implement that she used in her cooking which served as a regular fork for the last one

The Invitation

at the table. Unfortunately, that chosen one was usually me. Like many other things in life, after a while, I grew used to it.

Saturday nights were evenings for going out funning. For teenagers like me, a popular rendezvous was the C.Y.O. (Catholic Youth organization). It was a place downtown where teen boys and girls could go on Saturday nights to dance, mix, and hang out. It was all very clean and wholesome. There was punch, soda pop, popcorn, cookies, etc., sponsored by the church and very closely chaperoned. There is where I spent many Saturday nights and where I experienced my first “puppy love.”

Her name was Betty Daye. Unlike me, she lived in the wealthy side of town, the North End. She was from a small family. We took a shine to each other from the start, and I looked forward to seeing her each week. We were rarely alone, since being alone was not encouraged.

Since we didn't attend the same school, it was difficult for us to see each other. My family had no phone or car. We

lived on the other side of the tracks, on the south side of town. It was thrilling to hold each other while dancing. I was grateful for that.

On one of these treasured encounters, Betty invited me to dinner with her family for the following Sunday. “Are you sure it's O.K. with your folks?” I asked.

She replied with a grin, “of course. It was their idea, and my sister is also anxious to meet you. I've told them all about you.”

“Well, should I bring a fork?”

“A fork? I don't understand.” She said quizzically. After explaining the plight of poverty, she remarked with a smile, “No, you don't have to bring a fork. We have ample silverware, I'm sure.”

“How should I dress?”

“Can you wear a sport coat?”



The Invitation

I hesitated, and in an embarrassing mode I answered, “I don’t have one that fits very well.” The truth of the matter was that I didn’t have one at all. No one in my family owned a sport coat.

“You can wear a shirt and a tie,” she said in an understanding tone.”

To break the tension of the moment, I said, “Yes, a shirt and tie....and I’ll wear trousers, too.”

She laughed and quipped, “Oh, Al! You’re so funny.”

Please understand what a traumatic event this dinner was going to be for me. I had never eaten in a restaurant or partaken of a meal in anyone’s home, but mine. I had such mixed emotions. I was both happy and apprehensive at this new adventure. My immigrant parents were not quite in tune with boy and girl relationships in this new country. Therefore, in order to avoid any problem, I told them I was invited to dinner at the home of a classmate - a

male classmate. My mother remarked, “Be sure to take a bath and change your underwear and you should not go empty handed. Maybe I can bake a pie.”

My father interrupted, “No pie, you bring a bottle of my homemade wine.”

My mother acquiesced.” Si, un bottiglia di vino.”

The appointed day arrived and I went to an early mass that Sunday morning. I had on my glad rags and with my wine bottle under my arm (wrapped in a paper bag), I said “See you later,” and headed for the nearest bus stop.

When I arrived, Betty met me at the door. To say I was nervous would be an understatement. She led me into the living room where her dad and sister were sitting. Mr. Daye rose and shook my hand as Betty introduced us. She then turned to her sister and said, “Sue, Al plays the piano, too. Did I mention that Sue studied piano for eight years, Al?”

Just then, her mother walked in from the kitchen. “Oh!

The Invitation

You must be Al. We've heard so much about you. I do hope you're hungry."

I nervously handed her my bottle of booze and said, "This is a bottle of my father's wine. He makes his own."

"Oh thank him very much. Homemade wine?"

"Yes," I said. "Italians do that, you know." For some reason they found that remark amusing and all laughed. I joined in the laughter, although I wasn't sure why.

"I hope you have an appetite." Mrs. Daye said. "Shall we go into the dining room?"

Mr. Daye sat at the head of the table with Mrs. Daye at the opposite end. The two girls sat side by side, while I took the seat opposite Sue.

The table setting was exquisite - napkin holders, flowers, candles, beautiful china. Suddenly, I looked down at my place setting and saw what sent a chill through my being.

Instead of a fork, there were several forks of different size, several spoons of different size and shape, and knives. I thought, "When and how do I use each? Why did I ever put myself in this predicament? How am I going to get through this?" All of a sudden it came to me. "I'll keep an eye on Sue, straight across from me, and imitate her."

To start with, she picked up her napkin and laid it across her lap. Now came the toughest parts - when to use what hardware. We started with soup. I had never had anyone's soup but my mother's. I noticed quickly, this did not have the same flavorful taste. I missed the various vegetables, herbs and spices, and whatever else went into my mother's soup. Although this had a foreign taste, I forced myself to finish it. I said nothing, and soon noticed I was the first one finished. I was pleased that this portion of the meal was over; or was it? Noticing I had completed this liquid course, Sue said, "Al must love your soup, mother!" I felt I had to say something.

I responded with “OH, yes. That was very delicious, Mrs. Daye!”

I’m so glad you like it. We have plenty. Give me your bowl, please.” What else could I do but hand her my bowl and tried to appear pleased. While suffering through this second portion, I decided to slow down with each course. When I reported my experience back home, my family was fascinated to hear of the spoons and forks of every size and shape and how each participant had a set all his own to use. It seemed a little difficult, now, to return to my “fork.”



Notin' ta luz



This was Camp Stoneman, California, a port of embarkation for the Pacific theater of war. We'd completed our eight weeks of basic training, and were aboard a large troop ship, the USS Buckner. Destination unknown. As soon as we were underway, the ship's deck became a casino. G.I.'s spread blankets all over the deck. Poker hands were flying and dice were rolling.

The ship's store opened early every afternoon for the ship's crew only. The most popular purchase seemed to be Hershey's chocolate candy bars, which the sailors bought for five cents and sold to us soldiers for one dollar. Mind you, we paid the price gladly. Under the circumstances, money had very little value. It was like playing with monopoly money. We'd have given more if they had asked. It's strange how the value of money

changes with the situation. It's all relative. Isn't it? I recall the depression years when I shined shoes for a dime, and sold newspapers where my profit was a half-cent per paper; rode the city bus for three cents; went to the movies for a nickel. Our socks were darned and our cloths were hand-me-downs. (Which could be embarrassing if your older sibling was your sister). I remember the corner grocery store proprietor would say, "Pay me when you can." I recalled, too, the candy counter in all the corner groceries where numerous "Goodies" were displayed costing one penny each; like a package of gum, or a seven pack of caramel candies, or a large sucker. These and many more required only one cent; but, the problem was you usually didn't have the penny.

Well, here we were paying a dollar for a nickel candy bar. In another time and place, a dollar seemed like a lot of money. Now, in this time and place, it was just a piece of paper with a number on it.

The weather was hot and humid, but the wind felt refreshing as I stood there on the deck. On this hot

summer day, an announcement came over the sound system, "How hear this: anyone who plays piano may report for audition on the main deck, compartment nine, at 0900 tomorrow."

I asked one of the crew members standing nearby, "Hey, sailor, what's that all about?"

"Did ya play, kid?" he asked.

"Yes, I do." I replied.

"Well, you can have a sweetheart of a deal if ya gets past the or-dishin'. Den ya gets ta play for da officers while dare eatin. Ya gets ta live in quarters wid air condishnin, and ya eats the same swell food dey git. How duz dat sound?"

"Gee, great!"

"Den ya betta git yasef up dare tamarra at o nine hunurd.

Dats nine in da morning.”

“Yes, I will.” I hesitated. “But there is a bit of a problem.”

“Wat’s at?”

“It’s been a long time since I’ve touched a keyboard. I wonder if there’s a piano I can brush up on for an hour or so.”

Cocking his head slightly to the left, he slowly rubbed his chin as he spoke. “Well...dare might be a way. Dare’s an ol piano in our day-room. If I rustle up a pair o duds dat fits ya, ya can pass for a swabbie. Den, I can take ya to da piano.”

“Isn’t that kind of risky?” I asked.

“Nah. It’ll be O.K.”

The tempo of his speech picked up as he spoke. “Tell ya wat. Wait by dis door.”

He disappeared through the steel door, and I nervously waited as I was told. After a short time, he reappeared with some crinkled up sailor’s outfit under his arm. As he took a quick glance around, he said, “Come wid me, kid.” We went through the door, down a short corridor which led to a restroom or the “Head” as sailors called it. We entered, and he handed me the outfit. It almost fit. I felt foolish, as I noticed him wearing a big smile.

“Looks gud,” he remarked. “Jes one thing. I forgot da shoes, but if ya take off yur combat boots, da pants is long enuf. No one’ll notice.” We left the head and I followed him to what they called the day room. There was the most beat-up piano, which, needless to say, had not been tuned in a long time. Fortunately, all the keys worked. I ran through some short exercises and a couple of Chopin Etudes after which I noticed a uniformed officer standing quietly in the corner to my right. He walked over as my heart rose to my throat. I tried not to act frightened as he



asked, "Where did you learn to play, sailor?"

"Chicago Conservatory," I gulped.

"Chicago?" he said. "I've got a cousin that lives in Oak Park."

"Yes, I've been there many times, sir.

"Go ahead with your playing. I didn't mean to interrupt."

As he exited, my breathing returned to normal. I was now too fearful of getting caught to continue. That was too close for comfort. I wasn't too sure of what would happen if I got caught, but I didn't want to find out, either. I reentered the head, changed clothes, bid my helper "thanks", and went out to the deck area. I breathed a sigh of relief as I talked to myself. "Did I really do that? I must be losing my marbles. If I had been caught, what would have happened? The brig? Court martial? The plank?"

Trying to sleep at night was always a problem. My

sleeping area was located three compartments below the main deck. Many got seasick and tossed their cookies down there. The heat was terrific and the stench was unreal. Therefore, many of us avoided this compartment. We took our blankets and slept out on the main deck. Early at daybreak, every morning, the ship's crew chased us off so they could mop down the deck. This morning was no exception. I picked up my blanket, took it below, and returned topside.

I passed the time looking over the side watching the white foam caressing the ship as it plowed gently through the bright blue liquid. It was a novelty to observe flying fish jumping out of the water. The morning sun rising out of the blue was a real delight.

I was pleasantly surprised at my old sailor chum approaching. "Hi there," I greeted.

"Mornin," he said. "Ya ready ta tickle da ivrees?"

"Yes, I guess."



“Well, ya sounded purty good yesterday. I think ya got a good shot at it. Den, remember, too, Ya got notin ta loose.”

“Your right, but I’m still a little nervous. I’ll feel better when I get up there. It’s this waiting that makes me jittery. I always feel a little creepy just before I have to play for someone, but, once I get into it, I’m fine.”

“Are ya really from da windy city like ya toll da man?” he asked.

“I’m from a town near there called Rockford.”

“Wat’s ya name, kid?”

I extended my had as I said, “Al.”

“Howdy. I’m Jess.”

“Where are you from, Jess?”

“Nowhere, really. I’ve moved aroun all ma life. Got into a little trouble when I was a kid. Spent some time in da slammer. Was in da Merchn Marine. Den, I signed up for a couple of hitches an found a real home in da Navy. Ya got any family, kid?”

“Yes - mother, father, two brothers and a sister.” I looked squarely at him and asked, “How about you, Jess?”

He gave a quizzical look as he spoke, “I tink I gotta brahda somewheres. We got split up when I was ten. He wuz five den. Kute lidle guy. Neva seen him agin. Don’t know if he’s alive even. Gee! Look at da time, kid! Ya auta git up dare. It don’t hurt none ta be a lidle early.”

“Yes, you’re right. I’ll see you later,” I said as I headed for the audition.

When I arrived, there was a line of about fifteen ahead of



me. At first I felt a little intimidated, but I soon settled down and felt a surge of confidence. I wasn't sure how much time I'd have, but I thought I'd play a show tune and a Chopin etude. The line seemed to move faster now. Soon I was next. A young ensign, dressed in a clean white uniform, opened the door and announced, "Next."

I entered, and there stood a glossy, white, Steinway, baby grand. The young officer handed me a clipboard and said, "Print your name and outfit on this paper, soldier." I did as he ordered and sat at the piano. I thought I'd loosen up my fingers a little, so I ran up the keys with an E-flat scale and followed it with a diminished arpeggio. Suddenly, I heard a voice command, "O.K., thank you."

"But, Sir - I haven't played yet!"

"Yes, you have. We're short of time, private. Thank you very much. We've got your name."

"You're welcome, sir." In later years when I took time to

think about it, I was reminded of this scene while watching Chuck Berry and the Gong Show on t.v. All that was missing was the gong. I figured they found what they wanted in an earlier performer, so now, they were just going through the motions. But, it was, after all, just like Jess said, I had "Notin Ta Loose."

That morning, rumor spread that we were pulling into Pearl Harbor. Maybe we'd get some time off this tub. I went to the starboard side and looked into the distance. It was a bright sun-shiny day, as usual. I noticed the water changing color from deep blue to a light green. Someone later pointed out this color change was caused by the change in the depth of the water.

As we entered the harbor, I became suddenly sullen at the sight of the wreckage that was still strewn throughout the water. You could see the hull of the Arizona sticking out of the water with twelve hundred men entombed in its compartments. Debris was everywhere. After our ship docked, the scuttlebutt was we'd be there a number of



days. Some of the ship's crew would get liberty to go ashore, but we were restricted on board. While we waited, cards again flew and dice rolled. Some hung around and exchanged jokes and stories. I found an old paper back of "Great Expectations" and spent some time reading. Sometimes I shot the breeze with some of my basic training buddies trying to guess where we were headed for. No one seemed to know for sure. There were lots of rumors about that.

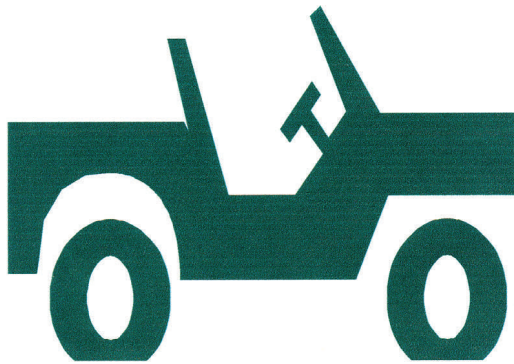
Two days passed and we were on our way again. I walked around the deck, searching for Jess. I wanted to tell him about my "Gong Show" experience. When I saw a member of the crew, I enquired about Jess. The usual reply was, "Never heard of him, but this ship's got a large crew."

After several attempts, I found a sailor who said, "Oh, Jess? Well, he went ashore at Pearl, and while there, he had to be hospitalized with an attack of appendicitis. So, he had to stay behind. Lucky dog."

"Poor Jess," I thought. "He was a real stand up guy. I hope he'll be alright." I never saw him again.



The Bully



After leaving Pearl Harbor, our troop ship sailed on for several days. One evening, we could see tiny lights in the distance. All night rumors ran rampant. At daybreak, all rumors were erased as we were informed we were off shore of the island of Luzon in the Philippine Islands. We were to occupy an area outside the capital of Manila. A camp was set up on the outskirts of the city. Across the road from us was a prisoner of war camp full of Japanese soldiers. We stayed in barracks of metal put together with nuts and bolts. The only part made of wood was the floor. Each building held thirty-five men. My bunk was in between two swell guys. On my left was Bill, a young man from Detroit. On my right was Ernie, a great kid from Akron, Ohio. They were, for the most part, a swell group in our battalion.

There was, however, one bad apple in the bunch. He was in company B, and had the reputation for being the



battalion bully, Sancho. He was tough, mean, and unreasonable. If one got into an argument with him, which was easy to do, it invariably led to a fight, with Sancho throwing the first punch. He was housed two barracks away from me. I knew him by his reputation, which had permeated the entire battalion of four companies. To the dismay of the officers in charge, he could never be curbed or punished because no one would ever press charges or “rat” on him. My barracks buddies knew I had some boxing experience in the Golden Gloves tournament and were, from time to time, urging me to challenge this troublemaker. I was not inclined to do such a foolish thing. First of all, he had never bothered me personally; secondly he was bigger than me; and last, but not least, he was a dirty street fighter. I saw him in action a couple of times. He gouges, bites, kicks, punches, and wrestles, anything to win. There were no holds barred when he fought. Some of the guys came to me and said, “What if we get him to agree to a fair fight? First time he cheats, we’ll stop the fight.”

“Great! First time he bites my nose off, you’ll stop the fight. He doesn’t know what a fair fight is. He’s a maniac. He’s a vampire! I would defend myself, if necessary, but I’m not about to act stupid.”

One evening, Ernie was looking for a lift to town. Later, he walked into the barracks saying he was getting a ride with Sancho who had checked out a jeep from the motor pool. I cautioned him not to get into any kind of argument with that lunatic. Sure enough, the worse happened. While they were in town, some words were exchanged, a brawl ensued and Ernie had to go to the medics for first aid. The medic notified the officer of the day, Lieutenant Pierce. Sancho told the Lieutenant Ernie fell out of the jeep. Ernie reluctantly agreed. Now, everyone knew that “He fell out of the jeep” was a standard lie wherever there was any physical confrontation. It was used over and over again, especially since almost always neither party would tell the truth. For a while, much talk of revenge ran through the barracks. I was approached with the same urgings again. My response hadn’t changed.

Several weeks had passed. One evening, I checked out a jeep and went into Manila. While driving down Rizal Avenue, I spotted a soldier on foot, walking along the side of the road. I slowed down and noticed he was staggering, obviously injured or intoxicated. I pulled up along side and could see he was drunk. To my surprise, it was “Military maniac Sancho. I said, “Sancho, where the hell are you going?”

“Oh, am I glad to see you! Gimmie a lift to camp.”

“Sure. Jump in.” I went on for a block, where the Saint Bonofacio monument lay in the center of a circular roadway. As I circled left around the monument, I said, “How did you get to town?” There was no reply. I glanced over and saw the seat was empty. I stopped and heard a voice a distance behind me, calling. It was Sancho limping toward the jeep. I backed up to meet him and shouted, “What the heck happened?”

As he approached, he groaned “Oh sh—, I fell out of the fu----- jeep.” I helped him into the back seat where he

could lie slumped over and headed for camp. When I got there, I headed strait for the first aid station. He had sustained a broken collarbone, as well as a fractured jaw and cheekbone. I almost felt sorry for him so I hung around while the medics tended to him. Before long, Lieutenant Pierce walked in. To my surprise, he had a large grin on his face. He smiled at me and asked, “What happened?”

I explained, nervously, “Well Sir, you see, I picked up Sancho in town who asked me for a lift, and I’m afraid he fell out of the jeep.”

“Fell out of the jeep?!” He screamed.

“Why, yes sir. He did. He did.” I responded nervously.

There was a long pause. A smile came over his face. He spoke in a paternal tone, “O.K. private, we’ll talk about it in the morning.”

That night, the event spread like wild fire throughout the

battalion. The word was that I had beaten up Sancho. I erroneously became the hero of the outfit. The more I affirmed, "He fell out of the jeep," the more convinced they became I had beaten him up. Next day, the fellows plague me with questions. Who started it? What did you argue about? How did you do it? Did you fight dirty? Did you club him with something? Later that morning, the sarge ordered me to report to the orderly room. Lieutenant Pierce came out from behind his desk as I entered. He wore a big grin on his face as he reached out his hand grabbing mine and said, "Now Al, I want to talk to you man to man, friend to friend, off the record, you understand. Just between you and me, I'd like to hear what really happened last night between you and Sancho."

"Sir, it was like I said...Here he spoke in unison with me, "He fell out of the jeep."

"I know, I know, come on, level with me, will you? Nothing is going to happen. You're not in any kind of trouble. What you say won't go past this room. I'd just like to know. He had it coming, I'm sure. It's about time

somebody cleaned his clock. You know you put that asshole out of commission. You did the battalion a big favor. Come on. Give me the lowdown."

"I'm sorry, Sir, but you see, it wasn't like that. You see...He just..."

With a look of defeat on his face, he interrupted me saying, "I know. He fell out of the jeep." His voice suddenly grew very calm as he said, "Now listen. If you ever decide to give me the real scoop, come and see me...anytime. O.K.?"

I didn't respond. We exchanged the usual hand salute and I left.

In the mess hall, it was the same scene. Guys from Sancho's company were asking the same tired questions. I wasn't enjoying this notoriety one bit. This undeserved adulation lasted for many days.

One day, orders came down from Command. My company, D - company, was pulling out that night. We didn't know then, but we were headed for Okinawa.

The Windy City Hop



This was Fort Knox, Kentucky. I had a weekend pass every week, but my home in Rockford, Illinois, was too far. I somehow managed to get a transfer to Fort Custer in Battle Creek, Michigan. This put me close enough to my hometown to put weekend passes to good use.

According to my traveling orders, I had to report to Percy Jones General Hospital in Battle Creek where I was to spend three days before reporting to Fort Custer. Why this wait, I never knew. The Army had strange ways. I was assigned no duty. I could come and go as I pleased for these three days. I found out on my first day that this hospital was for amputees only. I recall how funny I felt when in the lunch line. I was the only one who had all his limbs. It was a very sobering experience. I'll never forget my first time in the lunch line. The soldier in front of me had lost his hands and was opening a package of gum

with the use of metal prostheses. I suddenly reached out to help him when he looked up disapprovingly at me and said, “thank you, but I don’t need any help.” I withdrew my hand and said nothing. After that I was always careful to avoid giving any of them any special treatment.

In a way, I felt a certain honor being in their presence. These heroes who gave so much. A sacrifice that would alter and affect their lives forever. I realized then how very lucky I was. My complaints seemed minuscule by comparison to their fate.

Since I was not far from Chicago, I decided to spend a weekend visiting some cousins who lived in the Windy City. It was a last moment decision on my part, but my aunt and uncle welcomed me with open arms. They were a large family. Freddie was my age, but had avoided military service via a slight heart murmur. At the dinner table aunt Josie said to me, “Have you got any plans for tonight?”

“No,” I don’t,” I replied.

She looked over in Freddie’s direction and asked, “Freddie, weren’t you going to a dance tonight?” Without waiting for a reply, she addressed me once again. “Al, do you like to dance?” Not waiting for a response, she glanced at Freddie again. “Freddie, why don’t you take Al with you?”

I had the impression Freddie was less than happy about the idea. To let him off the hook, I quickly said, “No, that’s O.K. I’m a little tired. I think I’ll just rest tonight. Maybe I’ll use your piano a little.”

“Nonsense!” said uncle Mike. “You’re not afraid of girls, are you? You can play the piano anytime.”

Aunt Josie interjected, “Yes, you know we love to hear you play, but tonight you go dancing. Tomorrow you rest. You go with Freddie, right, Freddie?”

Freddie now tried to act more enthusiastic. “Ya, Ma. Of course.”

It was clear to me that Freddie was slightly disenchanted with the prospect of dragging me along. To avoid embarrassing him, I did not inquire why. I decided to pretend all was well. Maybe he felt a little intimidated by my uniform with ribbons and medals and all. We went in uncle Mike's car. Freddie was not very talkative. In fact, I don't recall him saying anything. Finally, we arrived. Freddie parked in the lot and said, "Let's go." Inside displayed a big band, large crowd, much talk, laughter and fun. Freddie suddenly stopped and said, "I'll meet you at the car at eleven o'clock. O.K.?"

As he disappeared into the crowd, I said to myself, "Nice going, Freddie!" I walked to the left side of the large hall and the most beautiful laughter caught my ear. There on my left, near the wall, stood a gorgeous girl, laughing at whatever her girlfriend was saying. I acted nonchalantly and stood about five paces from them. When the band started the next set, I walked

over to this brunette beauty and said, "Would you care to dance?" I extended my hand and she grasped it gently. As she walked toward me, her movements seemed like slow motion. I noticed her eyes were a deep blue that glistened like glitter. It was a slow dance and I held her close to me. I whispered into her ear. "My name is Al."

She spoke softly, "I'm Cathy. It looks like you've been overseas."

"Yes, I got back a few weeks ago."

"Where were you?"

"Oh, some Pacific islands you've probably never heard of."

We stayed together all evening and I eventually said, "I've got to go in ten minutes or I'll miss my ride. By the way, how did you get here?"

“I came with my cousin Flo. She has a car.”

“Will I see you again?” I asked.

“Would you like to?” she replied in a surprising voice.

“Very much. Yes, I would. I’m stationed in Battle Creek, Michigan. I get a weekend pass every Friday. I’ve got relatives I visit here in Chicago. Do you live here?”

“No, I too have a cousin who lives here. Flo, the girl I was talking to earlier. I come to visit her often.”

“I’ll be here the rest of this weekend. Can I see you tomorrow maybe?” I inquired.

“I’ve got plans with my relatives tomorrow,” she said regretfully. “Have you got a car?”

“No, I haven’t. How about Sunday morning?”

“I can’t,” she said hesitantly.

“Oh, I see,” I said with a dejected tone.

“No, really. I would like to see you, but I don’t want to make waves with my relatives. Please don’t be angry.”

“I understand. How about next weekend?” I asked.

“Yes, I’ll try. Is there any way I could call you?”

I answered, “Yes, I’ll be at my Aunt’s Friday about two in the afternoon.”

I jotted the number on a piece of paper and handed it to her.

“Is there anyway I can call you?” I asked.

“No, not yet. I will call you for sure.”

I felt slightly sheepish as I asked, “May I kiss you goodnight?”



“Here, in front of all these people?!?”

“Let’s step into the entry where we’ll have some privacy,” I suggested.

We made our way through the forest of humanity to the entry. There in the shadows, we held each other’s elbows and touched lips ever so tenderly. As we held that position, I was afraid, she’d feel my heart beating as I felt her breasts pressing against my chest. All of a sudden cousin Flo appeared in the doorway. “Cathy,” she remarked, “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Cathy introduced us. Just then, Freddie appeared. I hurriedly bid the girls goodbye. I noticed Freddie had a girl with him. He took me aside and said “Where can I drop you off for an hour or two and then pick you up to go home?”

“How about an all-night movie?”

“Good idea! I know where!” he whispered with excitement in his voice. I was introduced to Julie and whisked off to a brightly lit theater. I said, “I’ll watch the feature and meet you in that restaurant next door.”

“Okey Dokey.” The evening went according to plan.

Cathy and I got together as agreed for about a month. We seemed to enjoy each other’s company immensely. We went on picnic cookouts, museums and art galleries. We frequented movies, lounged on beaches, and went for walks. Each weekend was like an adventure.

One Friday Cathy called me as usual and said, “I’m sorry Al, but we can’t see each other again.”

“What!? What are you saying?”

“This is so painful. I care for you so much.” She spoke in a tearful voice.

“So, what’s wrong?”



“I should have told you in the beginning. I’m Jewish. My family would never approve of this, I know. I cannot break from my traditions and beliefs. I thought it was a one-night stand. I never dreamed things would get this serious. I have spoken to my Rabbi and thought it through and....” She was sobbing profusely. “And I can’t go against my family and faith. I do want you to know I love you, but I must not see you again. Please don’t make this anymore difficult for me than it is. Don’t try to get in touch with me.”

With a heavy heart I said, “I love you Cathy.”

The next sound was that of a telephone dial tone. I never saw her again, but for the next five years, every year on my birthday, I received a card in the mail simply signed “I love you, Cathy.” There was never a return address, but they were all postmarked Oakland, California.



A Sweet Refrain



It was a beautiful, sunny, June day. Two years in the army seemed a long time ago. Okinawa was becoming a faint memory. I felt proud and elated as I strolled down University Avenue headed for my first graduate class. This was the University of Wisconsin in Madison - quite different from the small state teachers college in DeKalb, Illinois. There, the student enrollment totaled 1800. Here, the student body numbered 35,000. I had my B.S. degree in music from DeKalb and I was recently accepted in the graduate program at the college of music at the University of Wisconsin. As I walked briskly down the avenue, watching students coming and going from class to class, I thought to myself, “Not bad, for a little poor kid from Sicily who came here with his family in 1929, just in time for the Depression.” Not only did we suffer from poverty, but we had no money either. The days of catsup

sandwiches and dandelion salads were far behind us now.

As I approached the corner of Park and University Avenues, I could see the beautiful old building that housed the music department. As it was a hot summer morning and this building had no air conditioning, windows were wide open and one could hear a mosaic of musical strains resounding from the practice rooms. I loved that sound.

Entering the heavy wooden doors, I immediately looked for and found room 204. It was not a classroom, but more of a studio. This was to be a one-on one lesson in composition. It was scheduled for me every Tuesday and Friday.

I gently knocked and a voice said, “Come in.” I entered and met Dr. Locke who was to be my instructor and mentor. He was a tall, distinguished looking man, graying at the temples and brandishing a mustache. He always looked serious, and seldom smiled. He seemed very

composed, but, then, he was, after all, a teacher of composition. If this had been a movie, Professor Locke’s roll would be best played by Gregory Peck and mine would be Woody Allen. I tried smiling, but found that was not in his repertoire.

We sat at a large writing desk who’s top was slanted for easy music writing. We talked about my musical background and my future at the university. As an assignment he told me, “Get some twenty-four staffed manuscript paper and score the Brahms’s A-minor string quartet for full orchestra. Do the first movement only. And, by the way, when it’s done, it should sound like Brahms did the arrangement. Study the scores of his four symphonies and that should give you some idea and insights into his style of writing. Use pencil only and we’ll look at how it’s going at our next meeting.”

The happy, optimistic feeling I had earlier now was turned around one hundred eighty degrees. To say I was disillusioned would be an understatement. I left his studio



talking to myself. “What am I doing here? Was he kidding?” I was looking around for “Candid Camera.”

“Did I bite off more than I could chew?” I headed for the restroom. Washing my face with cold water, I gained my composure and convinced myself things could only get better. Besides, I was on my way to Band, which I always enjoyed. Band was not a requirement in my program.

It met twice a week every Tuesday and Friday. Since I was free at this time, I decided to treat myself by participating. When I arrived, I found the room buzzing with musicians, each one warming up by playing the familiar scales and arpeggios. Everyone there was a total stranger to me. I walked over to the adjoining office of the director Dr. Levens and introduced myself. After some friendly exchanges, he asked me to sit in the first clarinet section, second row, and seat four. By now most students had taken their places. I walked over to my seat with clarinet in hand. I turned politely to the young man on my left and we introduced ourselves. His name, I recall, was Don. Turning to greet the young lady on my right gave

me quite a stir. She was a Nun wearing the full Habit, which only showed her hands and face. And what a face! It was entrancing, to say the least. Her skin was silky cream. Her lips were perfectly formed. When she smiled, she displayed a set of pearl-like teeth that could be used for a toothpaste poster. She had a dimple on her left cheek which appeared only when she smiled. She was truly a vision of loveliness. When I regained my breath, I think I said my name. She extended her hand and said, “Sister Therese.”

In time I learned from her she was originally from Stevens Point, Wisconsin, assigned to St. Michael’s in Eau Claire where she taught music to high school students, and was also working on the Masters Degree. While studying at the University for the summer session only, she was staying at a local convent. Now, there was another reason for enjoying Band. Being Catholic, myself, I realized only too well she was “off Limits,” and nothing serious could ever remotely occur. When you’re a young man in your early twenties, however, carefree and

impressionable, flights of fancy and fantasy run through your brain like an electric current. Nonetheless, when I was seated next to her at rehearsals, I remained polite and quasi-shy. We engaged in polite conversation, which generally involved our backgrounds, musical tastes and experiences.

We were both pianists and expressed the desire to perform for one another. One day I suggested we use one of the practice rooms to play piano.

“When would this be possible?” She asked.

“How about today after Band?”

“We couldn’t do that!” She replied.

“It would be ok, Sister. The practice rooms are not at all private in that they all have large windowed doors. There would be no hint of any impropriety.” I

quipped.

She raised one eyebrow, gave a quizzical smile and said, “Not today. I’ll have to give this some thought.”

“Of course,” I said assuredly. “Any rehearsal day would be fine.”

For days after, my mind raged in a frenzy of fantasies too incredible to describe. I thought about her often. What was behind that adorable face with those velvet-like lips? What was underneath all that drab garb? That soft silky voice buzzed in my ear at various times of the day and night. These thoughts gave me as much a feeling of guilt as pleasure. I was determined to be a gentleman at all times around her. I promised myself I would never mention the piano performances again.

My Brahms was coming along. Professor Locke Seemed mildly impressed. He told me to start copying parts so the University Symphony could play it. It was soon Tuesday. My session with Professor Locke was



over and I made my way briskly to the band room. I was feeling especially good about myself and the progress with my studies. I entered the rehearsal hall and there she was...walking to her seat like a veil floating in the breeze. I took my seat beside her as we exchanged complaints about the incessant heat.

The rehearsal was enjoyable as usual. It was time to put our instruments away. As we took our clarinets apart, placing each section carefully into our cases, Sister Therese looked up at me and softly said, "Al, would this be a good day to find a piano room?"

"Why yes, of course," I said, trying not to sound as eager as I felt.

We went down the hall where a montage of sounds emanated from the practice rooms. Coming to one that was obviously empty, we entered. We were fortunate in finding there, a Baldwin grand. We took turns playing various solo works for each other. She played extremely

well. We spent about an hour and a half and then we left. As we headed for the entrance, she said, "I've got ten minutes for the bus."

I replied, "Well, I've got my car in the lot. Let me give you a lift."

"Oh! I couldn't do that. I don't want to impose on you."

"Nonsense! It's no imposition at all. Please allow me."

After a ten-minute drive and some pleasant conversation, we soon arrived at the convent. We bid each other goodbye till Friday.

Tuesdays followed Fridays, and Fridays followed Tuesdays. From then on I continued to escort Therese home after each rehearsal. We had been bonding more and more with each meeting. We were now on a first name basis. We had, however, kept a continued safe and discreet distance.



One day, while on the usual journey homeward, I asked if she ever went swimming on these hot summer afternoons. She said, “Sometimes. We have a pool here at the convent.”

“How about going swimming with me some afternoon?” I asked.

“Al! How would that look?” She responded.

“No one has to know.” I replied.

“It’s too great a risk.” She affirmed.

“Well, then, how about we rent a row-boat on the lake?”

“Wouldn’t that look fine?! You and a nun in full regalia in a row boat on Lake Mendota!”

“You wouldn’t have to wear your habit. We could get a light summer outfit downtown for you to wear.”

“And where would I change?” She said in a teasing tone.

“In the music building restroom.”

“And how would I explain carrying a nun’s habit over my arms?”

“You wouldn’t have it on your arms. You could fold it neatly and put it in a paper bag. Later, you could change back the same way.”

“Oh, Al -! If I got caught, it would be the end of me!”

“How are you going to get caught? It’s easy and we wouldn’t be hurting anybody.... and it would be so much fun.”

“Fun, yes, but you don’t understand. Swimming, boating, laying in the sun, who would know?!”

Her voice softened to a near whisper. “God would know.”



She put her hand over mine, looked me square in the eyes with her baby blues and said calmly, “Please, AL, don’t throw such temptations in my path.” I felt somewhat flattered in that I believed she wanted to go as much as I did, but, at the same time, I felt some shame in having made the proposal.

Finally and unfortunately, the last week arrived. This was the last Tuesday. It was very cloudy that morning and very humid. When band rehearsal ended, it was raining very hard. I had Therese wait in the entry while I went after the car. I pulled up and she ran out getting very soaked in the process. As I pulled away, she removed her head-garb displaying a lovely head of soft, brown, silky hair. She looked unusually radiant. Her large blue eyes sparkled as she spoke. “Al, this has been the most enjoyable summer of my life.”

“For me, too.” I said.

The rain continued harder than ever as we pulled up behind the convent. I felt great sadness realizing I would see her only once more. The thought left me speechless. I reached over and held her hand. I fully expected her to pull away, but, to my surprise, she clasped her other hand over mine securing it there. She spoke ever so softly, “Al, I’m a nun and will always be. I’m married to God. I will never break my vows.”

I felt deeply impressed by her devotion and honor to her calling. Not a word was spoken. Then, without a pause or so much as a “by your leave”, she opened the car door and bolted out into the torrid downpour. I stared as she disappeared into the building.

Friday arrived, and my final session with Professor Locke went well. As I walked toward the band room, I wasn’t sure how or what I would say to Therese this final day. I knew, deep in my heart, what she said was right. She is a bride of Christ. With that commitment, nothing would ever change. I recalled our last meeting with both pleasure



and guilt. Had we been sacrilegious in our last encounter? Were we wrong in allowing our feelings and desire to surface in such a manner, innocent as it may have appeared?

Anxiously, I entered the band room. Evidently, Therese was late as she was not there yet. Roll was eventually taken and rehearsal started. Still, no Therese. How unusual! I thought. She was never tardy or absent. What could have happened? Rehearsal finally came to a close, and I hurriedly went to the student center to use the phone.

“Hello,” I said. “May I please speak to Sister Therese?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, but Sister left on an early bus this morning.”

“But I thought she would be here the rest of this week.”

“Yes, I believe that was her original intention, but it seems she finished her class work yesterday so she

decided to take an early bus this morning.”

“Did she leave any message?” I asked.

“No. She did not.”

“Thank you.”

I felt a sense of very mixed emotions. Devastation, disappointment, and at the same time a certain relief. I so looked forward to seeing her, but I would have been no good at saying goodbye. How would I have let her go? What would I have said? I had searched for the right words for days, but they never came. Now, it didn’t matter. She was gone and it was all over. It was like a death experience.

Often times, when all is quiet and very still, in the deep recesses of our memory, long forgotten joys are unlocked and, once again, thrills are relived. Past dreams are resurrected and revisited, and flights of fancy take wing once more.



Now, some forty-eight years later, I can't help wondering at times. Is she a saint in heaven? Does she still live her religious life on earth? Does she ever think back to that summer of '51 when life seemed so carefree while punctuated with seemingly monumental decisions? Did we go too far? Did we not go far enough?

Looking back on my life with its "ups and downs," I'm presently in an "Up" mode and I often look back fondly to this cherished experience like a sweet refrain in a favorite song.

A SUMMER WIND, A FOND EMBRACE
MOMENTS OF PASSION IN A FAR OFF PLACE
LONG FORGOTTEN SOME JOYS AND TEARS
VEILED IN MEMORY THESE MANY YEARS
OH COME AGAIN SWEET THOUGHTS AND
SOUND
OUR SENSES ARE PRIMED. OUR PAST IS FOUND
SWEET GHOSTS OF MIND AND MEMORY SO
CLEAR
LIKE A SWEET REFRAIN FROM A SONG SO
DEAR.





Sweet revenge

Osceola, a small town in Wisconsin. Here was my first position as band director of the high school. The town population topped six hundred. A most wonderful people, friendly, kind, understanding, appreciative, and supportive. The town, being small, had but one Movie Theater that was opened on Saturday. The few stores and businesses of the town remained open later on these evenings. When the weather permitted, the school band played in the bandstand located down town. It was a wonderful experience that I have cherished always.

The only restaurant in town was Stella's Coffee Cup. I ate most of my meals there. Stella was a very nice lady, maybe in her early forties, with a perpetual smile, and a great sense of humor. One didn't have to

order off the menu. You could just tell Stella what you wanted and she was only too willing to oblige. It was a great place for a coke and conversation.

The high school was crowded. The teacher's lounge was a table in the hallway at one end of the first floor. That's where I met miss Garrison, the English teacher. She was a gentle but plain lady, probably in her late thirties. She had a keen sense of humor and I enjoyed chatting with her. She had never married and I thought it a pity for she would have made children a wonderful mother. The only family she had was a brother who lived in California. He was married with two daughters, one of whom lived in Minneapolis, and worked in an insurance office. Miss Garrison said she, Evelyn, came to Osceola to visit her on some weekends. Osceola was about forty miles from Minneapolis on the Wisconsin side.

One day, while talking with miss Garrison, at school, she said, "I think my niece Evelyn is coming to visit me this weekend. She's such a pretty girl, and talented too. Did I

tell you she plays the violin beautifully? Took lessons for some ten years."

"How nice, miss G.!"

She spoke of Evelyn often and always in glowing terms. Made me wonder how much was true and how much was exaggerated. Often times we are prone to have a perspective of kin that is less than real. At any rate, any time miss Garrison spoke of Evelyn, it was with great pride and affection.

One Saturday afternoon, while having a coke at the Coffee Cup and chatting with Stella, miss Garrison walked toward my booth. She was, apparently, leaving after her lunch. "Good afternoon miss Garrison," I said, "Did you have a nice lunch?"

"Oh, Al, I want you to meet my niece who is visiting me this weekend Evelyn, this is Al our school band director."



“I’m pleased to meet you, Evelyn. I’ve heard so much about you.”

She put out her hand and spoke softly, “How do you like our fair city?” she said facetiously.

“I’m enjoying the people very much. I’m more accustomed to big city life, but I do enjoy this slower pace. Gives one time to smell the roses.”

As we shook hands politely, miss Garrison said, “Oh, my! Look at the time. I have five minutes to get to the hairdresser. We have to run?”

Evelyn quipped, “so much for smelling the roses.”

I said, “It was a pleasure meeting you, Evelyn. I’ll see you Monday miss Garrison.”

Evelyn.... what a doll. A real beauty! Long blonde hair, blue eyes, beautifully shaped lips, and gorgeous body with legs that never quit. A real dream boat. People followed

her with their eyes all the way out the door.

Later that week I was chatting with Mr. Hart, the coach and P.E. teacher. We were going over the basketball schedule. He wanted some assistance keeping the clock at some of the games and I enjoyed helping in this way.

“So you met Evelyn, I heard! What do you think of her? Some dish, huh?!”

“Yes, not bad,” I said in a matter of fact manner.

“Not bad?! I’ll say. Makes me wish I were single again. You ought to check her out, Al.”

I grinned and remarked, “She did turn some heads at the Coffee Cup Saturday.” Next weekend came around and I went over to Stella’s for lunch as usual. They were crowded and I spotted miss Garrison and Evelyn sitting in a booth. Miss Garrison motioned to me and I joined them. “Hi, miss Garrison. Hi, Evelyn! Isn’t this beautiful



weather for autumn?”

“Certainly is.” Responded miss Garrison.

“Oh, yes!” said Evelyn.

Evelyn handed me her menu and said, “I heard Stella’s meatloaf and gravy is delicious.”

“Everything Stella makes is delicious,” I said, knowing Stella was in earshot as she approached.

“Al, you’re a flatterer.” Stella remarked. “How about some lemonade?”

“That would be great.”

Miss Garrison talked about the yearbook she was in charge of. “The children are so enthusiastic, and eager to do a good job.”

“How long have you had this project?” I asked.

“Well, lets see now,” she said pensively. “I guess this is my seventeenth year. I’ll keep doing it as long as they want.”

“Al, I hear you’re a pianist.” Interjected Evelyn.

“Yes, after a fashion,” I grinned. “And you’re a violinist. Maybe we can do some duets sometime.”

“Oh! That would be fun. I’ve got loads of music. How about I bring some with me next weekend?” She spoke with enthusiasm.

“Swell! I’ll look forward to it.”

Miss Garrison smiled approvingly.

The following week, Miss Garrison reminded me of my duet date. “Evelyn wants to know what time you want her to be here.”

“I’ll be in the band room at nine in the morning, Saturday. She can come over anytime after that.”

“I think nine will be good. I won’t be able to come with her, but I think she’ll be safe with you alone. Won’t she?” She grinned and winked.

I blushed, “of course!”

Saturday morning came. I arrived at school at eight-thirty. I arranged a music rack next to the piano, opened a couple of windows to air out the room, and played some exercises to warm up. Soon Evelyn arrived with her violin and music. We had an enjoyable morning, which passed quickly. She was a very accomplished musician and played with a lot of feeling. I asked how she came by such a good instrument and she said it was her grandfather’s. “Grandpa gave it to me when I was a little tike. He was an excellent violinist, himself. He injured his

hand as a young man and could never play again.”

“Is he living in California, too?”

“Oh, yes, he lives with my parents.”

“And your sister?”

“She’s in nurse’s training in San Francisco. Oh my! It’s time to put on the feedbag. Let me treat you to lunch.”

“Oh please, allow me to treat you,” I insisted.

Since it was not quite noon, yet, we beat the crowd at Stella’s. We sat in a booth and ordered quickly. I said to Evelyn, “How would you like to go on a picnic some night this week?”

“What picnic?”

“Our picnic. Just you and me. I’ll pick up all the food and meet you in Minneapolis, and we’ll have a picnic

supper at Reed's Park."

She replied with great interest, "Sounds like fun. I can meet you there...say six o'clock. Is Wednesday ok?"

"Wednesday's fine."

"Maybe I can bring something," she offered.

"No. I'll take care of the food and stuff. I'll bring a couple of tennis rackets and balls. There are some fine courts there at the park. Maybe we can knock some balls around before we eat."

"Great idea! I love tennis, but I think I'll bring my own racket, if you don't mind."

"Of course!"

"We'll meet at the main entrance, in front of the flag pole," I said.

"Gotcha"

The appointed day finally arrived. I had been looking forward to Wednesday with wild anticipation. I did some shopping and packed what I thought was an appetizing and interesting picnic meal. I even included some marshmallows to roast afterwards. It was to be an evening to remember. I drove the forty miles to the big city and arrived at Reed's Park a little early. I parked at the main entrance and waited. Six o'clock rolled around, six-thirty, and seven. I decided to give another half hour. Seven-thirty came and I was finally convinced she was not going to show. I left for the hour-long trek back to Osceola. I was very dejected and disappointed to say the least. The next day at school, I was in the coach's office and he said, "Say, Al, my wife and I were in Minneapolis last night and saw your girlfriend."

"Girlfriend?!"



“Yea, Evelyn, miss Garrison’s niece.”

Trying to act disinterested I asked, “Are you sure it was her?”

“I wouldn’t mistake a looker like that. She was dressed to the nines and was with a young man walking arm in arm into the State Theater.”

He must have read disappointment in my face as he spoke. “Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything. Did you have something going with her?”

“Who me?” I chuckled. “Why no, not at all. I’m sure she’s got boyfriends all over the place.”

“Yea, a girl with those physical attributes has got to be fighting off guys with a stick. I thought, maybe, I spoke out of turn. I’ve seen you over at Stella’s with her. You didn’t have something going with her, did you?” He reiterated.

“No, no, just polite conversation and being friendly. She is attractive, but not really my type. I’ve got a class coming up. I’ll talk to you later.” I walked down the hall toward the band room doing a slow burn. That little vixen stood me up. That little selfish, self-centered, egotistical, inconsiderate viper. What a nerve! Such unmitigated gall! Not a warning call or excuse! No apology. Nothing! She’s probably still laughing at me thinking of me with arms full of groceries and tennis rackets.

I’d love to get even with her. But how? Suddenly, it came to me. She’s got to have more vanity than a chorus line. I began to formulate my plan of sweet revenge.

I waited until Friday, two days after the stand up and went to miss Garrison’s room during her free period.

“Good morning miss Garrison.”

“Good morning, Al.” Obviously, she had no knowledge of any of these past events.



“Miss Garrison, a terrible thing has happened!”

“What’s that, Al?”

“Well, I had a picnic date arranged with Evelyn for last Wednesday and I forgot all about it. Oh boy! I just flat out forgot!” I laughed heartily as I said, “I hope she’ll understand and see the humor in it as I.”

“Gee, you forgot a date with Evelyn?!”

“Golly! I thought about it over the weekend, thinking about the food and all, and then I guess it just left my brain. Must be a sign of old age creeping up on me. Please give her my apology and I hope I didn’t cause her any inconvenience.

The next day was Saturday. I went to Stella’s early for lunch and purposely sat in a rear booth. In walked miss Garrison and Evelyn who was obviously disturbed. They quickly spotted me and Evelyn led the way to my booth

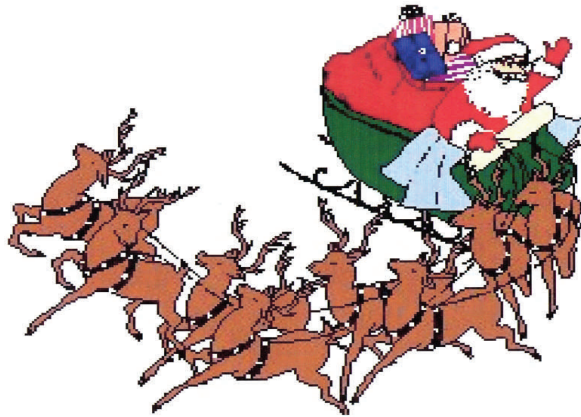
like a storm trooper. She looked madder than a hatter. “So! You Forgot!! You forgot??! She didn’t wait for an answer. She spoke rhetorically.” Just when did you decide to remember? You Forgot!?!

Stella stood by the counter confused and shocked at such outrage, which could, I’m sure, be heard throughout the entire room. I tried to answer each protestation, but she wouldn’t give me a chance. Miss G. looked on in disbelief. All of a sudden, without so much as a by your leave, she did an about face and stormed out madder than a wet hen, with miss Garrison tailing behind.

Oh, what glee for me! It worked. I felt a gladness in my bones that comes only with sweet revenge. She didn’t mind doing it to me, but didn’t like the thought of having it done to her.



Reindeer Time



Midwestern farm community, population two thousand. This was for me, an advantageous job move. First of all, it was only thirty minutes from my hometown. Secondly, it provided me with a summer job as well, since it included a summer band program. And last, but not least, it increases my income by one-third. It also involved some challenges. Beside the band program, there was a mixed chorus and the elementary school program. The schedule provided twenty minutes of music for each elementary class.

There were two buildings in this school system. One housed the junior high and high school students. The other, a newer building, was for K through six children, plus the home economics room and a large band room. The rear of the band room was all windows. It provided much light and full view of the play area with baseball diamonds and soccer field. Beyond that was an

incinerator where the custodians got rid of all burnable materials.

As the Christmas season rolled around, we were involved in the traditional Christmas carols and songs. The elementary grade teachers were very helpful and cooperative in preparing programs and plays. It was during one of these ventures that some of the kindergarten and first grade teachers told me about Santa's reindeer tradition. It seems one of the farmers in the community had some reindeer and every year at this time, he would welcome the little children to visit Santa's chariot and steeds. Mrs. Kincaid, the farmer's wife, would provide cookies and hot chocolate. It would be a morning of fun that the Kincaids and the first grade children looked forward to. What was my role in this joyous event? I was told, "These children fully believe these are indeed Santa's reindeer and that they are housed at the Kincaid farm. In their enthusiastic anticipation the little tots will probably bring this event to light during music class." I was further cautioned,

"Please do not diminish their belief. In fact, if you could, reinforce and even embellish it if possible.

In the ensuing days, the children did become engrossed in jolly old Saint Nick and his annual adventure. His reindeer became a favorite topic. Their names drew great interest, as did the coming journey to Mr. Kincaid's farms. I did all I could to corroborate the facts surrounding the man with the jelly like belly and his steeds of flight who will soon bring joy and merriment to all, young and old. Some of the children asked if I was included in the trip to visit the reindeer. I explained I was not, for I didn't have the free time. They said, "If you write your letter to Santa Claus, and tell him you've been a good boy, we'll tell Mr. Kincaid to give it to Santa when he comes for his reindeer."

The appointed day came and went with the usual great success. Now there only remained the usual classroom Christmas parties. This event occurred on the last day of school preceding the Christmas holidays. On this day the

schedule allowed me to be free most of the time. I hung around the band room, which was brightly lit from the sun's reflection off the fresh snow. As I stood gazing out the glass wall, my eyes traveled to the incinerator, perhaps some one hundred and fifty yards away, when what should I see but eight reindeer standing near the burner. Halfway between them and the building, treading through the white fluff, there appeared a fat figure, dressed in red, and wearing black boots that glistened in the snow. Over his right shoulder, he appeared to be carrying a large bag.

“What a guy! This old man Kincaid,” I thought. “He not only gives kids a great time at his farm, but plays Santa Claus at the parties as wells.” I quickly made my way to the main entrance where the jolly fellow soon approached.

“Good morning, Santa,” I greeted with a smile.

“Good morning” was the grinfull reply. He seemed to know the way once in the building, and headed down the hall carrying his heavy load.

As he disappeared into the first classroom, one could hear the joyous shouts of glee coming through the closed door. I went back to my room and kept busy with some record keeping. After about half an hour, I took a break and went down the hall to see how Santa was doing. As I peered through the glass in the door, I could see the smiley faces staring, wide-eyed, at the red clad visitor, who was quickly, but adroitly, passing out gifts to each and every child. I had never met Mr. Kincaid, but I kept thinking, “What a guy! What a swell guy!”

But who was footing the bill for such an affair? The PTA, maybe? The businessmen's association? Some children's welfare group? Maybe all of the above. I returned to the band room and resumed my bookwork and filing of music. After some time elapsed, I happened to look out the window and noticed the reindeer were gone. I went quickly down the hall and stopped at Mrs. Floyd's room. “Well I see you had a visitor from the North Pole,” I said.

“Yes,” she remarked. “Wasn't that nice?!”

“Well, who was the fine performer?” I asked.

“I don’t know. It was no one I knew or ever saw before. I tried studying his face and voice. It wasn’t anyone I recognized.”

We went next door to Mrs. Miller’s room. I was quick to ask Mrs. Miller, “Who was the Santa?”

“Nobody I know,” she replied. “I’ve lived in this community all my life and he was a stranger to me.”

Mrs. Floyd remarked, “Who paid for all these gifts? Each boy and girl got one!” Just then, the principal approached and asked, “Who arranged for our visitor? Nice touch!!!”

“Don’t you know?” asked Mrs. Miller. “Was it the janitor?”

Mr. Worthy replied, “No! No! I know nothing about it. I

thought perhaps the faculty arranged it.”

When the school day ended, I went to the faculty lounge where many of the staff were discussing the Santa affair. Mrs. Jones was speaking, “I called my husband, and he said the business men’s association had nothing to do with it.” Mr. Jones was the town barber..

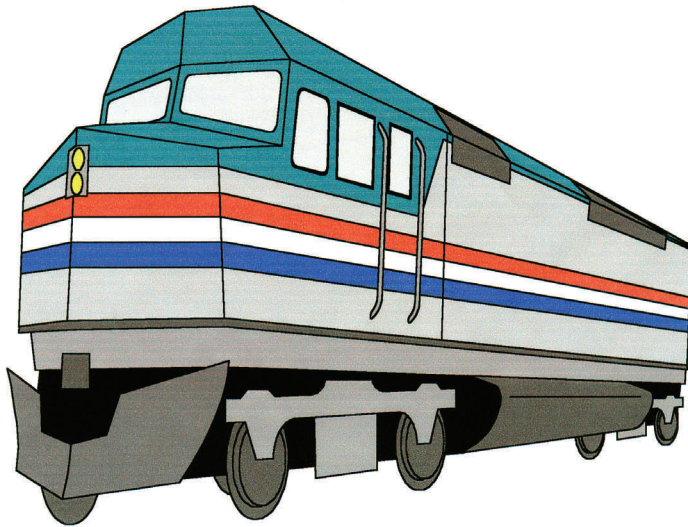
Mrs. Greene said, “Being an officer in the PTA, I can assure you we had no hand in it.”

Mr. Worthy spoke, scratching his chin, “Well, this is a new one on me. Nobody announced this arrival or called to ask may I. I know the board had nothing to do with it. I don’t even know whom to thank.”

When Christmas vacation ended and school was back in session once more, life went on as before. The mystery was never solved to my knowledge. And the odd thing about it was that no one ever spoke of it again, nor did the event ever repeat itself.



Train to Spain



was 1986. My wife, Fran and I were in the middle of a two-month vacation to Europe. We were traveling alone from country to country, by train. We were now in Spain headed for Granada. Since we were coming a long distance, we arrived on a sleeper. It was early morning as the train pulled into the station. Now came one of the least pleasant tasks when you're traveling alone without a formal "tour"...finding a hotel room.

Inquiring in the station, I was told there was a very grand hotel in walking distance. I suggested to Fran, "Why don't you wait here with our bags, while I run along and see if they have any vacancies? Then I'll return for you and the luggage."

"No." She replied. "It's such a beautiful day. I think I'd

enjoy the walk. Let's just take our stuff with us. The fresh air will do us good."

It sounded like a good idea. So, we picked up our bags and trudged toward a beautiful room, a warm bath, and a hearty breakfast. There in the distance stood a most majestic edifice, the "National Hotel". Our spirits really soured as we approached the marble stairs leading to the main entrance. We climbed the glistening ladder to the large wooden doors. We entered and walked up to the smiling clerk who determined we were Americans somehow. Perhaps he heard us talking as we strolled in. "Good morning," he greeted.

"Good morning to you." I replied. "We're looking for a room for two with bath."

"Do you have a reservation, sir?" he asked.

"No. We do Not."

"I'm sorry, but we have nothing at this time. There are, however, other hotels down this street you may wish to try. We are filled for the rest of this week."

"Thank you", I responded. We picked up our things and walked out rather disappointed. Once in the bright sunlight, our spirits picked up again.

Fran said, "This street has long blocks, and these bags are heavy!"

"I know, dear, but I've got a plan. Let's walk over to the corner. There's a bench we can rest on there."

We walked about fifty yards to the bench, set down our bags, and perched ourselves on an empty wooden bench.

“Now here’s my plan. You wait here with our bags and I’ll run down the street and see what the hotel situation is. I’ll get us a room, and then I’ll return for you and our stuff. How does that sound?”

Fran appeared slightly reluctant as she answered, “Well...How long do you think you’ll be?”

“Oh, I shouldn’t be too long. I’ll run most of the way. I’ll be as quick as I can. You’re safe here on this busy corner. Just relax and I’ll be back in a jiffy.” I assured her.

I started out slowly jogging down the busy avenue until I came to a hotel. It was very inviting. The main entrance was on ground level. I walked in and approached the desk. I asked the clerk, “Do you speak English?”

“Yes, sir. May I help you?”

“Oh, good? I need a room for me and my wife.” I said hopefully.

“I’m very sorry, sir. Unless you have a reservation, I’m afraid we are out of room.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Sorry. You can try further down the avenue. There are a couple of hotels there.”

“Thank you.” I left and walked briskly down the street. About two blocks down, I finally arrived at my destination. They only turned out to be repeat performances.

“No reservation? No room.”



Now I understood better how Saint Joseph felt. “No room at the inn.” I finally came to a very busy main cross street. Looking to my left about a hundred yards away I saw a marquee of a hotel. With renewed hope, I lost no time making my way to the brightly lit entrance. My hopes were once again dashed to pieces with the same response. “No room.” I walked out.

There in the bright sunshine, a hotel employee was working in the flowerbeds that adorned the front of this fine establishment. He was obviously taking a brief break chatting with an elderly lady friend. I interrupted hoping he understood English. He did. I asked if there was another hotel nearby.

Following a short exchange between him and the old woman, he said “This lady will show you the way to another hotel if you would like to accompany her. She is going past there on her way home.”

“Swell! Does she understand English?”

“No, but she understands your problem and will gladly show you the way.”

“Is it far?”

“Not far. Please to follow.” He said as he pointed to the old woman who looked to be at least in her eighties.

She turned and started walking, motioning to me with her hand. I followed, but due to here advanced years, the journey was very slow. Owing to the language barrier, no conversation ensued. After a drawn out trek, we finally arrived. She pointed to the entrance of this lovely looking hotel and said, “buenos dias.” She continued on her way.

In my limited Spanish I said to her, “Mucho gracias, Senora.” I rushed into the building only to be disappointed once more.

I looked at my watch and noticed I’d been gone almost two hours. All of a sudden, I realized Fran has been waiting all this time for my return. I was carrying all the money and travelers checks, all our ID cards and passports. If anything happened to me, she’d be in one heck of a fix. What could she be feeling and thinking?” Is he lost? Was he involved in an accident? Was he a victim of some crime? Is he injured? Is he dead or alive? I hadn’t realized this much time had elapsed. I tried retracing my way back to her. As I trudged along, I came to the shocking realization I could be lost. Nothing seemed familiar. I searched for some frame of reference, a building, street or landmark. In desperation I walked into a clothing store and asked in my worst Spanish, “Donde Sta los train station?”

The clerk grinned broadly and directed me in perfect English. Finding my way back to Fran was now easy. She was waiting on that same bench both angry and upset, and at the same time relieved and happy to see me. We decided to try another method of finding a hotel room. I walked over to a parked cab and said, “My wife and I are looking for a nice hotel.”

“Yes, sir. Me take, please.” He got out of his vehicle and put our bags in his trunk. After what seemed a short drive, we came to the famous castle and main tourist attraction the Alhambra. Directly across the street and one block past there stood a very attractive hotel. What luck! We had a busy and hectic morning, but all ended well.



Mama Mia



The ornate wooden jewelry box sat on the kitchen table. She opened it slowly. Handling each article with a delicate touch. Carefully removing every precious item, she wrapped it in paper before placing it in a cardboard box. This package was one of many Mama sent to her family in Sicily. The war (WWII) was ended and her relatives were in dire need. This care package was one of several sent to rescue her parents, sister, five brothers and their families from the claws of poverty that overran post war Europe. This package represented all of Mama's personal treasure except for her wedding rings.

Other than her family, the church was the center of Mama's life. She served as secretary to two church related ladies societies, and attended mass regularly. Her rosary beads could be seen hanging carefully over her

bedpost.

Although neighbors helped one another with canning, baking, etc., many sought eagerly Mama's advice and opinion on cooking, baking, sewing, and home remedies. She seemingly had a way of coaxing the petunias on the side of the house to grow.

Baking bread was an event that happened twice a week. An added treat on bread-baking day was making coodoruni. This was done by taking some of the bread dough and making patties, which were fried and then sprinkled with sugar.

Bread was something we never purchased. I recall our first loaf of store-bought bread. It was in my teens. We children were all fascinated by the fact that all the slices were of the same thickness.

Mothers have always been and will forever be very special people. Mothers of that period in time were

particularly heroic. They were "stay-at-home moms." They cleaned house, did laundry, planned and prepared all meals, and provided any and all disciplinary functions. If your cheek needed a tweak or your bottom required paddling, she administered whatever dosage was required, on the spot. It was not postponed or reserved for Papa.

When Papa came home from work, Mama greeted him with enthusiasm. After dinner, they sat in the kitchen, and over a cup of coffee, discussed the events and experiences of the day.

Mama's schedule was full. She had no time for psychotherapy, counseling or retreats. She never heard of Mary Kay, Sara Lee, or Doctor Laura.

If your throat hurt, she prepared some bad tasting concoction to gargle with, and you felt better the next day. If you had an earache, she put some warm fluid in your ear and stuffed it with a piece of cotton. She



had a remedy for everything. Her daily routine was performed without complaint.

One of Mama's specialties was her homemade pasta. After being made and cooked, it was piled in the center of a large board called a scanatore. This scanatore covered most of the kitchen tabletop. Then her delicious sauce was poured generously on. Each would move a portion in front of him or her and dig in. All that was required was a fork. At the end of the meal, which included meatballs, salad and fruit, the scanatore, was scrubbed, washed, wrapped, and stored away. It may sound a little primitive, but it's an old Sicilian custom that we looked forward to with great anticipation.

One sad day in September of 1947, Mama sustained serious head injuries in a terrible auto accident. She lay unconscious in a hospital bed for three long months. She was not expected to survive.

Her strong faith, fortitude, and will allowed her to make a miraculous recovery. A quasi-complete recovery took

over a year. The result was she was mentally alert, could walk and talk, and perform all daily functions unassisted. The downside was, she was limited in cooking meals, having lost the steady use of her hands required in knitting, sewing, crocheting, etc. She lived to be eighty-three.

She never again set foot on her land of birth. Although she frequently communicated with her family in Sicily, she never saw them again. Little did she realize that kissing them goodbye in 1929 was forever.

Her children and grandchildren will forever hold this brave, unselfish, loving woman in their hearts and minds.



Papa



A man of charm, wit, ideals, and a consummate storyteller, papa had many rules, which were strictly enforced. He was the absolute ruler of the family. In his absence, mama was in complete command.

After our arrival from Sicily, we lived in the southwest quadrant of the city, which was, for the most part, occupied by Italian immigrants. Almost everything we required was located in this "Little Italy." We had stores of hardware, furniture, clothing, liquor, our own milk dairy, cabinet shop, stocking factory, two theaters, elementary and junior high schools, and countless number of corner grocery stores.

Papa was a shoemaker and repairman. He was very gregarious. He loved being with and conversing with people. They were fascinated by his ability to tell

had a knack for telling a story in a most humorous manner.

Whenever some of his friends came to visit, which was several times a week, they would invariably say to papa, "cunda ne un fatto." - Sicilian for "tell us a story." Some of these gentlemen were life-long friends, as well as good neighbors. There was Mr. Angelo, Mr. Joe, and Mr. Barone to name a few.

After the depression, Papa managed to establish his own shoe repair shop. His hours were from seven a.m. to six p.m., after which, he would come home to a fine spaghetti dinner. After dinner, he loved to take a walk, slowly around the block. Since he made frequent stops along the way to chat with neighbors. This journey would usually take at least an hour.

Papa had one obvious vice. That was smoking. He was a very heavy smoker of cigarettes. Following his evening stroll through the neighborhood, he would sit at the

kitchen table with a pouch of tobacco, cigarette papers, and a small hand tool, which was, used to hand roll cigarettes. He then placed these homemade tobacco sticks into an attractive metal cigarette case. After this activity, he would take out his "tools of the trade" and spend time making a pair of shoes for himself. This task would take several weeks during which he would cut out the patterns, lining, leather uppers, tongue, insert eyelids, attach the last to the bottoms, soles and heels. He finally used the shop machines to finish them off.

One November morning in 1953, Papa developed a cough that wouldn't go away. After trying several home remedies, he consented to visit Dr. Magnelia, "Little Italy's" family physician. A preliminary exam revealed little. It was not the cough that alarmed the doctor most. It was the fact that a high body temperature was persistent. The doctor decided to hospitalize Papa for further and more thorough tests. The results were conclusive and catastrophic. Papa had cancer. It had started in his lungs and had spread to several vital organs.



The doctor gave him six months. At the age of fifty-seven the many years of smoking had finally taken its toll. It was difficult to believe that this man, who was always the picture of health, now had a fatal condition.

After a short hospital stay, it was decided to bring Papa home. He was bed-ridden and in much pain. A day that shall forever stand out in my mind was the day Mr. Angelo came to visit Papa. Mr. Angelo stood just inside the bedroom doorway and said, "Michael, if there is anything you need, if there is anything you want, if there is anything I can do, here is Angelo Terraciano." As he spoke, he placed his right hand over his heart. Tears filled his eyes and rolled down his cheeks.

Papa's response was also very tearful. "Thank you Angelo," words cannot adequately describe this highly emotional scene. It was by far the most poignant of all my experience.

It was six months to the day, April 10th, when Papa

passed on. He was a humble and generous man. He was a man well read and lover of opera. He was a man of high moral courage; unselfish, and regarded honor the highest of virtues.

Papa did the best he could for his family and friends with the few years given him. I always admired his wit, his sense of humor and last, but not least, his uncanny ability to spin a good "yarn", that seemed to beguile and fascinate his listeners.

Papa always prided himself in the fact that he never, in his adult life, wore a pair of store-bought shoes. He always made his own. A pair of shoes does not define a man, but the path he walks can.



Family

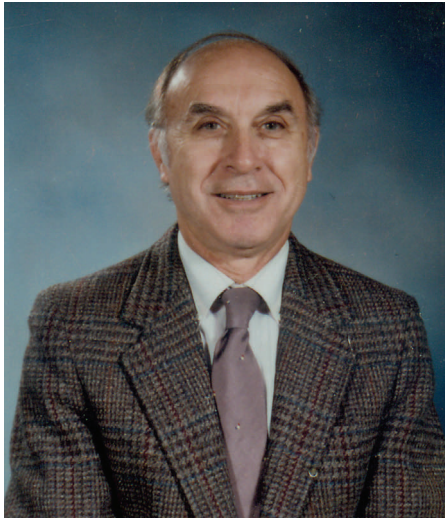


There is much I could say about my siblings and their achievements and accomplishments, their friendship, which I have always enjoyed and treasured. We have always been supportive of each other in every endeavor. We try to be there for each other whenever a need arises.

It is difficult to put into words the strong and loving bond that exists between us. The love, loyalty, and camaraderie we share can never be diminished. For me, this relationship is one of the brightest jewels in my crown.

My wife, children and grandchildren, relatives and friends have been and continue to be a constant source of encouragement and joy in my life.

About the Author



Alex Las Casas was born in Italy; immigrated to America and served in World War Two's armed forces. He earned his undergraduate and graduate degrees at Northern Illinois University and the University of Wisconsin. He performed with several Symphony Orchestras, was involved in directing, arranging, composing, and teaching both privately and in the public schools. He enjoys traveling with his wife and enjoys his children and grandchildren.

