Forward

This book is not about me, although at first glance it would appear to be so. I am not that special, just extremely fortunate. Rather it is about the times in which I have lived and fleeting experiences that could only have been realized in those unique places at one specific time, that no one can ever know the same way again. To assume that someone might be interested in reading the story of my life seems to me a form of vanity, an assumption of significance not born of accomplishment but of an unwarranted sense of self-importance. My life was quite ordinary in most respects. I am not a movie star or a rock idol. I am neither a politician, a self-made millionaire nor a celebrated military commander. I am neither hero, nor villain. I am like you in every way. What separates us is just a matter of degrees. You may be a little smarter, and the next fellow may be a little braver. Your talents may lie in your physical abilities and you might gravitate to sports while I may favor the

arts. But on every level, we are all the same, and this is true for all times. We feel love and pain, hunger and exhaustion, fear and embarrassment, and motivations, both inherent and influenced, that propel us through this miraculous journey we call our lives, but the times that we have lived through are quite unique and while they may contain many lessons, can only be recalled for reflection not relived by others.

If anything, this book is an assertion that you are not alone. We are not alone. Whatever you feel, we have all felt under different circumstances. I am graced that the circumstances of my life existed in the best of times. I suppose every generation regards the period of their life to have been the best of times. Most of what I heard from my elders as a young boy were nostalgic reflections on loss, regrets based on the technical and societal changes that had stripped away their normal patterns of living, and the simple amenities, pleasures that they so rarely enjoyed, like a 6-cent Coca-Cola or a 25-cent movie, and replaced them with something new and

improved. Yet their sense of loss was a clear expression that they felt their world of the past had been a better time.

My mother's family lived in a small town outside Montgomery, Alabama called Eclectic. Their home was very small and had no running water. Rather they drew their water from a well in the side yard that was later replaced with that most modern of conveniences, a lever-handled pump. Their toilet was an outhouse of weathered barnwood, likely to give you a splinter in your rump, should you survive the smell and the stiff pages of the Sears catalog that were supplied to wipe clean. Chickens roamed the fenced yard providing natural fertilizer to their homegrown crops, like corn and beans. The smell was at times horrific. Early in the morning my grandmother rose to milk the cow. During one summer visit, in a pre-dawn hour, she took me along to instruct me in this lost practice. It's not as easy as it may look. Every day her chickens provided eggs—no need for refrigeration. The vegetables were harvested and canned

in Mason jars to be stored in the dirt-floor basement under their home. Butter was hand churned in the kitchen. Occasionally a chicken would be killed, but the larger part of the family's protein was derived from the many patient hours my grandfather spent crouched in the shade of a tree at the end of a homemade cane pole, fishing. He was a prolific fisherman. Restaurants were a seldom used luxury reserved for special occasions. In the days before fast food and happy meals, everyone cooked their own food. Grandma cooked in cast iron pans on a wood-fired stove. Quick release Teflon pans did not exist yet and that miracle of infomercial promotion, the non-stick, copper ceramic frypan was still almost a century away. There was no such thing as television. People communicated with pen and paper, not text messages on their smartphones. Dick Tracy, a comic strip detective, was the only person who had a video capable wristwatch communicator, a flight of fancy that enhanced the entertainment value of the daily newspaper alongside characters like Joe Palooka, The Phantom,

Little Lulu, Sadsack, Mutt and Jeff, Dagwood and Blondie, and Pogo. Life's diversions were simple then.

My cousins referred to our grandmother as "my Momma" and our grandfather as "Big Daddy." These were the names they had learned to call them as very small children, simply because that is how their mother, my aunt, referred to them. When my aunt referred to her mother, their grandmother, she always said "my Momma," so as her children heard it, that became her name. These were only several of the many expressions and colloquialisms unique to the South. My favorite was realized one day when I heard my cousin refer to someone who had left in a hurry as having "lit out of there like a scalded dog." Now to be certain, I have never seen a scalded dog and I seriously doubt that my cousin had either. In fact, I doubt that anyone I have ever known has seen a scalded dog, yet the meaning of that humorous phrase can be easily brought to mind in a colorful vision, shared without a need to be learned or explained. Like my grandmother's recipes, they occupy

a small place in time and fade slowly, little by little, with each passing generation, homogenized and eradicated as our nuclear families are dispersed across a broad land mass of mixed cultures, propelled ever more so by the advances in technology that began with the automobile, originally known as the horseless carriage. Despite all this and paradoxically because of it, I am certain that my parents and their parents would agree that they lived in the best of times.

Chapter 1

In 1945, my father returned home from his station at the RAF base in Polbrook, Great Britain, a B-17 navigator with the 351st bomber group, an honored veteran of the last victorious war remembered as having been fought for clearly defined moral principles, a righteous war everyone supported and believed in. It was everybody's war. It was a world war. The period of 1945 to 1950 was one of readjustment not only for the returning vets but for the nation at large, a return to the pursuit of goals interrupted by the call to duty, including relationships, education and careers. It was a romantic time for those honorable men who had left their sweethearts to place their lives on the line for the greater cause of liberty and justice and returned safely to a grateful, welcoming nation. It was a joyous moment in time that was evidenced by what is known today as the "baby-boom."

I was born in 1949, one of the last of the baby-boomers. In the later years of my life, I played that to my advantage by advertising my commercial film production business in full page ads featured in Back Stage magazine, referring to myself as a "baby-boomer/boob-tuber." This claim reinforced the notion that I was versed in television because I had grown up with TV advertising, as one of the first generation that had embraced it from birth. Yes, I watched the boob-tube and there was no shame in that. I intuitively understood the power and visual language of TV commercials through an osmosis of sorts, by long and repeated exposure over decades and therefore I was qualified to produce your company's commercials successfully. True or not, the people who read Back Stage remembered me.

The shows I first watched were Rudy Kazootie, Howdy Doody, Andy's Gang, Shari Lewis, The Mickey Mouse Club, Captain Kangaroo, Roy Rogers, The Lone Ranger, The Adventures of Wild Bill Hickock, The Cisco Kid, The Gene Autry Show, Gabby Hayes, and Hopalong

Cassidy. Yes, from the beginning there was no shortage of television cowboys.

But to limit our fascination with cowboys exclusively to the early days of television would be to sell the western genre short. Our preoccupation continued through the fifties and sixties for a full two decades before giving way to new heroes as doctors and contemporary lawmen, trends that began with shows like Ben Casey, Dr. Kildare and The Untouchables.

Meanwhile cowboy shows continued to prevail until every possibility had been exhausted. Shows like Wyatt Earp, Bat Masterson, Wanted Dead or Alive, Wagon Train, Rawhide, Twenty Mule Team Borax, Bronco, Sugarfoot, Cheyenne, Maverick, The Rebel, Gunsmoke, The Rifleman, Rin Tin Tin, Bonanza, The Virginian, Broken Arrow, Circus Boy, Death Valley Days, F-Troop, The High Chaparral, Have Gun Will Travel, The Nine Lives of Elfego Baca, Texas John Slaughter, The Texan, The Wild, Wild West, and Zorro were just a few of the

many shows that filled the American imagination's need for it's ideal hero—a straight shooting, morally confident, independent minded loner, a Robin Hood of the Old West as The Cisco Kid claimed and as the real life Jesse James was often referred to.

These cowboy heroes set a tone, a standard for the good guys who enforced the law and righted wrongs, one where no one was ever shot and died who did not clearly deserve it, but more often was shot in the hand, or disarmed with a shot to their gun and of course never while running away. Shooting the pistol from a bad guy's hand was the most common way to resolve a conflict, a feat performed with uncanny ability by virtually every western hero, to shoot from the hip without aiming, never injuring the villain but simply disarming him with a well-placed shot. Nor was there ever any blood. Pistols held not six shots, but an endless supply of bullets--seven, nine, ten, twelve-- without reloading, whatever was needed to keep the action going. Bullets whistled, ricocheted and pinged, but never exploded with a

deafening concussive bang. Guns were friendly tools that when used properly were harmless.

By age four I had my Hopalong Cassidy outfit, a flannel lined black shirt and pants with white-piping outlining the pockets, a two-gun gunbelt and a pair of cowboy boots that I wore year-round often with summer shorts. We were inseparable. My Hopalong "six-shooters" shot a seemingly endless supply of "caps," a red paper roll with small gunpowder dots that popped with a bang and smoked when hit by the hammer of the toy pistol. But in later years before the end of the first decade of cowboy shows, my Hopalong six shooters were replaced by a Mattel' Fanner 50, a realistically shaped toy gun that fired grey plastic bullets from spring loaded "shoot-um-shells" with sound effects provided by individual "greenie-stick-um-caps" applied to each shell to create a more realistic experience. My holster was real English-tanned leather and the ornate buckle contained a derringer that could spring out to fire a shoot-um-shell squarely at a surprised enemy simply by pushing my

tummy outwards. This was the high-water mark of the golden age of toy guns, as good as it ever got. Back then toy guns were black or silver, never lime green or pink or orange. There was no fluorescent orange tip at the end of the barrel to mark it as a toy. We played with our guns openly in yards and on sidewalks without ever fearing that we might be shot by police officers who had not yet been schooled in the code of the Lone Ranger and Hopalong regarding the proper use of firearms or some other child who might innocently bring his daddy's unlocked pistol to the toy gunfight. No, these were never concerns. It was a different time.

My parents lived in New Haven until I was of age four. Theirs was a second story apartment above a portion of my grandfather's grocery store on Blatchley Avenue a block down from Grand. A concealed narrow alley separated them from my grandparent's home above the liquor store they rented to my Great Uncle Pete. The kitchen windows of each home were above the sink and faced each other across the span of the narrow alley.

Possibly only three or four feet separated the windows. It was the practice of my father's mother Rose, who we called Noni, and my mother to communicate daily by tapping on the window of the other with the long handle of their ever-present dustmop, a signal to open the window and chat as needed. Noni had a rotary dial phone on a party line and to use the phone you had to wait until whoever else was using it was off the line. No one was ever concerned that their conversations might not be private. Nevertheless, the kitchen window method of communication was simply one of convenience and economy and met their needs perfectly.

Noni's kitchen was the central hub of all family activity. She served meals all day long to her family and all who stopped by for a visit, the extended family and everyone who worked in the store below—the butchers, the stock clerks and the cashiers. It never stopped. The kitchen was very large and the window at the far end of the room led to a small flat roof, used each day to climb through so that Noni might hang the laundry on a moving

clothesline, one with large pulleys at each end, that extended over the store's alley below to the house next door, their former home. Directly below in that small alley that led to the back door of their store were several fifty-five gallon drums used for burning trash. Everyone burned their trash back then, and many homes, as well as schools and businesses had incinerators for that purpose, but the grocery store's needs were so large as to warrant the three cans. I can remember my early childhood in New Haven through many familiar smells—the stench of the sewage making its way to the ocean as we crossed the low drawbridge over the aptly named Mill River on Grand Avenue as we headed for downtown and the smell of burning diesel fumes from the city buses along the way; but more so, the smell of burning trash was uniquely New Haven for me. It may seem quite odd now, but that unique smell had many fond associations. Air conditioning was not yet in use and Noni's screened kitchen window was always open in warm weather. A gentle breeze from the west would waft the smoke up from the drums spilling lightly into the kitchen. It was

no more unwelcome than the smell of burning logs in a fireplace or the smell of a campfire, but it had its own unique tinge. As environmental standards began to take hold, trash was no longer being burned and the smell that signaled that I was now home had vanished with the times.

Yes, times were quickly changing. Take for example, the "modern" washing machine that sat in the corner farthest from the kitchen table. It could be rolled out as needed and put away. It was not electric but was simply a pair of hand-cranked rollers bridging a large tub where clothes and linens were agitated by hand in soapy water and then rinsed and squeezed through the pair of rollers to remove the excess water before making the trip to the roof to dry. Laundry was a group exercise that all the women joined in on. Helping one another was common practice.

In other areas, technology was already running wildly rampant out of control. I clearly remember trying on shoes with my mother by putting my feet into a

fluoroscope. This was an x-ray device positioned in shoe stores to assist the salespeople in determining the fit of a child's shoe by providing assurance to their mothers. In actuality, it was a novelty device that attracted kids to view their feet and wiggle their toes, watching the bones in real time under x-ray. The fluoroscope had three viewing hoods that looked rather like they should have come from a submarine periscope. These allowed the mother, the child and the salesman to all view the active x-ray simultaneously. These devices were extremely dangerous and as the dangers were understood most States passed laws against their use, but this continued until 1970. However, it was not until 1981 that the last fluoroscope was removed from a department store in Madison, West Virginia. The problem with all new technologies is that we remain ignorant until it's too late. These devices radiated children at thousands of times the acceptable exposure level. What did anybody really know back then?

At night, the cash from sales in the grocery store was brought up to the kitchen to be counted and placed in a zippered deposit bag that my grandfather would drive to the night deposit drop at the local bank a few blocks away. This was the safest way to deal with the cash. My grandfather's office had one of those thick-walled, extremely heavy safes but the office had been the target of several break-ins and attempts at the safe, some of which had been successful, so my grandfather became very cautious over the years. Now there are no more safecrackers to worry about. It's a lost art I suppose. It went the way of typewriter repairmen, extinct, made irrelevant by hackers using cyber means to steal identities and anonymously take money directly from bank accounts without ever being caught.

In later years, during the summers and holidays that I spent with my grandparents, they would allow me to help count the money from the cash register drawers that was brought up to the kitchen. We counted the bills first and then put the coins in paper rolls, using an old adding

machine with rows and rows of buttons, 100 in all, to tally the totals. As a reward for helping, they allowed me to go through all the coins to find specimens for my coin collection. Most of what I collected were contemporary small coins that I placed in stiff blue cardboard folders that had holes punched where each coin was to be inserted by date and by mint, be it Denver, San Francisco and so on. But the real surprise was how many rare coins would be filtered in the nightly screenings. Indian head pennies were still in circulation and I netted quite a few. In fact, my uncle Pete who ran the liquor store below, kept a coffee can behind the counter that he eventually filled with Indian head pennies he had garnered from liquor sales. He later gave to them me. They were still that common. However, I never would have expected to find the oversized copper penny dated from the 1790's or the 1873 seated liberty silver dime with the "arrows;" or the several silver half dimes or the two-penny piece. Many coins from throughout the 1800's were still in circulation, as evidenced by my success collecting coins while screening the cash sales of the store. These rare

coins had been used for the purchase of groceries, the users obviously unaware of their true worth. Silver dollars too, were being widely used and many were dated from the late 1800's.

At 96 Clay Street days began at 6 A.M.-- no laying around in bed sleeping in. Everyone got up early. We all had the same biorhythms. Noni began by preparing breakfast--bacon, and eggs, sausage and pancakes, hash brown potatoes or grits, toast and always fresh fruit. She would cook whatever was asked for by each new guest to her kitchen. She ran it like a small diner. The night before she would prepare fruit for serving by taking the spoiled or damaged fruit that was no longer saleable from the store and peel away the bad parts, saving the good flesh. Often it was apricots or peaches, but frequently plums or pears. She would also stew prunes with fresh oranges and chill the mixture for the morning's meal. Every morning my grandfather sat in the rocker by the window leading to the roof, putting on his shoes before departing on his daily morning rounds in his station

wagon to replenish the produce and meats for the store. The smells from those trips lingered in that vehicle and never left. It was somewhat of an unpleasant odor, quite distinctive, but a welcomed smell nonetheless, that when encountered triggered many happy memories just as the burning trash smell would do. He wore simple round toe, ankle-high, lace up boots but prepared each foot by first binding them in a tightly wrapped ACE bandage. He spent all day on his feet and apparently, this provided some benefit. Often at the end of the day he would soak his feet in a small tub of warm water before retiring to nod off in front of the TV.

Across the way in our apartment my mother would also be preparing breakfast. It was routine that my great grandfather Monaco would stop by for coffee. He would drink it with sugar and cream and pour off a little bit into a small saucer for me to sip from. That is how I learned to love coffee. He was a diminutive man, short and slim with perpetual grey beard stubble and a tailored moustache. He was never without his fedora. It was his

signature look, often paired with simple, but what would now be considered very fashionable, sunglasses. Each morning he would take my hand and stare lovingly into my eyes, muttering softly in Italian. I never understood a word he said other than "bambino," but his meaning was clear. It was always an expression of love. At that age, I was still uncomfortable with such direct admissions and although I loved him back equally, I had no proper way to express my feelings without embarrassment, other than to stay and keep him company, smiling and nodding in agreement.

Italian bread was a staple and pointed loaves were delivered to the family store every day by the bakery, warm in paper wrappers. Deliveries ran like clockwork and it was our practice to bring up a loaf or two while they were still warm. The aroma of fresh bread is seductive. There is not much that can compare to it. Much to my mother's consternation, I was schooled by grandpa Monaco in the old country's way of eating bread by tearing off a small hunk and dragging it across the top

of the large pound of butter on the table, leaving a textured butter pattern in its wake. It was the very best way to eat warm Italian bread and still is. Something about eating this way, as shared fingerfood, seems to me very primal and instinctively gratifying. It furthered the communal experience of the meal and solidified bonds among family and friends, the value of which is not fully understood today.

As a child, I did not know my great grandparent's names. They were just Grandpa and Grandma Monaco to me. It wasn't until my parents decided that I should take Grandpa Monaco's first name as my confirmation name that I heard it for the first time. While not a legal name, I had become Michael Prisco Caporale, III, a pretty big and important sounding name for a little kid. It was a great many years before I became comfortable with it. Children can be so awful to each other regarding names and I knew if I ever revealed it to my friends I would be nick-named "Prissy" or perhaps "The Prisco Kid." But as an adult, I grew into it and bore the name with honor,

using it in my film credits to indicate approval of my work and honor my great grandfather.

Prisco grew grapes on the arbor in his back yard. The dirt floor basement of his home housed a wine press and all the necessary paraphernalia to bottle his own wine. He had been named after his hometown, a small village near Naples, San Prisco (Saint Peter). I have never been to San Prisco but a brief tour on the internet using Google Earth reveals a town dominated by the Monaco family with a major boulevard named as such. Prisco had left Italy on a steamer arriving at Ellis Island in 1895 as one of thousands of Italian immigrants, eventually making his way to New Haven, Connecticut. He was a carpenter by trade. His bride followed in 1900. Born Antoinette Bencivenga, she was from the nearby town of Gobbledygook. Like Prisco she never learned to speak English, though it never stopped her from interacting with me. The twinkle in her eyes was all that was needed. My favorite memory of her was playing "cowboys and Indians" together. I was the cowboy and

she, the Indian. The game consisted of capturing her and tying her up in a kitchen chair by running in circles around the chair, wrapping her in clothesline, loosely tied to the chair. She played her part enthusiastically in an abundance of giggles, unable to contain her joy. I don't know how we developed the story for this game without a common language, but somehow, we both understood.

Their daughter, Rose, was one of six children. She married Michael Caporale from Brooklyn in 1919, from a family of 12 brothers and sisters. Michael had been in the merchant marines and was able to save enough money to open a grocery store in Fair Haven, an Italian/Irish neighborhood that same year. Needless to say, the Catholic population of the neighborhood was quite dense, enough to support two churches in very close proximity. St. Donato's, the Italian church Rose preferred, was two blocks north of their home and Rose walked there every Sunday of her life. St. Francis's was three blocks east. Mike preferred St. Michael's across town a short drive. I suspect his preference for that church may have been his

namesake. Oddly, I did not question that they did not attend church together.

I remember seeing a life-sized, marble copy of the Pieta in the outer lobby of Saint Francis. It looked like the real thing to me, especially after seeing the original in the 1964 World's Fair in NYC, a stunning work of art, but here you could reach out and touch it. No one else seems to remember it being there, but it is etched solidly in my mind as a formative experience. Perhaps it was on loan or part of a traveling exhibit, but the connection to my Italian heritage was remarkable even if it was in the "Irish" church.

Noni and Grandpa had four children. My father, born in 1924, was the oldest and Eddie, his brother, was the youngest. In the middle were their sisters Marie and "Sis," her given name being Anne.

My father and mother met in 1941 while my father was attending the University of Alabama. My mother was

enrolled at the university majoring in library science while dad entered as a freshman in engineering. A friend of my father had a date with a young woman who required that they be accompanied by another couple to include a friend of hers, Nancy Lyons, such was the nature of propriety at the time. My father was recruited to complete the requisite couple and so it was that he met my mother on a blind date. But his tenure at the University of Alabama was short lived when in February of 1943 my father was drafted into the Army at age 19.

At the time, all draftees were sent to a base in Massachusetts for assessment before being reassigned to a different base for basic training. My father was chosen to be in the medical corps and was sent to the appropriate base for that type of training which was in Virginia. At some point during that training period he approached his first sergeant to request a transfer to the Army Air Corps. He wanted to be a pilot. Upon completing the examination, he was accepted and briefly sent to Atlantic City, NJ where he stayed for about two weeks in one of

those high-rise Boardwalk hotels awaiting reassignment to Geneva College, PA for basic training in the Army Air Corps before moving on to a flight training school in the South. Different parts of the program were conducted in different locations and he moved between Mississippi, Texas and Louisiana for each part. Along the way, it was determined that he was best qualified to be a navigator, and after that determination was made, he finished his training with many practice flights originating from Louisiana.

Around February 1945 he received his assignment to a base in Great Britain, Polbrook. The trip to Polbrook was made with the same personnel that would be his crew and in the same B-17 that was to be their fortress in the sky. The journey began in New Jersey with several layovers for refueling. On the day of their departure, the bomber group overflew New Haven making its way to the first stop in Newfoundland. As the group flew over Noni's house on Clay Street she heard it and knew it was her son. She noted the date and the time. Later in

correspondence with my father she learned that she had been correct. Dad had made a special effort to navigate over their home. The flight to England consisted of two more stops, one in Greenland and one in Iceland. One of the layovers required a weeklong stay as they waited for the weather to clear enough to permit continuing.

There are a great many mysteries in this world that cannot be explained with conventional logic. Our spiritual connections are truly deep. Not all of us have the ability to access them, but for those that do, it is an undeniable blessing of faith. Noni was connected in this, the deepest of ways to her son. She often dreamed about the conditions in his barracks, conditions like sleeping in the severe cold, eventually relating her dreams to him in letters, only to find out their complete accuracy. This we may never understand, but I shall never doubt it.

Auntie Anne found her soulmate in my Uncle "Chic" Difilippo, a formidable man of great strength, a sports figure, avid football enthusiast and college coach. Chic

piloted a B-24 in WWII. All my aunts and uncles were practicing Catholics, as were my parents, and so it was that Chic and Sis had five children: Gene-o, Adele, Andrea, Denice and Paulie. Their family settled in Massachusetts, the farthest home from the family hub in New Haven and therefore, were not as well known to me as my other cousins. Gene-o, however was an early playmate as we were only two years apart in age. We developed a strong bond between us and I loved him like a brother. The relationship was not without tension, though. I had been the first born of the grandchildren, and was the third in succession bearing the surname Michael. My grandfather was known as "Mike" while my dad was "Mickey" and I bore the full moniker, "Michael." By the time Gene-o was born, I had already cemented my place in Noni's heart and attention was being showered over me by all the family, so it was hard for the parents of succeeding grandchildren to feel that their child was equally regarded and treated. Jealousies arose. Complaints were lodged. Regardless, there was never a shortage of love.

My father's sister Marie followed suit with another strong and handsome fella', my Uncle Frank Oddi. Uncle Frank sported a perennial tan that forever reminded me of John Wayne. He was what was referred to then as a man's man. He just had that certain swagger of confidence about him. I suppose that completed the connection I made to John Wayne, that and his knowing smile. Frank and Marie set up house on the outskirts of the New Haven area, just beyond Hamden in an area surrounded by thick woods. Frank raised German shepherds and I was still small enough to ride each like a horse with just a little help from Uncle Frank. Nearby was a man-made pond that was bordered with slabs of thinly cut stone. The pond was always full of small tadpoles and tiny frogs that the grown-ups would swim amongst. It was too deep for me, and I had not yet learned to swim. I was nevertheless fascinated with the abundance of aquatic life.

Eddie married yet another Marie, Marie Greco. With Marie Caporale having become Marie Oddi, Marie Greco now the newly minted Marie Caporale, became known as "Marie Cap." It was widely regarded that Marie Cap "wore the pants" in her family, that is to say, her opinions set the course for their family's direction. Eddie complied happily, no one else minded and they raised three lovely daughters that way: Claudia, Janice and Cindy. Experience has taught me that it's never that simple, but whatever the arrangement, they made it work and they were as happy as any.

Noni had four brothers, Ralph, Danny, Uncle Stevie (also known as Pete) and John; and one sister, Julia. Uncle Ralph married yet another Marie my Aunt Mary. Among Catholic families it was a most popular name. Mary was a tiny woman of boundless energy and enthusiasm, with an ever-present smile. She was often very outspoken regarding her opinions while Ralph always seemed more cautious with a tightly-defined, rather rigid set of values, though loudly outspoken when challenged. Danny was a

saintly man, warmly comfortable and relaxed. For many years, he was the Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus, a revered Catholic organization headquartered in New Haven. He married my aunt Etta in a perfect pairing of personalities. Etta was outgoing, an extravert with an endless supply of love for everyone in the family. I welcomed her visits to Noni's as she showered much attention on me. Danny and Etta had two sons, Anthony and DJ, wonderful outgoing older cousins.

I made no distinction in referring to Uncle Stevie as either Stevie or Pete. Half the time it was one and often the other. Everyone called him by both names. I never stopped to wonder about it, but one must have been his middle name. Uncle Stevie owned the liquor store directly below my grandparent's home and next to "Caporale's Food Fair." Their adjoining store fronts had been clad in thick panels of red and black Italian glass that my grandfather had specially imported from Italy. Large three-dimensional aluminum letters that traversed the cap identified each business. Inside, in the back of the

store, Stevie maintained intact the old-fashioned, wood-lined, walk-in ice box. There he stacked the cases of unrefrigerated beer. The small room had previously been used to store ice in the days before refrigeration so it provided some degree of insulation from the summer heat. Uncle Stevie still had an old pair of giant ice "pincers" used to move the big blocks that he kept as a memento. Several of his refrigerated displays in the front of the store were of the same type that you would find in the butcher's section of a grocery store of the period. He used them both as displays and as counters, over which he conducted sales. It separated him from his customers and on rare occasions provided cover as evidenced by several of the units that had multiple bullet holes from failed, attempted robberies. Anyone stupid enough to mess with stubborn Uncle Stevie got nothing from him and probably never left the store. Stevie was a war vet and a crack shot. He kept a well-worn semi-automatic pistol behind the counter that he brandished as needed in a reactionary instant. He married my Aunt Ida, yet

another warm-hearted woman and by all accounts enjoyed a rewarding life together.

Julia always seemed to me to be the intellectual in the family, perhaps because she was quieter than the others, although no less filled with warmth. Julia married Husky DeLorenzo. I never knew his given name. Why he was called Husky may have had something to do with his body type, but I preferred to think that it had something to do with his voice, a raspy smokers voice. Husky was a milkman, another bygone profession. He delivered milk each day to family homes. I can't explain why, but he always reminded me of William Bendix, an early TV personality who had a long running show called "The Life of Riley." Perhaps it was because he lived in a more suburban home that reminded me of Riley's. In later years Husky's smoker's voice gave way to throat cancer and he had an operation that left him with a hole in his neck covered by a small white net that he spoke indistinct syllables through, sounding much like a distorted synthesized voice. He was the second of my Uncles to

succumb to self-inflicted cancer. No one knew any better back then. Julia's marriage to Husky produced two more cousins to me. Bobby DeLorenzo who became a nuclear submarine designer and Carol who was my much beloved babysitter until we moved away from New Haven.

Noni's brother John married Helen, a feisty woman, who propagated the belief that she, like Marie Cap, wore the pants in her family and that she could not be overcome or deterred by either old age or disease, somewhat a local version of the "Unsinkable Molly Brown." I believe that John was the youngest of the Monaco children, which if I were a psychology major might spark some sort of theory that men born as the youngest are happiest allowing their mates to rule, or at least to have them believe so. Helen had a prosperous answering service business and appeared to be the wealthiest of all my relations. Before answering machines, and later voicemail, it was customary that unanswered calls could be directed to a switchboard of operators who could take messages on

that customer's behalf and relay them when called upon. Uncle John was a civil servant, the local postmaster, a safe career choice with security and benefits. I will always remember Helen for her purple dining room, a warm shock of color in an age of drab greens and powder blue, almost worthy of gossip. She hosted many a backyard barbeque and family dinner parties at her home. After Grandma Monaco died, they cared for Prisco until he died at the old age of 94. Each morning he would have a glass of sweet vermouth with a raw egg in it for his breakfast, followed by smoking a cherry flavored Cheroot cigar. It was his ritual.

Uncle Eddie, Noni's youngest, was just a mischievous teenager when I was born. He claims to have been the one who taught me the alphabet at a very early age, say around two. But his single greatest accomplishment that year was to teach me the use of s single word that would send him into uncontrolled spasms of laughter. That word was "shut-up." Apparently, I used it indiscriminately as a response to any comment or

question made in my direction without ever understanding its meaning. My mother often laughingly recalled when she took me for a walk down Blatchley Avenue on a warm summer day, chatting with neighbors along the way. “Is that your little boy, Mrs. Caporale? Oh, what a lovely child,” to which I responded, “shut-up.”

Our walks began on Blatchley Avenue, an Elm lined street with a huge block-long commercial laundry service on the other side of the street. The steam and detergent smells permeated the block at certain times of day and was yet another critical memory trigger connecting me to New Haven. There was a small grassy triangle directly across from Caporale’s Food Fair where Clay Street met Monroe and Blatchley. That was where I had my picture taken on the photo pony at age three, an indescribable thrill for a would-be cowboy. Across Blatchley to the far corner on the southeast side of the street was a small shop that sold Italian ices, a sherbet-like lemon treat served in

small, accordion ribbed, shallow paper cups that when squeezed would offer up the last of its melting contents.

Walking south on Blatchley led to Grand Avenue where most businesses resided. Grand was the main artery to downtown. Across Grand on the southwest corner was a Five & Dime, my favorite place to visit with Noni. Items for sale were contained in rows of rather crudely made displays of compartmentalized units of bulk items, much like nails would be offered in a hardware store at the time. This was the store where My Howdy Doody marionette, Rudy Kazootie hand puppet, "The Doggie in the Window" and the infamous "Winky Dink" TV kit was sold to my doting Noni. The Winky-Dink kit consisted of a small piece of transparent green vinyl that would adhere to a TV screen and a few soft wax crayons. Children watching Winky Dink would be encouraged to draw doors, windows and the like on the green vinyl screen for their cartoon characters to use, but more often than not, just drew right on the TV tube with their own crayons.

Around the corner on Grand on our side of the street, was a small pharmacy where neighborhood children would go to buy Bonomo's Turkish Taffy. We delighted in taking the bars home and freezing them, causing them, while still in the wrapper, to shatter in small, glass-like splinters when slammed on the sidewalk before being eaten piece by piece. The other treat we bought there with regularity was a Sky Bar, a chocolate covered candy consisting of four sections with individually flavored fillings: caramel, vanilla, peanut and fudge. Now, the elms, the commercial laundry and the five & dime are gone, but Bonomo's Turkish Taffy and Sky Bars, while not common in stores, can still be had over the internet.

Completing our walks, we turned right on Lombard Street and walked past Grandpa Monaco's house to finish our walk, arriving back to 96 Clay Street. The center of the block was one big open dirt lot of merged back yards, with scrubby weeds and grass worn down by children's play. The space was large enough for almost any activity

and was widely used for playing baseball, often with a broken broomstick and bottlecaps or small pebbles. Most of the time the game consisted of just hitting the "ball," but when a real ball and bat was available, it offered the potential to run the bases and administer outs.

My father had grown up on these lots and his friends were now adults with children of their own. Miles Notafrancesco became my Godfather and faithfully bestowed small presents every year on my birthday. Jimmy Inglese still lived on the block and his son Jimmy was my age. He was my best friend. Our favorite game was to paint the green shingles of 96 Clay Street, using two large, old paintbrushes and a bucket of water to darken the absorbent green tile, racing from one end of the house to the other to get a uniform coat applied before the water evaporated from the start point.

Heading the other direction down Blatchley at the intersection of Peck was the A.C. Gilbert company. A.C. Gilbert made chemistry and microscope sets, but was

most famous for Erector sets and American Flyer trains. The building had several large round portals through which children could view a running display of their trains. A wrought iron bridge on Blatchley spanned the railyard behind the factory and the iron tower beside it reinforced the notion that their toys were created as an extension of the physical reality of their location.

A dozen or so blocks west at the intersection of Munson and Winchester was the Winchester factory district. The company made its home there for 140 years. Connecticut was littered with gun factories notably Colt, Ruger, Browning, and Savage, but Winchester always held a place of prominence in the imaginations of small children brought up on cowboy shows. Their model 1894 lever action rifle, a design that began with the creation of the "Henry" was in every general store, ranch house and saddle holster and appeared in scene after scene in those Westerns peering out from behind rocks, watering troughs and broken windows to ambush the "Good-guys" sporting Colt "Peacemakers," the Single Action Army.

We may have been easterners but we identified with our cowboy heroes through our industrial creations.