

Dedication

Although many of my books are dedicated to family and friends who have encouraged and inspired me throughout my life, I've decided something different for 'Grandpa's Grapevine'. The characters in this book are a culmination of people I have met, and a few I have created, throughout the years. Many readers may relate to some of the events the main character, Elizabeth, encounters- but I assure you only one event actually happened to me that I decided to use in the book. I'll let you discover which event it is! My point is, the characters and events could never have been created without someone instilling a love of writing in me and the freedom to use my imagination. As an educator, I am saddened by the emphasis our schools place on test scores and 'cookie-cutter' writing prompts...all in the name of 'leaving no child behind'. I think we are leaving much more behind in the process...the freedom to explore, discover, question, engage, wonder, dream, risk and most importantly- to just enjoy. My memories of elementary school include kick ball games, science experiments, field trips, and teachers reading aloud while the students closed their eyes to visualize the characters. My fondest memory is in the sixth grade. Every Friday, my sixth grade teacher would handout the writing journals. Everyone, including her, would write for sixty-minutes. There was no prompt, no score and no critiquing. We all just wrote. Some wrote stories, others wrote poems. I remember the room being so quiet you could hear the pencils rubbing on the paper. There was no time limit either. If you didn't finish your story, there was always next Friday. After all, how can you put a time limit on creativity? It was on these Fridays that I began to realize I was good at something- I could write. So, the class-clown went from disrupting social studies class, to 'jotting down' an historical event to use in a short story. I began to view everything and everyone in my life as future characters and short stories. Many characters I created in that sixth grade class in 1983 are in the short stories and books I write today. Characters that would not have come to fruition without one teacher deciding to put aside the text and schedule for just an hour once a week, and allowing her students to write with imagination, curiosity and freedom.

Thank you, Mrs. Kalosky, my sixth grade teacher at Central Elementary in Southington, CT. You were an educator who inspired, motivated and loved her students, without ever a word of criticism or attempt to label a child as remedial, special or gifted. We were all challenges and we were all a priority. We were never, under your watch, left behind.

Linda Massucci

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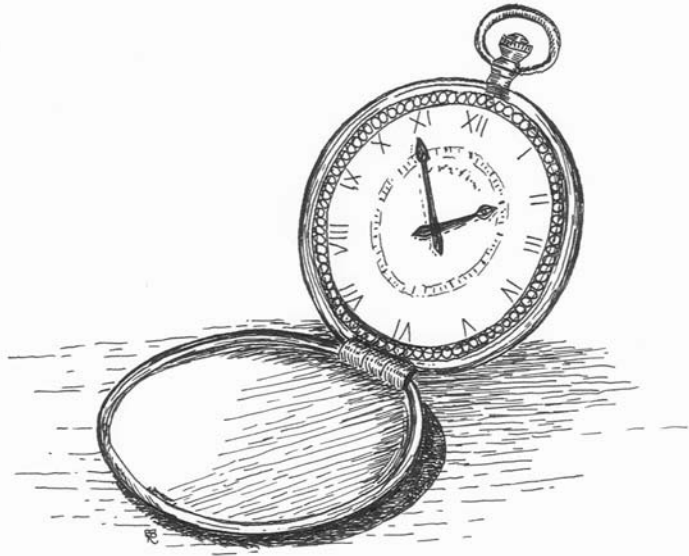
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Prologue

I can't recall the first memory I have of my Grandpa Frank, but I can recall the many Sundays at his home just listening to him speak. He told stories of coming to America with ten dollars in his pocket and his best girl by his side. When he laughed, you could see his stained teeth from all those cigars he smoked since the age of twelve. His face was worn from working outside at the trolley yards and his hands had calluses and scars. Grandpa Frank was a slim man with wavy white hair. I'm sure, in his youth, he must have been an attractive man, but to me he was just my Grandpa Frank. An old man who always had time to sit with me and listen to my worries, hopes, and insecurities. Whether I was eight years old or sixteen years old, I could always depend on Grandpa Frank for a listening ear. He was never hard to find either. From my house to his, it was a quick bike ride and all down hill too! Pass the town bank, cross the street at the market, turn left across the tracks, and you entered the Italian side of town. Grandpa Frank and Grandma Marie moved into the two story white house after they left Brooklyn. Grandpa said the Italian section was called Goat's Island, because so many of the families had goats in their yards. I don't remember Grandpa Frank having goats- I guess he got too tired of taking care of them. There was one thing he never got tired of caring for, and that was his grapevine. That is where I could always find my Grandpa Frank. He loved to sit under that grapevine and smoke his cigars. He would watch the trains pass by and think out loud about where it might be going. The grapevine was his place to think about all the yesterdays, the struggles he and Grandma Marie overcame while raising a family, and maybe to ponder how many more days he would be blessed with her in his life. I always got a feeling of excitement when I saw my Grandpa Frank sitting under his grapevine. I knew whatever problems I had, he could fix with a story or words of wisdom. I had to listen carefully as he spoke in his broken English, but I didn't mind taking my time with Grandpa Frank. He always seemed so confident and brave in my eyes, why would I want to rush away from such a man! I thought, in my youth, he would always be there for me. I guess that's what makes being young so wonderful- the concept of time is not fully understood. Now, I am much older and completely understand how quickly time passes. As I drive down I-84 in Connecticut and take my hometown exit, I realize Grandpa Frank will not be waiting for me under his grapevine. As an adult, I realize death is just a part of life. As a granddaughter, I just want to sit with Grandpa Frank and ask him one more question. I guess I should have come home a lot sooner.



The Journey Home

Who would have thought I could tear myself away from all the deadlines and rewrites in the publishing world. On Tuesday morning, I received a call from my father saying Grandpa Frank was not doing very well and I should take a drive to Connecticut to say goodbye. I went to work that morning to try and get all the ‘things that can’t wait’ done, and rescheduled my Friday interviews for a book I was working on. I thought it would be great to leave the city for a three-day weekend in Connecticut- even better to spend it with Grandpa Frank! On Wednesday morning, I called my parents and said I would be arriving home on Friday. My mother was a bit quiet on the phone. Her only response was, ‘I guess if that’s the soonest you could get here. Your father will tell Grandpa Frank you are coming soon.’ I thought to myself, my mother has been retired for too long and how easy it is to forget life in the working world. Yes, Friday was the earliest I could get there. Maybe I could leave Thursday evening, I’d have to wait and see. Thursday morning, I awoke to my alarm and jumped in the shower. I was thinking about what my mother had said and it was irritating me. After I got dressed and was eating breakfast, I checked my schedule for the day. I was thinking how I could strategically move some appointments around, so I could leave Manhattan by noon today. As I was doing this, my phone rang. It was my mother. My Grandpa Frank had passed away in the early morning hours. I told my mother I would be in my hometown by noon.

'My hometown', I thought to myself as I crossed into Connecticut and passed Danbury on I-84. My hometown was like any other small town, I thought. Just off the highway, exit 32, was the place I called home. I hadn't lived there for over 15 years, the town had changed dramatically, but it was home to me. It's funny how I couldn't wait to leave the place and find excitement and 'real life' somewhere or anywhere but there! However, there still remains a part of you that secretly hopes the place will stay the same for your own greediness and insecurities. It becomes a place that you can return to with the hopes of feeling as safe as you did in your youth and fooling yourself into thinking that time can stand still. Well, that wasn't the case as I entered my hometown of Southington. Nothing was as I remembered, and I quickly understood the saying, 'You can never go home again.' The farms were replaced with mini-malls, traffic lights were put in place- where once only a stop sign was needed, Grandpa's trolley tracks were dismantled, and the train tracks were replaced with walking trails. The downtown merchants I recalled were no longer in business. Replaced by chain stores or fancy restaurants. The streets were lined with BMW's and a Lexus or two. I guess these cars were necessary to go with the extravagant homes being built, where once apple orchards stood and grazing sheep roamed. It was a far cry from the working community I remembered. It was a town where everybody knew everyone. There was a local pharmacy, a department store, two grocery stores, and you really did shop downtown on Thursday night. There were small businesses with loyal customers who paid on credit- with no monthly interest. You could walk down the street and know everyone you passed- and you always said hello. If you were a kid, you better behave, because someone would see you, who knows someone, who knows your father! It was a small town....it is my hometown.

As I passed the old bank, which has since sold to a larger bank, I just had to turn my car towards the old market, left across the tracks, and drive by my Grandparent's house. I parked in the driveway and slowly got out of my car. The house still looked the same. The windows were spotless, the house had a fresh coat of white paint (I hired painters last summer as an anniversary gift to my grandparents), and the flower garden was immaculate. My feet traveled to the back yard and there I spotted my Grandpa Frank's grapevine. It was in perfect condition, just like I always remembered. It was nice to know some things never change. The view was still pretty too! And now, Grandpa Frank could wave to all the families using the walking trail. I pictured him smoking his cigar, glass of wine in one hand, and waving to the families with the other hand. I gave a silent chuckle and then a sigh of regret. I suddenly realized Grandpa Frank wouldn't be sitting under this grapevine anymore. I would never smell his cigars again or listen to his stories with a strained ear as he spoke in broken English.

"Elizabeth, I thought I'd find you here."

I turned and saw my father walking toward me. My father looks like the typical aging Italian man. He has wavy salt and pepper hair with a mustache that matches his hair color. He is blessed with a year round tan and always walks very straight. My father has a sort of bounce to his walk, like he has not a care in the world. My mother has said I tend to walk like this to, and I'm thankful for the trait. As I watched my father walk towards me, I took a second glance at his face. It's funny how when you're away from loved ones for a period of time, they appear to have aged when you see them again. When I'm away from my folks and think about them, their faces in my reflections always appear young and vibrant- like they looked when I was a child. Now, I see my father looking more and more like my Grandpa Frank. I guess that is all part of the cycle of life.

"Actually, your mother told me to drive by after I went to the florist. She knows how much you like your grandparent's house."

"And Grandpa's grapevine," I said to my father as I gave him a hug and a kiss.

"You made good time on the road. I hope you didn't speed!"

"Hmmm, if I was, I know where I learned it from!" I responded with a smile. My father loves to drive fast, and so do I. Of course, in Southington, it really doesn't matter how fast you're going. The police tend to pull anyone over who isn't related to an officer. It always amazes me how the dumbest kids in high school became police officers- and it just so happens their father was on the force. I guess in some ways the town is still small-town America.

"I'm glad you're here. Now I won't be the only person your Aunt's can talk about! They keep asking your mother when you would be arriving," my father said with a wink, as he put his arm around me and we walked back to my car.

My Aunt's! I forgot about them. Anyone who comes from an Italian family can appreciate the secret fear I have of my Aunt's. Although I have many Aunts', there are only three that cause my blood to boil as I bite my tongue and smile at their prodding questions about my life. These three Aunts' are the ones my father was referring to. They live for weddings and funerals. It is their only time to check out the nieces and nephews who have moved far away. They always travel in a pack, and each seems to have a different job during the interrogation process. First, there is Aunt Sophia- the oldest sister in the pack. Her job is to start-up a conversation with the niece or nephew of which the interrogation will be brought upon. Then, there is Aunt Caterina. Her job is to wait and listen for just the right time in the conversation to interrupt with a very personal and intrusive question. And then, there is Aunt Rosetta. Her job may be the most difficult of all. She must remember the responses of all those they interrogate, so the aunt's can visit other friends and families throughout the town and deliver the ever important and necessary news. I guess Aunt Rosetta received the job by default. Her being the youngest of the four sisters at the youthful age of 82!

The other sister of course is my Grandma Marie. Now, I love my Grandma dearly, but she does love to gossip with her sisters. However, I must say she does protect me when she sees the Aunt's making their interrogation triangle toward me. Through the years, I have learned to laugh at their questions and see a little of their thoughtfulness through their interrogations. Although, now, it would be a little different without Grandpa Frank to run to and hide away from those pesky Aunt's, under his grapevine.

"I see you bought a Buick," said my Dad with a cheshire cat grin.

"Yes, I knew you would be happy to see me arrive in an American car," I responded with a smile.

"I guess this book writing thing pays pretty well," my dad said as he opened my car door.

"Yes, things are going very well," I said with a silent chuckle. My dad still can't comprehend that my job is actually paying the bills. I guess he comes from a generation where a job meant working at a company or factory from nine to five and retiring after twenty-five years with a gold watch. I'm sure, in his eyes, I'm still that twelve-year-old girl who received three dollars a week for allowance and spent it on candy and arcade games. He is always asking if I have enough money for food and am I paying my bills on time. Most of the time, I really don't mind his worrying questions. I guess there is a part in all of us that would like to stay twelve years old forever and let someone else do all the worrying.

"Dad, I'm sorry I didn't get here sooner," I said while trying to hold back the tears.

"Don't give it a second thought," my father said, "you were always there for your Grandpa Frank while he was alive. Always spending summer days with him and listening to all his stories- which seemed to get better with time," my father said with a wink.

"Those stories he told would make a great book someday!" I said.

"Never mind that- let's keep some things in the family!" my dad said.

"Getting nervous," I laughed to my dad. "Maybe I shouldn't go see my aunt's then. Now there are some interesting ladies."

"What's so interesting about your Aunt's?" asked my dad. "They are just like anybody else's aunt's."

"Oh dad, you have got to get out of Southington more often!" I laughed as my father closed my car door.

"Just be respectful when we go over your Aunt Sophia's house."

"Deal, when will that be?" I asked.

"No time like the present. Follow me," my Dad said as he walked towards his car.

"Do you think I forgot the way to my own Aunt's house?" I shouted back to him.

"Nope, just want to make sure you don't take a detour!" laughed my father.

“By the way, are you married yet?” shouted my father with a grin.

“Here we go again,” I whispered to myself, as I started my American car.

The drive to Aunt Sophia’s house involved a right turn at the first stop sign, passed St. Thomas Church, and a quick left onto Pine Road. My Aunt Sophia’s house was made of brick. She and her late husband, Geno, would always wash the house every spring and fall. There would always be tons of flowers in their yard and the grass was always cut to perfection. Of course, no one was allowed to walk on the grass! Uncle Geno had laid out perfectly marked paths so one could walk from one side of the yard to the next without disturbing a blade of grass. Now, of course, the yard is just grass. Aunt Sophia is unable to plant all those flowers anymore and she hires someone to cut the grass. However, she refuses to hire anyone to help clean the inside of the house. Aunt Sophia and her sisters help clean their homes together. Not only is this a nice sisterly thing to do, but it also gives them the chance to correlate all the gossip they have heard around the town. Then, of course, they can properly share with the ladies at the beauty parlor on Fridays.

“Maggie, your daughter is here,” my dad announced as we entered Aunt Sophia’s house.

“Oh good, I was worried with all that traffic. Are you hungry? Did you stop for lunch on the way here? We have plenty of food. Here, sit down and I’ll get you a plate. How about something to drink? You know, Vinny, get her some ginger ale. After that long drive, ginger ale is best.”

My dad just gave me a wink as he went into the pantry to get the ginger ale. I have yet to give a response to all my mother’s questions and yet she already knows the answers! I often wonder why mothers ask their children questions if they are only looking for one particular answer.

“So where is everybody?” I asked my mother, as she made sure every part of the plate was covered with food.

“They are in the parlor going over the arrangements with the funeral director. Your Grandma wants to keep things simple, but you know your Aunt’s!”

I smiled at my mother as she sat down next to me. My mother is French, not a bit of Italian in her, but she is the world’s greatest cook! And that is why, as my dad says, he married her even though she is not Italian. My mom is happiest when she makes other people happy- and that usually involves making them food. So, I ate everything on my plate and waited patiently for the Aunt’s to make their way into the kitchen. As the funeral director walked out the front door with my dad, I knew it wouldn’t be much longer.

“Margaret... has Elizabeth arrived?” I could hear my three Aunt’s shuffling their feet towards the kitchen. I took a deep breath and mentally prepared myself for the interrogation.

“Yes, she is in the kitchen. I made her a plate with some of the food that was sent over. I hope you don’t mind,” responded my mother.

“Mind....oh please, it will just go to waste. Oh my, there she is....Little Elizabeth! I hear you like living in the city and the job is good- yes?” asked Aunt Sophia.

“Oh yes, I like it very much,” I said as I continued to eat the shells and meatballs.

“And what is the city like now?” asked my Aunt Caterina. “I remember when I was a young girl-”

“When you were a young girl it was safe to walk in Brooklyn at two in the morning! But then again, a proper young lady wouldn’t be out walking at two in the morning! You don’t go out walking at two in the morning, do you Elizabeth?” asked my Aunt Rosetta.

“Oh no,” I responded quickly and looked towards the parlor for my Grandma Marie.

“Why don’t you go keep your Grandma company while your Aunt’s and I prepare all this food for dinner,” my mother said with a smile.

“Are we having lots of people tonight?” asked Aunt Sophia.

“Oh yes, a lot of the nieces and nephews are staying at hotels and I thought it would be nice to have everybody eat a good meal before the two long days ahead,” said my mother.

“Oh why yes, that is a wonderful idea,” smiled Aunt Sophia as she looked at her two sisters.

“Sounds like you better get a pad and pencil to take notes,” I said somewhat quietly as I walked into the parlor.

I entered the parlor and saw my Grandma Marie sitting in a chair. She was looking at a wall where all the wedding pictures of family are on display.

“Searching for mine,” I said with a smile as I walked over and gave my grandma a hug.

“You look good Elizabeth. Did you get something to eat?” she asked as she kissed my cheeks.

“Yes Grandma, I did. How are you doing?” I asked.

“Between you and me Elizabeth, I miss your Grandfather and there is a place in my heart that yearns for him to come back to me. But I also feel so blessed to have known and loved such a man. Someday, I hope you will know such a love,” she said as she took my hand and gazed back at the wall.

“I heard Aunt Sophia is saving me a spot on that wall,” I said with a cheshire cat grin.

“Ahhh, your Aunt Sophia-”

“She’s your sister-”

“And she means well. You be nice to your Aunt’s, no matter how crazy they are! You promise to tell me when I get crazy?” questioned my Grandma.

“Absolutely,” I said as I took my Grandma Marie’s hand and walked into the kitchen.

“Marie! Can I get you some food,” exclaimed my Aunt Sophia to her sister Marie.

I always find it amusing how my Aunt’s try to solve every life obstacle or discomfort with food. I guess it comes from a time when they remember not having a bounty of food. I walked my Grandma Marie to the kitchen table and we sat down. The table was covered with every type of food that either reheats beautifully, freezes beautifully, or just requires little fuss to be presented beautifully at the table. Again, your typical pre-wake, post-wake, prefuneral, and post-funeral food.

I really wasn’t thinking too much about the food. My eyes caught a glimpse of Grandpa Frank’s cigar box set on the corner table of Aunt Sophia’s kitchen. My Grandpa Frank had a cigar box at all the Aunt’s homes and he always kept it well supplied. He had cigar boxes at a few other homes too, including my folk’s house. My mind started to drift back to one of my first memories of the cigar box Grandpa Frank kept at my childhood home.

“Take it, it’s just one. Don’t be a weenie!”

“I’m not a weenie and I will take one. But not to prove I’m not a weenie to you Johnny! I’m taking one because I want to take one, so there!”

“Oh stop your girlie explaining and just take one before Grandpa Frank comes back from his walk!”

“How’s this one look?” I asked my cousin Johnny- the twelve-year-old connoisseur of cigars.

“Oh, they all look the same. Come on, let’s go!”

I ran as fast as my Ked sneakers would let me and followed Johnny behind my folk’s garage. I was eleven years old and, as my mother would say, the most curious child she ever set her eyes upon. My curiosity would find me on this spring day of 1982 behind my folk’s garage attempting to smoke my first cigar! I had mentioned my curiosity of what a cigar tastes like to Johnny one day, and being ever the gentleman, took it upon himself to help me find out.

“Did you bring any matches?” asked Johnny.

“Matches- I’m not allowed to use matches!” I said.

“Oh my God- I’m dealing with an amateur here!” grunted Johnny.

“Oh, like your so cool!”

“Cool enough to know we need freaking’ matches to smoke cigars! I’ll be right back.”

I waited patiently with Grandpa Frank’s cigar in my hand. I brought the cigar to my nose, just like Grandpa Frank does before he lights it. It didn’t smell that bad, I thought to myself. I put the cigar in my mouth and practiced taking puffs and holding it properly. Suddenly, I heard the crack of a twig and peeked around the corner of the garage. I went to look up, but a pair of black pants stopped my nose and they weren’t Johnny’s. I could

recognize those black pants anywhere- they were my Grandpa Frank's! My Grandpa Frank always wore black pants and a crisp white shirt. He even mowed the lawn in black pants and a white shirt! Once I asked him why he didn't have another color of pants to wear. He just laughed and said he would go shopping for a new pair of pants when these wore out.

"Hello Elizabeth Marie Manciano," my Grandpa Frank said with a smile.

Ahh- the usage of one's full name. That's when every kid knows they are in some serious crapola!

"Hello Grandpa Frank. How are you on this beautiful spring day?" I said with a forced smile, which I hoped could still look cute on an eleven year old face.

"It is a beautiful spring day. I love this time of year. One can smell the earth starting to wake all the flowers from their winter rest. Would you like to walk with me Elizabeth?"

"Sure- where are we going?" I asked as I hopped up from the ground and secretly tucked the cigar into the back pocket of my Levi's.

"I have to stop at Mr. Ferrucci's to sharpen my pruning blades. It's time to clean up the grape vine again!"

I loved walking with my Grandpa Frank and I especially liked walking to Mr. Ferrucci's. He always had a jar of candy at his hardware store and he always let me have two pieces! One for each dimple, he would say.

"Hello Mr. Ferrucci!" shouted my Grandpa Frank as we walked into the store.

"Bonjourna!" replied Mr. Ferrucci as he came from the back room with two glasses of wine. "Let's make a toast to another good year for Frankie's grapes!"

"Sounds good to me," smiled my Grandpa Frank as he and Mr. Ferrucci enjoyed a glass of wine together.

"And how is Elizabeth today?" asked Mr. Ferrucci. "Have you been a good girl?"

"I don't know," I said shyly as I looked at my Grandpa Frank. "I haven't done anything wrong yet today!"

"Well- that's good enough for me," Mr. Ferrucci said with a laugh. "Tell me- do you still have your dimples?"

"Yes," as I gave him a huge smile.

"Ah yes! I see them clear as day! Well then- I guess that means you may take two pieces of candy."

"Thank you, Mr. Ferrucci!" I said as I ran to the candy jar near the cash register.

"Just eat one now Elizabeth. You may need the other one later," Grandpa Frank said with a grin.

"O.K.," I said while looking at him peculiarly.

“You know Frank, I have some new pruning shears- very well made too! Let me show you-”

“I like the ones I have, thank you. These shears are the only shears that have touched my grape vine on Goat’s Island.”

“Ahhh- your Grandpa is a stubborn man Elizabeth. Doesn’t want to change with the times,” smiled Mr. Ferrucci.

“I’ll change with the times when the change is an improvement,” laughed back my Grandpa Frank. “Come on Elizabeth- let’s see what Grandma has made for lunch!”

“I hope it’s pasta fagoli! Grandma makes the best pasta fagoli-right Grandpa Frank?” I asked as I took my Grandpa’s hand and walked back home with him.

“Absolutely- which is only because she is the best cook in the whole world,” smiled back my Grandpa Frank.

“Grandpa, what were you like as a little boy?”

“Oh, I got into a little mischief now and then,” smirked Grandpa Frank.

“What’s mischief?”

“Mischief is what you were getting into with your cousin Johnny behind the garage,” said my Grandpa Frank in a stern voice. “Why don’t you share what you have in your pocket.”

“I just wanted to see what it tastes like. And Johnny said it would make me feel like a grown-up,” I said shyly as I handed the cigar to my Grandpa Frank.

“I see- well I feel like a grown-up every day and sometimes I wish I could feel like a kid,” winked my Grandpa Frank.

“You’re not going to tell on me are you Grandpa Frank?”

“Hmmm- let’s see. I’ll give you a test to figure out how grown-up you really are. And if you pass- maybe then I’ll have to call you Miss Elizabeth. Does that sound more grown-up to you?” asked Grandpa Frank.

“Oh yes- you know I am eleven and I’m getting a ten-speed bike next week!”

“Well then- let’s take the test! O.K.- let’s have the other item you’re hiding in your pocket!”

“Huh- you want my candy, but-”

“Don’t you want to be a grown-up?” asked Grandpa Frank.

“O.K.” I said and hesitantly handed him the second piece of candy Mr. Ferrucci gave me.

“Now then, I have one item in each of my hands. First, I have a cigar in my right hand. Next, I have a piece of candy in my left hand. Elizabeth- which item do you really want to have?” asked my Grandpa Frank with the look of a scholar.

“Well, I guess- when it comes right down to it....there really is nothing better than Mr. Ferrucci’s candy!” I exclaimed as I grabbed the piece of candy from my Grandpa’s hand and popped it into my mouth.

“Well then, since you passed the test, I guess you have officially become Miss Elizabeth,” smiled my Grandpa Frank as he kissed me on the cheek.

“I did! You mean I really am a grown-up?” I asked while hugging him with excitement.

Grandpa Frank looked at me and said, “Yes Miss Elizabeth- you are exactly where you are suppose to be.”

“Elizabeth, honey- are you with us dear?” asked my mother as she rubbed my back.

“Oh yes, my mind just wandered for a minute there,” I said as I sat at my Aunt Sophia’s kitchen table.

“Would you like daddy to bring you home and you can rest for awhile. I have your old bedroom all fixed up for you. You can come back in a few hours and then all your cousins will be here too!”

“That sounds like a good idea,” I said as I kissed my mother and reached for my coat.