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## My Grandfather's Hand

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# *My Grandfather's Hand*

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My grandfather had four fingers missing on his left hand. He had a palm and a thumb. He smiled seldom but well; he frowned often and effectively. He was seventy-three in 1939 when I was born and eighty-nine when he died in my own sixteenth year. So he was always an old man to me and I, always a boy to him. Indeed, he called me "Boy" as often as he called me by name.

He worked in his garden and in his greenhouse. He smoked his pipe under the grape arbor. He rocked in his chair in my grandmother's kitchen, or sat in a straight-backed one by the stove in the cellar. He saved seeds and sorted potatoes, pruned grape vines and split tomato stakes. He planted, weeded, raked, hoed and harvested. He fed pigs and chickens. That's what he did. Until I was five, I followed him around most of the time, and from five to eleven I followed him around a lot of the time. That's what I did.

My grandfather's name was Francesco, but no one ever called him that. We kids, his grandchildren, called him Tadile. His friends who came and sat with him under the grape arbor for talk and wine or beer called him Cico. Most were old timers like himself, but some were younger men he had worked with on the city ditch-digging crew. They used the deferential Zi'Cic, an elision of Zio (Uncle) Cico.

My grandfather was born in 1866 in Cerce Maggiore, where he and a younger sister were orphaned when he was nine. He worked in the wheat fields from the time he was six until he came to America. To my grandfather America meant white bread—dense, moist thick-crust white bread my grandmother baked every Saturday morning. She mixed the dough on Friday night in two great blue and white speckled enameled pans, and then baked the not quite round-shaped loaves early Saturday. My family lived upstairs so that when I awoke, the house was filled with the smell of bread. Up, dressed and downstairs in a flash. As I crashed in on the breadmaking at age 4 or 5, my grandmother—short, stocky, stolid, white hair in a bun—beamed a smile to greet me. "Ah, you're up. You want some bread?"

Hot bread! With plenty of butter. And cold milk. The body of the bread soft with heated moistness, its true rugged texture yet to be revealed by cooling. The crust already tough and chewy—not to be bitten through, but rather grabbed in your teeth and ripped with a combination of head and hand movement. And beyond the smelling and the eating, the whole process enveloped me: the flour-dusty breadbaking cloth on the table (you shook it out and put it away for next week); the big breadboard for rolling and shaping loaves and cutting slashes in the tops; fifteen or twenty loaves all over—cool, cooling, unbaked; the green and white enamel cast iron stove radiating heat—wonderful in the winter and awful in the summer. She baked right on the cast iron bottom of the oven, without pans. The way cast iron conducts heat was a secret of that bread. And, of course, sometimes my grandmother cut slices of the dough and fried them up. Today's doughboys. What we called *pizza frit*.

That was the bread then, my grandmother's bread, which signified the wonder of America to my grandfather, for he had naught but what he called black bread till he reached these New World shores. The whole wheat and stone ground flour that made that black bread in Cerce Maggiore so long ago was likely healthier than the Pillsbury's Best my grandmother used here. But what of that? What I still see is my grandfather's palm and thumb ripping off a crust. That hand. What happened to his hand?

My grandfather first came to America when he was sixteen. After a year he returned to Italy, but then at age twenty he returned to Waterbury, Connecticut, to stay. He was working in a factory when he married my grandmother. The marriage was a match, of course, arranged by my great-grandparents. Their oldest daughter, Maria, was fifteen and it was time for her to marry. Her father had initially settled in New Hampshire in 1888, when she was eight. There he cut trees with French-Canadian loggers while his daughters went to school with little Yankee girls, learning to read and write English and, in my grandmother's case, to ride horses. Though my grandparents liked New Hampshire and talked of it years later, there were few other Italians, let alone paisans, to whom Angelo Marcella could marry his four daughters. So south to Waterbury they moved. For Maria the match was Francesco Zello. He was twenty-nine in 1895, had a good job and was a paisan.

By 1897 my grandfather began building a house—on one particular hill a little further out of Waterbury than anyone had built before. I grew up knowing the house had been the first in the neighborhood or, as everyone said, the first “on the hill.” The first child, Victoria, was born in 1897, and the small family of three moved in when the house was finished in 1898. September of 1899 the first son, Albert, was born. June of 1901 brought Angelo, and February of 1903 watched Michael Zello come into the world. Meanwhile, my grandfather was very busy. His house was on one 75 by 100 foot lot, and he owned another of the same size behind his house. Because it was his, the rocky New England soil was special to my grandfather. He had worked other people’s land in Italy, but these lots were his. What he planted was his. The harvest was his. So every possible square foot was utilized. A garden went in; grapes and grape arbors, chickens and a chicken coop, pigs and a pigpen, and a greenhouse to start seeds in. He was busy fixing his less than half acre, making it work for him, making it produce all it could, making it home. Then, in the summer of 1905, in the middle of all this, with my grandmother carrying Florence who would be born in November, my grandfather went off to work in the factory one morning with ten fingers, and returned in the afternoon with six.

My Uncle Albert remembered. He was six: “I was outside and I saw my father walking down the street. So I ran out to meet him and I saw that his hand was all bandaged up. ‘What happened, Pa? What happened?’ I was asking him. ‘Where’s your mother?’ he said. ‘Get your mother—get your mother!’ And that was that. Four fingers completely gone, cut off by a machine.” They had taken him to a doctor who sewed and bandaged him up and they had sent him home. He walked. Four miles.

He healed and returned to work. Not in factories though—not without fingers. He dug with a pick and shovel. He worked first for an outfit called Barlow Brothers who put in foundations, cesspools, retaining walls. Then he worked for the growing city, putting in sidewalks, storm drains, sewers. The city needed lots of digging and my grandfather dug. And for all those years, as well as for some five years after his retirement in 1931, he did private jobs on his own. Relatives, neighbors, friends all over town knew that Zi’ Cic would dig, so if you were putting in a sidewalk, a wall, a cesspool, or needed

your garden turned over, my grandfather would dig with his good right hand and his good left palm and thumb.

While he dug for over three decades, life went on. Five more children (Rose, Adele, Laretta, Sylvia and Harry) were born. The neighborhood grew into its heyday in the 1920s and 1930s, an intact and vital ethnic enclave. By the 1940s and early 1950s when I was following him around, my grandfather was failing and the neighborhood was beginning to fail too. As with so many small ethnic neighborhoods, the writing on the wall was clear. We were Italian American, with the emphasis increasingly on the latter, and that meant that the heart and soul of our ethnicity were wearing out with the old timers.

After my mother got married, my grandfather added to his house, changing it from a one family to a two. Inside plumbing was added, superseding the outhouse and a bath once a week in the tin tub in the kitchen. When the work on the house was finished, my family moved into the top floor over my grandparents, and my Uncles Al and Mike, who in common old country style as the eldest sons, did not marry but helped support the household instead.

I remember from my early years that my grandfather's habit was to get up with the sun. He worked outside in the morning and had lunch about eleven. He drank wine, homemade red wine—dark, pungent, dry. He drank it with his lunch; he drank it with supper. So did his sons. A quart or more was drunk every day. By the time I was five, I was sent to the wine cellar daily to fill an empty bottle from a barrel. From the time I was three, no matter how I spent the morning, I was always with my grandfather for lunch. He ate whatever he ate and I ate my grandmother's bread and butter, but we both drank wine. He, one or two little glasses—strightsided heavy bottomed glasses, holding four or five ounces. I, a one-and-a-half-ounce apertif glassful of wine. I was little; the wine was strong.

After lunch, in fair weather the old man would sit and smoke under the grape arbor. He lit up his pipe by cupping it in his left palm while that thumb stuffed in strong smelling tobacco from a pouch he held with his good right hand. DiNaboli & Sons was the brand name. It came in a blue paper package with a picture of a factory on it and we in the family called it Italian tobacco. Though he never smoked

indoors, except for an occasional wintry or rainy day, my grandfather's clothes always smelled of that pipe tobacco.

He sat under the arbor, smoking, and I hung around. I fetched him water, more tobacco, matches. He was already an old man and—while willful and still strong—he was becoming infirm. His eyes were going and, despite glasses, he saw poorly. His legs were weak: he moved through the house, leaning on doorways; through the garden, leaning on tomato poles, on a hoe; elsewhere, leaning, always leaning, on his cane. The cane was always with him. When angered, he brandished it, waving it a foot or so above the floor or ground with an “Aah” of indignation or disgust. Before I became interested in playing baseball, I spent a lot of time playing near the old man, or following him around, doing whatever he asked. The activities of my grandfather's latter days, then, were the activities of my younger ones. An old Italian and his skinny grandson, spending a lot of time together in a greenhouse, a shed, under a grape arbor—feeding chickens, feeding pigs, working in a big garden. It was his world; and it was mine.

The year's garden work began at the turn of February and March when my grandfather pruned and tied the grape vines. Into his eighties, he did this job. Indeed, no one else in the family ever learned how to do it and it was never done properly after he was gone. All I remember is that he pruned them severely and tied them in the proper old way—with green pussywillow twigs. Although pussywillow bushes grew close to where we lived, for years and years my grandfather walked to the Waterville section of town, some three miles away, to gather the pussywillow along the railroad tracks. One year in late February when he was old, he asked my uncles to go get that willow, but they didn't get it soon enough to suit him. So he arose at dawn one morning, slipped out of the house leaning on his cane, and started walking.

A cousin, working in an office in Waterville, called because from out her window she saw Zi' Cic walking by. She had tried to get him to come in but he wouldn't because, he insisted, he had to get his willow. An uncle was called out of work to catch up with the old man and drive him home. A short time later, my uncle's car pulled up to the house with grandfather in the back seat and bundles of two- to three-foot willow twigs tied with the twine he had brought along for

the purpose. I opened the door and he got out with his cane and his willow, smiling. My grandmother gave him hell. She was loud, shrill—said everyone had been worried. The old man stared at her with steely eyes, uttered some curse in Italian, and brandishing his cane, gave his most disgusted “Aah!” It was wonderful. He had his willow and he cut it himself. And thus the spring season began.

He cut lots of willow because there were lots of grape vines. The grape arbor ran from the back of the house to the end of the property, 120 feet long by 8 feet wide, with another piece of land 40 by 50 feet set near the side of the house. By my time, the arbor had been shortened and that 40 by 50 foot plot was lawn for grandchildren to play on and a small flowerbed for my mother. The old man never tired of asking my mother if she intended to feed his grandchildren flowers.

The beginning of the arbor, just back of the house and near the big shed, was the fancy part with trellised sides and the built-in bench. If you continued toward the back of the property, toward the more simple part of the arbor, you stood on the main drag of my grandfather’s world. The walk itself was made of old bricks imbedded in the soil. When you went down this red brick road (which it was to me as a little kid in a peddle-car), you passed the tool shed on the right and the greenhouse and coldframes on the left. The tool shed was a small 5 by 8 foot affair where I went to get the old man a rake, a shovel or a hose. There were lots of these as well as grubaxes, crowbars, sledgehammers, wood saws, splitting wedges and so on. On the right you came to the outhouse, then the feed shed and pig pen, the chicken coop and fenced chicken yard. Behind that there was more garden, the rest of the second lot the old man owned, and adjacent was a third lot which Uncle Mike owned. When you included the pig pen, chicken coop, sheds, greenhouse, coldframes and the work area for splitting wood, killing pigs, etc., you had 18,500 of the 22,500 square feet of land being used for work and food production. Two more lots were owned by Uncle Albert. He had a garage and workshop there, and more garden and grapevines. I went “up the garden” to bring my grandfather lunch or “down the house” with the old man when his work was done. These five lots then, less than an acre, were my grandfather’s world when I was a kid.



Because of all those grapevines, he needed all those willow twigs. He would put two or three twigs in his teeth, grab the vine with his left palm and thumb, and work his clippers with his good right hand. When he was ready to tie a vine, he would tuck his clippers in his pocket or under his arm and make his knot in the willow, trimming the long ends off after he tied it. The willow would bend and tie and hold, but it also would not bind on the vine. That was the idea in using it instead of string or twine—that and the fact that it was free and every penny counted. The willow would dry out and hold all year. In fact you had to cut through it the following spring. And thus it was done with willow, with my standing by shivering, stamping my feet to keep warm, handing him more twigs, pulling cut vines out to be taken away later, and waiting for lunch so I could drink wine with him. That's how spring began.

As March moved on, it was often rainy and cold—but it wasn't winter. The ground was thawing and you began to smell the earth. That smell, the smell of rich wet soil, even in March before it was turned over (we did it by hand so we never said "plowed") was the smell of spring. During the month of March, while my grandfather was putting his greenhouse in order, I got to run all over the garden flying kites because nothing had yet been planted.

The greenhouse was built long before I came along. It was small, only twice as large as the tool shed, and built into the ground. You opened a narrow green door, stepped over a high threshold and went down two steps into a small and wonderful place. Down the center ran a two-foot wide dirt walkway. On either side there were planks held in place by old pipes driven into the earth, forming the 30-inch deep channel you were standing in. These planks held the soil in a long deep bay on each side. Though small and roughly made, it was wisely planned. The mid-March sunshine, not quite three months from the winter solstice, warmed the place, and the rich dark soil in those bays absorbed that heat. That, combined with the greenhouse being built partially into the ground, brought the seedlings through the cold nights and the odd March snowstorm.

I'd be out flying my kite and getting cold when I'd pile in there. The old man would smile at me, his eyes sparkling, his fine straight teeth all warm browns and yellows from the tobacco smoke. I'd tell

him I got cold playing and he's smile again, wordlessly, and go back to his work. So I'd open my coat in the heat and settle in to watch. If the smell of the warming garden soil outside offered some primal promise to my young senses, what can be said of the inside of that greenhouse? The pungent aroma of moist warm rich earth. And once the seeds sprouted, the look and the scent of new green growth. And always, my grandfather and his tobacco.

As I watched, then, he would loosen the soil with the large mason's trowel, patiently turning those two greenhouse beds over and over in preparation for St. Joseph's Day when he would plant his seeds. Indeed, the first preparation for that planting had occurred the previous summer when the best of the old composted manure was shoveled and mixed into those greenhouse beds to lie through the intense summer heat working their organic magic.

His seeds were, of course, mostly his own. My uncles would buy some, but mostly the seeds were saved from the year before. The biggest, best, most well-formed tomatoes and peppers were eyed on the vine for seeds. More than once, I got in trouble for picking such a choice fruit before it was ready. They were left until fully ripe, and were cut open and the extracted seeds spread on a cloth napkin to dry. The seeds were stored in envelopes and jars on a shelf near the greenhouse door. Seeds for peas, string beans, cranberry beans and other vegetables were handled by grandfather. As for basil, parsley and other herbs—plants with tiny seeds—their preparation was my grandmother's work. On warm and sunny, windy September days, outside the cellar door, working with two small white tablecloths, my grandmother rubbed the dried stalks and pods, letting all fall on one cloth. Then she winnowed it all from one cloth to the other and back again, letting the wind carry away the chaff, leaving only seeds to be put in envelopes for my grandfather. So he planted his seeds in the greenhouse, his left palm and thumb scribing shallow furrows in the soil, his right hand sprinkling the seeds, line after line until all the tomatoes were in, and then his right hand grabbing handful of soil from an unplanted section, sprinkling it over the seeds and patting it all down, over and over until the job was done, or until it was lunchtime, when he would motion to me to come, while putting on his coat, and I'd follow him the twenty-five steps from the greenhouse to the back door—he, slow, leaning heavily on his cane, me anxiously

behind him in the cold of March, then into the warmth of my grandmother's kitchen for lunch and that little glass of wine.

April follows March, and in April, as soon as it was dry enough, the garden was turned. It was turned twice, in April and again in early May, to loosen the soil. It was done by hand with a spading fork—by my grandfather, my uncles, and from the time I was eight, by me. A spading fork has a short handle and four or five stout tines. You push it some ten inches into the ground, with your foot if necessary, and then push down on the handle to break free a large clod of hard, wet soil. This you lift up and drop a foot in front of you, turning it over and as you do so, turning under the weeds that have already sprouted. Then you smack it to break it up a bit. You move along doing this over and over, creating a furrow as if a plow had passed. When you come to the end of the garden plot, you start back again. It is very simple hand work. It tires your back. I have a small garden now which I turn over in an hour. My grandfather's garden was some hundred times the size of mine. The amount of digging and cultivating done in one year by hand in those days—let alone over the years—is stunning to contemplate.

Crops that grow well in colder weather, like peas and lettuce, were of course planted outside early in the season. And beans, for example, might be planted in early May in a warm year. But it was the middle of May before it was warm enough for the hundreds of tomato and pepper plants that had been started in the greenhouse and transplanted and raised to garden size in flats in the cold frames. This was the big planting my grandfather did with the new moon. If you asked him why, he would have said little more than that was when you did it. He carried hundreds of years of folk wisdom which he didn't question or explain. As it happens, transplanting disturbs the roots and essentially shocks the living organism that a plant is. Done in the new moon, plants recover from the shock more easily and grow stronger.

So the plants would go in. He'd take his digging rake, a long handled affair with eight-inch tines, and he'd dig holes for tomatoes. Bent over to thirty degrees, he's smile and the rake would fly high and then sock down deep into the soil. He'd pull back and have the beginning of his hole. A few more dirt-drawing strokes, and it was done. Then he'd move back a few steps, leaning on his rake, and dig

another one. He wouldn't unbend after each hole, but, after five or six, he'd retreat a few steps and straighten his back, leaning on his rake and using the strength of his arm to stand upright. Then he'd smile and look at the holes he'd dug. He'd tell me to go get him a drink, or motion to drag baskets of manure down the row, to throw handfuls of it into the holes, or he might just stand there. He'd catch the rake in the crook of his arm, leaning on it slightly, spit on his hands and rub them together, raise the rake high above shoulder level, and then the rake and he would come down together, my grandfather back to his thirty-degree working bend and the rake back into the ground for the first bite of the next hole. It was a slow, steady place of straightening up and resting, the rhythm of a man who had worked the soil all his life.

After he'd made twenty or thirty holes he'd plant some tomatoes. Because he couldn't bend all the way over without falling by the time I accompanied him, he had a sawed-off shovel handle about two feet long for the job. On one end was the shovel grip and on the other a tapered point. His left palm and thumb gripped this tool and mixed the manure with the soil and then plunged down to make a hole. His right hand then took a tomato delicately by the stem and dropped it into the hole, its ball of wet roots and soil (balled by that same hand earlier and placed in a bucket for me to carry.) The tool was then used to push soil around the tomato and I followed along with buckets and watering cans to wet down the new plantings.

Summer came and we were always picking things: lettuce, cucumbers, squash, beans, peas, beets, carrots, spinach, onions, garlic, corn, peppers, and more that I no longer remember. And tomatoes, always more and more tomatoes. With hundreds of plants my grandfather and I were always picking, and my mother and grandmother were always canning. I would carry baskets of produce to the cellar kitchen. I'd help out washing jars and putting full jars in the canning cellar—a large closet-like enclosure lined all around with deep shelves, hundreds of quarts of food preserved each year. This continued right through September when we picked pears and grapes as well as the last of the garden produce and my mother and grandmother canned pears and grape juice and pickles and relish and the last of the tomatoes. By the end of September the garden was finished except for the potatoes.

My grandfather dug his potatoes in October. After the hard frost, the vines and rank weeds, withered and dry, made the rows of hills plain to his eye. He dug with a tool called a potato hook, a heavy steel letter "U," a straight sided horseshoe shape on a pickaxe handle. My family called it a "zop." Where that name comes from I cannot say, but that was the sound it made hitting the earth, and the name made sense to me as a child. I can still see my grandfather at his familiar working angle, his hint of a smile looking at the sunny cool day, at his land, at me. Then the tool would arch smoothly into the air and plunge down into the side of a potato hill—"Zop!" He'd pull the tool back toward him, and the potatoes would roll from the earth. Leaning on the handle, he'd reach down and toss the potatoes aside for me to pick up, sifting through the dirt with his fingers to get them all, even the little ones. "A.h!"—explosively expressive with a smile for a big potato in fine form, or a curse in disgust when his digger cut through a big one. He dug the potatoes and I picked them up and put them in a bushel basket. I worked fast to keep up with him, picking them out of the dirt to save him from bending. But he usually waved me off, doing it his way, at his speed. He dug, flung potatoes aside, tossed plants and weeds in piles for compost. He never swung the heavy tool very hard or very fast for its heft did the work easily, and so he worked at a steady pace for hours. A lot got done. He knew about digging.

Every year there were some twelve to fifteen bushels of potatoes. They were dug in a week or less and put into the big shed. Then for a few days, when it was dry and sunny, they went out on the sidewalk to dry for storage. You rolled them gently out of the bushels so they didn't bruise. You picked them up in the late afternoon, by handfuls, carefully placing—not throwing—they into the bushels. Then you carried the bushels into the shed. Every time you handled them you rubbed them a little, so most of the dirt was off by the time they were ready for storage in the bin in the cellar.

I recall a cold October morning when I was four. I am out playing till my hands and feet are numb, so into the big shed I go to see him. He has the old kitchen wood stove going and it is warm and toasty. Sitting on an oak kitchen chair, his cane and jacket on a box, his pipe in his mouth, he is bent over, sorting potatoes. Those cut by the zop, or with a sign of rot or blight, go into one bushel to be used first before they were lost; the little ones—the size of a half dollar, a quarter

or smaller (he picked them all up)—into another bushel to be used soon; and the rest, smallish through big, mixed in bushels to go into the potato bin in the cellar. I warm my hands at the stove. He smiles at me and sorts. He puts his cane and jacket on the floor, and pulling the box over near him, he takes my hand in his palm and thumb and sits me down. I start helping him sort. He catches my mistakes. “No,” and I pick the potato that I now see the gouge in and put it with the nicked ones. “No,” and I nod, because I realize I threw that one too hard. For a while we sort potatoes in the warmth of the shed, and then he tells me to go get the wine. Into the house to my grandmother I go, carrying the bottle and two glasses (his bigger one with my aperitif glass inside it) back to the shed. He pours the wine and puts the glasses next to me on the box. Again, his hand takes mine, and he winks. Reaching over, he opens the oven door and fifteen or twenty tiny baked potatoes are in there. He has newly baked potatoes for lunch. He lays his cap on the potatoes in the bushel in front of him, and piles the potatoes from the oven on it. He reaches into his jacket and out comes a salt shaker. He takes a small potato and breaks it open. It steams. He salts it and hands it to me. And we sit there on a late cold October morning, an old peasant and a little boy, and we eat his potatoes and drink his wine. What he knows, what he makes happen from the earth, this old orphan gives to his grandson. But I am growing towards a very different world and he is shrinking from what has been his.

By the time I was eight or nine, my grandfather was failing. Though still strong, he was failing. He was falling down—in the house, on the sidewalk, in the garden. More and more frequently, I found him, propped on an elbow on the ground, unable to rise alone. I was big enough to help. I’d set my feet and grasp my forearms in front of me, and his still strong arms and shoulders would lift his weight on my young arms while he straightened out a foot from under himself. He’d put a hand on my shoulder and right himself further—cursing the whole time in disgust at his body and his growing helplessness. I’d bend down and reach for his cane and he’d make his way to his bench for a rest.

Sometimes his falls were severe—spectacular in a sense. Once he pitched off a three-foot stone wall into the garden. I found him, holding his head and shoulders on both forearms. His face had

smashed into the ground. His glasses had broken and his cut face was covered with blood. Unable to see me through the blood, he lay there calling for help, his voice strong, not wailing, calling for help in anger and defiance.

"Ro, Ro." He called for my mother. "I'll get her, Tadile," I shouted over my shoulder, already sprinting for the house. With the image of his bleeding face in my mind, I took the stairs two at a time, and burst into my mother's kitchen. "Tadile fell over the wall. His face is all cut. Come on." My mother comes, calling my grandmother on the way. "Oh Pop," she says. "Ro, Ro. Son of a bitch," says my grandfather. "He's all right, Dick, he's all right." She's always cool in a crisis—takes stock, gauges what has to be done and does it. "Look, the lenses aren't broken, they just pushed out of the frames. His eyes aren't cut, just his eyebrows."

And she talks to him in Italian, telling him the same thing, telling him we have to get him to the house. We get him up, and my mother and I walk him, supporting him step by painful step to the house, up the stairs, into the kitchen and his rocking chair, with my grandmother along encouraging him. How clearly I still see it. His bleeding face, his tender daughter wiping it, venous blood, dark and bluish, clotting on his closed eyes, on his bristly cheeks.

"Here Mama," my mother says to my grandmother, "Keep daubing the blood. He needs stitches. I'll call the doctor and Harry." Soon the crisis is in hand. Uncle Harry arrives and so does Uncle Michael, and they decide to take the old man to the doctor for stitches. But my grandfather balks at leaving. He says something through his bruised and bleeding lips which we all miss. "What, Pa?" asks Harry, bending his tall frame over his father's bent one to hear better. The old man repeats himself, and Harry asks, "Where the hell is his hat? He wants his hat." "It's in the garden," I say. "We left it where he fell."

"Get it," says Harry, but I'm already on my way, out the door, running to retrieve my grandfather's cap, his dignity, for the trip to the doctor. Besides growing infirm and falling, and losing his sight, my grandfather had what we then called "hardening of the arteries." Perhaps it was Alzheimer's. In any case, toward the end, his mind wandered and he'd get confused. To watch him dying slowly, step by step, fall by fall, confusion by confusion, tore the family's heart. When he became really bad, Uncle Michael took a leave from his factory job



to stay home and care for him. This continued for almost a year until the old man failed even more and even Uncle Mike—as good and strong as he was—couldn't handle it. So finally the family gave in to necessity and my grandfather, no longer Tadile, Frank, or Cico, but an aged infant, spent his last months in a bed in a nursing home. He was eighty-nine.

Before the last two years when he was failing more and more, but not yet into the final slide, he was lucid most of the time. And the anger which was so apparent when he fell, the pride and resolve, rooted in his thoughts. My grandfather tried to kill himself. He tried twice that I know of. I stopped him. I was thirteen or so. On both occasions the same thing happened. He and I were on the property alone. Both times I went down the cellar, perhaps to check on him but just as likely for some other reason. Both times I smelled gas and found him sitting next to the stove in the cellar kitchen with all the burners on, but unlit. I shut off the burners and looked at him. He looked at me squarely, without smile or frown. We said nothing, and I never said anything to anyone either.

The last three or four years of his life, a lot of changes had been made on the property. The garden had become smaller while the lawn had grown bigger. The pigs and chickens were gone; the pigpen had been demolished and the chicken coop used as a tool shed. This made the back yard fit for extended family gatherings on the Fourth of July and Labor Day, and other summer celebrations. My mother and aunts cooked on an elaborate fireplace built by Uncle Albert, and the men played bocce or horseshoes.

It was on one such occasion that my grandfather put his infirmity and his shrinking world into sharp focus. On this particular day, my uncles had drunk a beer or two more than usual and the women, my mother and aunts, instigated what was to become a telling incident. They had been talking about making the place look better. They told my uncles that since the pigs and pigpen and chickens were gone, and since the house had had plumbing for twenty years, maybe we ought to get rid of the outhouse. It was old-fashioned. It was smelly. It was time. No one ever used the outhouse anymore, except for me and my uncles when we were working outside and didn't want to be bothered walking into the house—and of course, my grandfather. But my grandfather used it from necessity.



It was without stairs and fifteen feet away from where he sat long hours in his spot under the grape arbor. As it happened, my uncles acted on the women's proposal. Off to the cellar went Harry and Albert, returning with hammers, pinchbars and a crowbar. Their mood was jolly.

"Come on, Al. We'll knock the son of a bitch apart right now for the hell of it," Harry said, "and I'll help you cart the bastard to the dump tomorrow."

It is thus that they approached the outhouse, laughing, with tools in hand, there to find their father, leaning with his left palm and thumb against a corner of the small structure, and his cane in his right hand.

"Pa, get out of the way."

"No!"

"Come on, get out of the way."

"No!"

"Come on, Pa, come sit," Uncle Mike said gently, trying to take his father by the arm.

"Get away!" he shouted in Italian. And still leaning with his left palm and thumb, my grandfather, brandished his cane against his sons. "Get away! I'm an old man. I can't walk. I fall all the time. Son of a bitch! I can't walk and you want me to go into the house to take a pee."

The moment was electric and is burned into my memory. The old man waving his cane and cursing. His sons backing off, embarrassed. "Get away! When I die. That's when you can knock it down." And when he died, that's what they did.