

RETURN TO THE SCENE

Carmella Gates

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*This book is dedicated to the two most important
people in my world—my husband Randy
and my daughter Meghan. Thanks for your support.
I love you.*

***Remembrance of things past is not necessarily
remembrance of things as they were . . .***

— Marcel Proust

CHAPTER ONE

OUR RETURN

Nostalgia: n. A bittersweet longing for things, persons, places or situations of the past

—*The American Heritage College Dictionary*

Nostalgia: n. Wistfulness; sentimental recollection

—*Word Dictionary*

Nostalgia is highly overrated! And the older we get, as the serotonin levels in our brains decrease, the more we forget the bitter memories and remember the sweet times. Even the most horrendous events can be blocked from our minds. This phenomenon has probably evolved in human beings for our self-preservation. We don't need a bunch of angry old people running around crazy or filling up mental wards. But at the same time, when those painful memories do come to the surface of our consciousness, they can really knock our socks off.

For several months, I had been planning a trip with my husband Dan from our home in Colorado to the old vegetable farm in central Massachusetts where I grew up. Remembering a few happy moments of childhood, which fostered warm Crayola-colored scenes, presented in Technicolor and slow motion and surrounded by a light golden haze; I had totally blocked the bitter memories that came flooding

back with a vengeance as soon as we turned onto the dirt-packed driveway of the farm. I could practically feel the synapses going off in my brain, crackling like lightning as they zapped from one to another, and it was overwhelming, to say the least.

Had I really been nostalgic about this place? Had I actually been looking forward to coming back here? What the hell was I thinking? I was returning to the place I fervently hated when I was a kid! Farming was most assuredly not a lifestyle I remembered fondly. And in my mind, I had downplayed the pain that could come from this trip. The main reason we were here was to clear out all the bric-a-brac of my family's three generations on the old homestead and prepare the place to be sold. As if that could be a fun, joyous event!

After my mother died a year ago, and months of legal haggling and rigmarole, sort of by process of elimination, I had inherited the farm. By process of elimination, I mean my brothers didn't want it either! Go figure. I loved my mother dearly; she was my major solace growing up. And after a year, I was reaching a plateau in my mourning, having gone from full body, overwhelming pain to more of an ongoing dull ache. I still thought of her every day, but now the difficult times occurred mostly when certain things reminded me of her, and the pain was brief and not as sharp. If I went to antique stores and saw utensils like she had used for cooking, or maybe smelled fresh donuts like she used to make in the fall, or especially when I make her homemade Italian pasta sauce, the best in the whole world, then I would feel the ache, and sometimes a few tears would moisten my eyes.

I guess I knew that getting the contents of the house and other buildings, including farm equipment and paraphernalia and yes, lots of junk, sorted and the property ready to sell would dredge up old memories. I thought it might even be kind of a catharsis, and give some closure to that period of my life. Now returning to this place where everywhere I looked, everything I touched, brought back memories of my family and the farm, filled me with dread and a sense of fatigue that encompassed my whole being. I wasn't sure I was going to be able to do this without constantly falling apart or worse, being filled with unresolved and probably unresolvable anger.

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Most of the buildings and their contents that we needed to sort through dated back even before my grandparents bought the farm in 1931. The additional accumulation from our three generations had resulted in all the buildings being full, literally to the rafters. Nothing was ever thrown away, nothing. If something ever left the farm, it was probably organic and rotted away, but its removal or demise was not intentional on the part of my family. Living through the Great Depression as my parents and grandparents did meant you kept everything. You couldn't take the chance of getting rid of something because you might need it again someday. Perhaps things got outdated or broken but might still be good for parts, or no one else wanted them, so they just got stored and eventually forgotten, as more stuff was put on top of more stuff.

Believe me, a farm has lots of places to store things—barns, garages, greenhouses, and the huge old farmhouse, as well as 100 acres of land. I knew it was going to be a monumental, backbreaking task, but my nostalgic state of mind had me believing we would discover family heirlooms and antique treasures. So many times when I engage in my passion of prowling antique stores and estate sales, I see things that I remember seeing on the farm when I was a kid. It might be butter churns, milk cans, old farm machine parts, metal toys, baby carriages or highchairs, or other items from my parents' younger years. As I get older, the furniture, dishes, appliances and toys that I grew up with in the late 50s are becoming very popular in the vintage market, reminding me not only of my childhood, but that I'm becoming an antique myself! If I see an old pedal car, I practically salivate with longing for the red racer convertible we had as kids.

I had hoped this trip would be a nice, leisurely adventure, and I thought I was emotionally ready for it, but as we arrived at the farm, I had my doubts. At least there was no deadline to accomplish this task. I had recently retired from teaching kids with special needs, and Dan had all but retired from his website design business. We weren't rich, but we had planned well financially, and the money from the sale of the 100-acre farm and its contents would take care of us quite nicely. It would allow us to travel extensively and live quite comfortably, while still leaving an inheritance for our kids. That was the big plan. Believe

me, the thought of keeping the old place had never, ever in a zillion eons crossed my mind! We would do the work and leave in a cloud of dust.

“Are you all right, Lily? You look pretty tense.” Dan was always aware to the slightest change in my feelings. He always said he could “read me like a book,” which irritated the hell out of me but was very true. I liked to imagine I was somewhat mysterious.

“I’ll be fine. I guess the sight of the old place just hit me with all kinds of memories there for a minute. Just thinking of all we have to do to get this place ready to sell! We have a lot of hard work ahead of us, old man.”

“Who are you calling old man? You know, the homestead doesn’t look so bad. The caretaker did a great job fixing up the buildings and painting them like you asked. It sure looks a lot less decrepit than the last time we were here.”

Mom had a hard time keeping up with everything after Dad died. Ten years without repairs and basic upkeep were hard on these already tired buildings. I think the place has been getting progressively more rundown for as long as I remember. Lack of money, time, or incentive; I’m not sure which, but when things other than farm equipment broke or fell apart, they just never got fixed. If a barn board fell off, it stayed off. If a window broke anywhere but the house, it stayed broken. It was practically a way of life. I’m not sure why Mom even tried to keep this place going. She could have sold it and had a comfortable last few years.

I guess it’s not easy giving up something that has consumed almost every minute of your entire life. Especially when you’ve put your blood, sweat and tears into it. They held on through the Depression, World War II, while their kids were growing up; most of their lives went into this farm. Or maybe she just wanted to leave all the hard work of cleaning out and selling the place to me! Mom was never good about getting rid of stuff, and she could be very passive aggressive about emotional issues or any tasks she didn’t want to deal with. She would just ignore them.

“Paint covers up lots of flaws, doesn’t it?” I responded. “I bet you will be amazed at all the stuff we find, some nice things, but also lots

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and lots of junk--including all of our old school stuff. You cannot look at my elementary school pictures. They are gross! On the other hand, whoever finds my first grade report card gets to choose pizza toppings for two months, okay?"

"Deal. I'm anxious to look at all your dad's tools. He must have had two of every woodworking and machine tool ever made! He always told me you could build anything if you had the right tool. And I'm sure your mom kept all of them. I picture myself building all kinds of things in my retirement years, just like your dad did. Hey, do you remember that little red wagon he built for Meghan when she was little? It was amazing! She made us save it for when she has kids someday."

"Remember trying to package it and get it shipped back to Colorado? Meghan was determined to take it home with us. There was no way she would leave it at the farm to play with when we visited. But it was well worth the effort. She got hours and hours of enjoyment out of that wagon! That was a very special gift.

"Despite the lack of repairs around here, Dad was a gifted carpenter. He was great at designing and building all kinds of things, but fixing them was not his idea of fun. I didn't realize until I married you that car radios, latches, cabinets, screen doors, whatever, could actually be repaired; they didn't have to be left broken."

My father had actually studied to be a master carpenter at the old Worcester Trade School, but he had to quit school and take care of this place and my grandmother after my grandfather died. Not long after my grandparents bought the property, my grandfather contracted tetanus from stepping on a rusted spike that went right through his foot. He got blood poisoning, and he passed away in less than a week. They had bought the property because of the huge house that would be a perfect size for them and their eight children. My grandfather had also been a carpenter, but the Depression made finding work difficult. No one could afford to build or remodel. My grandparents hoped to eventually build houses on the land and sell them, providing work for him and income to take care of their large family. Grandpa's death put an end to that plan.

Of course everyone in our large Italian family contributed ideas for

what was the best thing to do for Grammy and the land, many of which were impossible because of the Depression, or because they were dumb ideas to begin with. My two uncles were the ones who decided the place should be turned into a farm. They argued that the property wouldn't sell at that time, so they might as well work the land and at least provide the family with food. My uncles were long on bluster but short on the brainpower and the brawn needed to run a produce farm. The popular stereotype of the dumb, lazy farmer is far from the truth. Farming requires a great deal of knowledge and constant physical work. So my uncles tried farming and bungled the job, and after two years of minimal crops and no profit, it fell to my father, the youngest, to fix the situation.

Dad never wanted to be a farmer, but he had to take over from my uncles because someone needed to help the family survive the Depression. Italians felt that filing bankruptcy was the ultimate failure, and my father was determined not to bring that shame on the family. He had worked on another uncle's farm for several summers, so he quit school and became a farmer, just like that.

"I suppose everyone has to deal with doing things they should do instead of what they want to do at times, but I can't imagine having to do something you never intended or wanted to do for your entire adult life," I thought out loud.

"So woodworking became a hobby, or maybe a practicality, instead of a profession? Well, he certainly was a good farmer and a good carpenter. I always admired your dad. He was a smart, hard-working man. He worked hard to take care of this place and his family and never complained," said Dan.

"Oh, he sure could get angry and yell sometimes, though! Especially when we didn't work as hard or as fast as he thought we should. I guess now I can see why he resented us kids complaining about farm work. He had to give up all his dreams, so he probably felt we damn well better appreciate it and do our part. Well, shall we go in? The journey begins!"

We unloaded our suitcases and entered the 250-year-old home of my childhood, and believe me, it creaked and groaned with every one of those years! When I tell people I grew up in a farmhouse that

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dates back to mid-1700s, they are shocked. First of all, no one has ever heard of a farm in densely populated, industrial Massachusetts. Then they picture a majestic manor house, sort of like the ones at nearby Sturbridge Village, with wide floorboards and lots of rooms built for every little purpose, sweeping staircases, huge high-ceilinged guest rooms and a long forgotten attic bursting at the seams with trunks and chests of drawers crammed with all sorts of wonders, antique furniture and other treasures.

Well, our house had a lot of those things, but they had never been properly maintained, so the wide floorboards were nicked and scratched and had spaces between them where the wood had worn, allowing dust to rise up from the old coal furnace in the basement. We used to dust and vacuum every single day, but dust and dirt from the furnace and soil tracked in from the farm made it a losing battle. Once Grammy's immediate family had married and moved out, my father renovated the home, if I can use that euphemism, into three apartments, one for my grandmother, one for my newly-married parents, and one to rent out to bring in much-needed income.

After my grandmother died, in a fit of remodeling, my parents removed all the brass and a few crystal chandeliers and replaced them with ugly 1950s lighting fixtures. They covered up the fireplaces with cheap, faux wood paneling and replaced all the glass doorknobs with modern metal ones. Even the claw-foot tub was shown no mercy. Out it went, replaced by a plastic tub and shower insert. My mother loved how modern it all looked. I thought it was pretty awful, but my mom firmly believed that having old things in your house meant you were poor. She hated antiques or anything old! On the other hand, her Depression mentality would never allow her to throw things away, so she either covered them up or moved them someplace for storage. The fun part would be finding all those treasures!

My parents never had enough money to remodel everything, so our house was eclectic before eclectic was chic. The ancient Oriental rug in the living room was so threadbare you could see the floor through it in spots. And here and there were old pieces of furniture that had belonged to Grandma, so in good conscience, or because no one dared,

they just couldn't be removed to the outer buildings. So by and large, it was probably the attic, garage and the barn where we would find and sort the detritus of my family's lives.

We unpacked our stuff in the "guest" room, formerly my childhood room. It still had the once bright yellow wallpaper with white flowers, now faded with age to a dusty pastel color. The room held a hand-me-down double bed and dresser, and a kidney-shaped vanity table and mirror bordered with a layered organza skirt with fluffy ruffles on the top and bottom. My aunt had made the skirt and given the vanity to me when I turned twelve. It was one of my favorite possessions. I can remember my mother starching and ironing those layers of fabric. It was not only my make-up table, it was my desk to do homework, and especially the place where I could look in the mirror and imagine a world away from the farm. Now the skirt was dusty and had lost its crispness, but I still loved this very personal piece of furniture. It was probably the most feminine thing I had ever owned.

We chose to sleep in this room because I wasn't quite ready to sleep in my parents' larger bedroom; somehow that just didn't seem appropriate. So we stuffed our clothes into the tiny closet and dresser drawers that had a few missing handles and no drawer stops, causing everything to fall out as soon as we filled them. Another problem of old houses is that there is very little closet space. We kept bumping into each other as we unpacked, and saying, "Excuse me," "Sorry," until we felt we were in a slapstick comedy. We finally just laughed about the whole thing. We were used to a huge walk-in closet and built-in drawers back home.

"Hey, Lily, I'm really beat after traveling a few days just to get here. How about you finish unpacking while I run to the Clam Shack and get us some of their great fried clams for dinner? Then we can take it easy for the evening and get a fresh start on all this tomorrow."

"Dan, dear husband and love of my life, that is the best idea you have had in a very long time! When you return, the room will be in order, your darling wife will be refreshed, and the wine that sweet caretaker kindly left us along with some groceries will be served in a fancy goblet . . . and thank you."

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“For what? A few fried clams? In my day, we would have called that a cheap date.”

“Well, you haven’t seen the current price of clams, but I mean much more than that. Thank you for putting up with all my moods over the last year, and for making me feel we are in this together.”

“We are in this together. You and me, kid! And I do want those tools. I’m out of here. Be back shortly.”

Dan kissed me quickly and flew out the door. That man had more energy than a jackrabbit! I knew he had enough energy to clear out a whole building, even after traveling all day, but in times of stress, he was always sensitive to my needs. Dan could be obtuse like most men a lot of the time, but he was good at picking up on nuances. He not only figured out what I was feeling, often before I did, but he would suggest a solution in a way that made it sound as if it was meeting both of our needs without putting me down or telling me what to do. He would never make me feel uncomfortable or beholdng. This was one of the many reasons I had loved him for over thirty years, and I hoped I would live long enough to love him for thirty more.

When Dan returned, everything was in order, and we sat down to wine and moist, tender, mouthwatering fried clams that you can only get in New England. My spirits were greatly improved. A good night’s sleep and I would be ready to take on everything! Later, as we contentedly lay in bed, we started making plans.

“I think we should tackle one building at a time. Sort everything into trash, things to sell, and things to keep,” said Dan, the organizer.

“Well, there won’t be much in that last pile. Maybe some of my mom’s jewelry, her recipe box, and stuff like that, but everything else can go to the dump or the flea market.”

“What, Liliana, the Archduchess of Antiques, the Viscountess of Vintage, the Princess of Primitives, doesn’t want to keep any of the truly tantalizing treasure trove we find? I don’t believe it! If we do find some really cool pieces though, we might want to get an antique dealer in here to appraise or maybe buy them.”

“Your alliteration is more like a tongue twister. Besides, I doubt there will be much of value. But who knows. What building should we start

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with? I think the house. That way we can get out all the junk, fix stuff and get it staged to sell.”

“Lily, dear, why did you ask me what I thought if you had already made up your mind?”

“I guess I hadn’t really decided until the very second I asked. Do you think it’s a good plan?”

“That I do. Now let’s get a good night’s sleep so we can be fresh and ready for a full day of work tomorrow. Good night, Hon. Love you.”

“Love you, too. Good night, Dan.”

CHAPTER TWO

THE ATTIC

I awoke the next morning to the heavenly aroma of fresh-brewed coffee. Had they finally gotten a Starbucks in this god-forsaken town? I washed my face, brushed my teeth and hair, threw on old clothes suitable for cleaning out ancient ruins, and headed to the kitchen to find Dan waiting with two enormous cups of coffee and a pastry bag.

“Good morning, Sunshine! While you were sleeping in, I went out and got us breakfast, and before you ask, no I couldn’t find a Starbucks. But remember, this is Massachusetts, the state with a Dunkin’ Donuts on every street corner, sometimes directly across the street from each other, so I went to one of those.”

All this chattering came from Dan, my bright-eyed and so very obnoxious morning person. It took all I could manage not to scream that I was still half-sleep, so hush up!

“At this point, I will drink anything labeled coffee. What’s in the bag?”

“Why, world famous Dunkin’ Donuts, of course. I got you the chocolate glazed you adore, and chocolate frosted for me. I do love their donuts.”

“Me, too,” I responded with my mouth full. “I hope you got me two. We need lots of nourishment for all the work ahead of us.”

“At your service, my lady, although nourishment is questionable

when one is speaking of donuts. Hey, I was looking at the house as I pulled back into the driveway, and I really paid attention to the architecture for the first time. The two-story central portion of the place reminds me of a New England saltbox. And the one-story east side, where we are staying, and the ell on the other side both look like additions to the original.”

“I think you’re right. This place used to be an inn a long, long time ago. The ell part was the tavern. Supposedly a man was shot to death in the tavern in the late 1800s.”

“Seriously? You never told me that before,” exclaimed Dan. “Why was he shot?”

“Who knows? Probably one of the usual things men fought about—land, love, or the Lord. But I’m betting it was about a woman.”

“When did all this happen?”

“I’m not totally sure. You have to remember that I learned most of the history of this place from elderly people who stopped at the vegetable stand in the summer. One man told me that the saltbox part of the house was built around 1760, and was originally the single-family home and farm of a family named Wilcox. Then in the mid-1800s, after several generations, the only Wilcox heirs still living were a lawyer brother and a sickly sister who had no interest in operating the farm. They sold the place to a family by the name of Harrington who built on the additions and turned it into an inn. They also added a wide wraparound porch that surrounded the front and ell side of the house. My grandmother called it the piazza because it was so big and had columns. One of my earliest memories is of running back and forth on that porch from one end to the other when I was a little kid. It seemed to me like a massive racetrack.”

“That must have added a lot of character to the house. It would have looked much more stately and elegant. What happened to it?” asked Dan.

“Like everything else around here, it wasn’t properly maintained. The wood rotted away in places. My father and his workers removed it so no one could get hurt. They tore down my grandma’s pantry at the same time and made that god-awful concrete slab they called a porch. The place went from charming to downright ugly!

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“This property is right on the old Boston Post Road, which back in the 1800s was the main east-west route from Boston to Springfield and on to New York. Stagecoaches passed here almost daily, as well as the postal service. It was a great location for an inn at that time. A small portion of the land was used for crops and some livestock for the inn. The rest of the land became a golf course.”

“A golf course? Really?”

“At least that’s what I was told. We used to find lots of old golf balls in the fields when my dad plowed each spring, so I think there was truth in that.”

“So what happened to the inn?”

“Well, from what my vegetable stand historians told me, in the early 1900s, as cars became more popular and the use of stage coaches died out, as well as new roads were built, there were fewer overnight guests who stayed at the inn. The Harrington family had to depend more and more on the income from the tavern. Then Prohibition came along in the 20s, and they struggled to just hold on.”

Dan pondered this tidbit of history and then asked, “Why didn’t they just make hooch way back in the woods? I can’t believe a few federal laws would keep my hearty Irish countrymen from getting their liquor! They could have set up a big still and made enough liquor for themselves, the tavern, and probably a few other nearby establishments! Just think. Your house could have once been a speakeasy!”

“Don’t laugh. You may be close to the truth. My dad told me stories he had heard about The Harrington Inn during Prohibition. They got whisky from Canada, smuggled in in the middle of the night by bootleggers. They supposedly also made some of their own liquor and mixed it with the Canadian whisky to increase their profits.”

“Can you picture huge bouncers wearing baggy suits with wide lapels and black shirts and ties? And white spats; they surely had white spats! I bet they wore fedoras low on their foreheads so their faces were partially hidden. And they would have had shoulder holsters with pearl-handled pistols under their jackets, just in case the police showed up, or worse--the Revenue Man!”

“Dan, I think you’ve watched “The Untouchables” too many times.

This is still the country here, not Chicago. However, there is an old tale about a Revenue Man. But we have work to do; maybe I should tell you later.”

“Spill it, woman, or I’ll eat your second donut! You can’t leave this story hanging!”

“Oh okay, I always knew you were a sap for a good story! But then we have to get to work. From what my dad said, the powers that be did periodically check out the place, but the Harringtons were able to buy them off. Corruption was common back then, as you know from the movies. Anyway, there was one Revenue Man named Roy Abernathy who could not be bribed. He would show up at all times of the day and night, trying to find liquor on the premises. He even scoured the fields and woods for a still or storage place for whisky barrels, but he could never find anything. He was said to have the determination and drive of an Eliot Ness, but the demeanor of a Casper Milquetoast.”

“You know, you are quite a gifted storyteller, Lily!”

“Thank you, but that won’t get you out of work. Anyway, Abernathy drove the Harringtons crazy. They had to be ready to hide everything at a moment’s notice. He would sometimes show up at noon, have lunch at the inn, check things out and then leave. They would think they were done with him for a while, but then he would show up again that same night to start searching all over again. Well, one night, he had been hiding, staking out the place, when the bootleggers arrived. He had no back up, but he decided to take on these huge gorilla-like delivery guys, who were armed to the teeth with rifles and Tommy Guns, while he was all by himself with his little pistol. There was a gun battle, and that was the last of the Revenue Man.”

“Are you serious? They killed him! Is that what really happened?”

“Well, that’s the part of the story that is unknown to this day. Dad told me that the following morning the yard smelled like booze, and the Harringtons were busy cleaning up lots of glass and probably bullet casings on their driveway. But no one dared talk about anything that had happened. The Feds came and questioned the owners and their neighbors. They scoured the premises, but no evidence was ever found. The FBI finally gave up after a few months. After that, business

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continued as usual. As for Roy Abernathy, no one ever heard of him again. Neither he nor his body has ever been found. His fate, as they say, remains a mystery.”

“That is amazing! Do you think it’s all true?”

“Most of it anyway, because Dad was not one to spin a yarn, but he was pretty young when all of this happened, and I’m sure the story has been embellished over time. When we were kids, we would try to find the still they used and Roy Abernathy’s grave. Along with ‘Cowboys and Indians,’ ‘Finding the Revenue Man’ was our favorite game. Our property includes the woods at the end of the fields up to the railroad tracks. We would spend hours in the woods looking for areas that seemed suspiciously like a grave, or parts of a still, not that we really knew what a still was or what one looked like. Then we would dig and dig to find evidence.”

“Did you ever find anything?”

“No, just the residue of some old hobo campfires, tin cans, and the like. So we played hobo, too, making believe we were riding the rails.”

“I’m surprised your parents let you play there. You could have gotten hurt handling that old rusty stuff, or going too close to the train tracks.”

“I never said they let us play there. There were Boundary Rules. The woods were Boundary Rule Number 1—Do not go in the woods! But the trees and ferns grew so thick, we didn’t have to go very far before we were totally hidden. With that and 100 acres of cultivated fields, the chances of getting caught were pretty slim. If we had gotten caught, I still wouldn’t be able to sit down from the spanking I would have gotten!”

“And you would have deserved it. So how did your grandparents come to buy this place anyway?”

“From what I understand, the Harringtons held on to the business during the Prohibition years, but then came the Stock Market Crash of 1929, resulting in the Great Depression. Business dropped to nothing, and they just couldn’t operate the inn or tavern any longer. They ended up selling out to my grandparents for a portion of what the property would have been worth before the Depression. A place with all these rooms was perfect for a family with eight kids, and that’s how the Martelli family came to own it. Now, time to work.”

I threw the paper cups and bag in the trash and wiped the table while Dan collected cardboard boxes, packaging tape, trash bags and a dolly.

“Shall we start in the attic and work down from there?” he asked.

“Sounds good to me. Put on this breath mask; it’s sure to be dusty. Let’s go for it!”

We climbed the stairs to the second floor apartment and looked around. There was an old chrome table and cushioned kitchen chairs from the 1950s, a little scratched up but serviceable, and a really old gas cook stove, but most of the place was empty. I opened the door to the attic, causing layers of dust to start swirling around. As we climbed a short flight of stairs, more dust blew about, and its scent was a combination of the musty smell of yellowed, aging paper, old clothes, mothballs and a slight mildew aroma. The air was hot and heavy with age and stagnant from disuse. Dan had to carefully walk in the dark to turn the switch on the one light bulb dangling from an early, insulated electrical wire in the center of the room. It threw off very little light, whether from low wattage or dust, I wasn’t sure. But it was enough to see several cardboard boxes bursting at the seams. In the dim light I could also make out a few trunks, a coat rack, some small tables and chairs, an antique croquet set and who knew what else. Dan crossed the room to open the dormer window to let in some fresh air.

“We have to be very careful walking around up here. My parents said the floor wasn’t very safe. That was Boundary Rule Number 2—Don’t go in the attic.”

“Now you tell me. The floor must be pretty strong to hold up all this stuff. This place is packed. We may be working up here for a week! Maybe we should wait until the kids get here this weekend to tackle this place and get all this stuff sorted.”

“We’re going to need the kids for the heavy lifting in the garage and barn. Besides the obvious stuff we can see, most of the boxes hold old ledgers and guest books from the Inn. We can sort those pretty quickly. But those trunks and boxes of old clothes and stuff are what I’m looking forward to going through.”

“How do you know what’s up here if you’ve never been in the attic?”

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“I said I wasn’t supposed to come up here, not that I didn’t. After all, I had to make sure the Revenue Man’s corpse wasn’t hidden in this mess, didn’t I? Most of the stuff up here was either from the inn or my grandparents. I never understood why they didn’t get rid of the inn records before they piled their own things in the attic, but they didn’t. I suggest we pull a few things at a time down the attic stairs to the apartment below and check them out there. The larger bedroom with more light and cleaner air will be a good place to sort.”

“Good idea. Let’s grab that old headboard over there and place it on the stairs. Then we can slide things down on it. That will be much easier than lifting everything, and will probably cause less damage to these already dilapidated boxes.”

We angled the wooden headboard on a slant down the length of the stairs to serve as a ramp. Dan slid the boxes down as I caught them at the bottom of the stairs and moved them on the dolly to the old bedroom. The system worked well. It was faster than carrying them down the stairs and saved our backs as well as the boxes. After moving about fifteen of them, he joined me in the apartment.

“These are most of the old boxes filled with papers. Let’s check them out.”

“Remember, the name of the game is ‘Trash Disposal.’ We are getting rid of all this old stuff.”

We each opened a box, and as I thought, they were filled with old ledgers from the Harrington Inn. They contained accounts of lumber, seed, tools, linens, and anything else bought for the operation of the inn, as well as accounts of income. Some boxes were mildewed, probably from a leak at one time in the old roof, and others were falling apart. The majority were yellowed and the paper brittle, but in decent condition.

“These are really interesting. Listen to this: ‘Purchased: 5 lb. bag of corn seed, 1/8 lb. tomato seed, 2 hoes, 1 spade and a gallon crock of molasses . . . \$2.00,’” Dan read.

“Here’s one for a work horse, with saddle and feed for \$5.00. And a hand plow for \$2.45. Gotta love these prices. We can’t read all of these, or we will never get done. How about if we find any from the Wilcox farm days, we keep one from the late 1700s or early 1800s, and an

early one from the inn, probably around 1870 or so, and the latest one we find from the farm and the inn. We can read them as we hang out in the evenings. If we find anything interesting, we can give them to the Public Library or Historical Society.”

“That sounds like a good idea, as long as we can keep all the inn’s guest registers. Maybe George Washington slept here!” Dan agreed.

“If George Washington slept in every place that claimed he had slept there, he would have had to live to be 108 just to have enough nights to do all that sleeping,” I retorted. “But I agree, it will be fun to look through the guest registers. Who knows, maybe we will at least find a few famous signatures to frame. Oh look, this is the register from 1862-64. That must be one of the earliest ones from the inn.”

“I have one from 1868-1870. Let’s put them in this new cardboard box.”

It was difficult to stop ourselves from reading everything in every old box, but then again, we could only look at so many accounts of cows and chickens bought, costs for butchering hogs, and glasses and dishes bought for the tavern before but we finally got better at perusing and sorting.

“I didn’t find anything that looked like a second set of books about bootlegging. Did you, Dan?”

“Not yet, but let’s get the rest of the boxes.”

Continuing our ramp system, we brought down five more boxes. The last two were made of cheap wood, and the papers were in such bad shape that they practically disintegrated on touch.

“It looks like the stuff in the wood crates goes back to the time when the Wilcox’s farmed the property. I will try to save a few of the best, but these are so old they will probably fall apart on touch. If not, you could probably rub two pages together and start a bonfire.”

“Dan, I think I’ve found something in this box. This ledger goes from 1922-25, and this one is 1926 and doesn’t have an end date. I already have found inn ledgers for those years. The entries in these seem coded or something. Listen to this: DLM 5b at 24ca, 22c at 18ca. 6 b at 38ca, 30c at 16ca. I bet that the c means cases and b means barrels of whisky from this DLM. That might be a person or a company. The ca must mean

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cash. This stuff goes on and on with similar entries for purchases from several different initials. I think I found the second set of dirty books!"

"Fantastic! Those books deserve further scrutiny. Definitely add them to our special box. I think I'll read them tonight while I sip a nice, cold drink by the fireplace."

"There is no fireplace, remember; my parents covered them all with cheap paneling. I found a few other references to purchases of liquor, and one other book with inn expenses, which was also written in some kind of shorthand. To think these historical records were right above my head all those years I lived here, and I never knew it!"

Next we lowered several old trunks. Two of them had been a feast and nest for mice and were worthless, but we did find a few that were interesting. One in particular seemed to be the steamer trunk my grandmother must have used when she came over from Italy. After they got engaged in 1902, my grandfather came to America, and worked as a carpenter. Then he sent for my grandmother. When she arrived, they were married in America. I almost wept when we found what must have been her wedding gown. It had been carefully folded between layers and layers of tissue paper. The satin had yellowed, but the fine lace and seed pearls sewn to the bodice were still intact. It was a fairly simple design, with long sleeves, a fitted bodice and a full skirt, which made it all the more beautiful. The veil had not fared as well; much of the netting had disintegrated, but the headpiece, a seed pearl tiara was still in great shape. It was hard to picture that dear old lady, hunched over with age, as I remember her so well from my childhood, as a young, hopeful bride.

"Your grandmother must have been a big lady. Usually dresses from that time are diminutive."

"She was a big lady, not fat, but tall and big-boned. I remember her hands were huge. At least they seemed so to a little kid. She was pretty strong, too. In old pictures of her at the weddings of her numerous kids, she was as tall if not taller than the other ladies, and even some of the men."

"What else is in that trunk?"

"Some old embroidered linens, doilies and such. I wonder if this was

part of her trousseau. And this framed picture . . . Oh my God! Look! It's their wedding picture. I have never, ever seen a picture of my grandfather before. I didn't think any existed. My family had very few photos taken back then. I guess they were too expensive. This is amazing!"

"Wow, he was a handsome dude, wasn't he? Even by today's standards. He looked a lot like your father, or rather your father looked like him. Same Martelli curly hair."

"He was nice-looking, wasn't he? And she looks so pretty, young and happy; so different than she did when I knew her. I have to keep this. This is my heritage."

"Of course you have to keep it. The kids will be thrilled to see it, too. We'll keep anything you want, Hon."

"Look Dan, here's their wedding license! 'Nicola Antonio Martelli wed Giana Isabella Noccia, June 23, 1904, St. Michael the Archangel Church, Worcester, Massachusetts.' I have goosebumps! This wedding picture and license are like evidence of their lives that I had been told about, but just sort of took for granted or couldn't really relate to, you know, but these make it so real. It makes them real. It's kind of a validation of their life before me. And look, this is Aunt Michelina's birth certificate, and here's Aunt Philomena's and . . . here's my dad's. It's my dad's birth certificate, Dan! Now I am going to cry. Gianni Nicola Martelli, January 27, 1916."

"Honey, that is amazing. That paper looks like parchment and look at the calligraphy. You have to keep all of these things. So your grandparents lived in this area even before they bought the farm?"

"Yes, when my grandparents were first married, they lived in the old brick house across the street. My dad told me he and his brother and eight sisters were all born in that house. There were no hospitals around here back then."

"I thought there were eight kids."

"There were ten all together, but two little girls, Mary and Rose, died in 1918 from the Spanish Flu. They were three and five years old. My dad was only two, so he was sent to stay with his newly married sister Luciana for three or four weeks, which kept him from catching it. I can't imagine losing two children, especially at the same time. And my poor

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dad was so young to be sent away from his mother and father. I'm sure he couldn't understand what was going on."

"It probably saved his life. People did what they had to do back then to survive, and they didn't have time to think about the emotional impact. I can't imagine losing a child, but they endured such things fairly often. Hardly a family didn't lose at least one child to illness or accident. Just think. If he had died, there would never have been a Liliana Caterina Martelli Delaney."

"You're right, and lucky for you there is. What did you find in that trunk?"

"A few old photos, some kid's clothes and a few toys. I say we take these trunks downstairs with us and look at the rest of their contents tonight when we have clean hands and more time."

We put those trunks aside and continued clearing the attic. Some of the furniture looked primitive and others were antiques, probably from the Wilcox farm days and the Harrington Inn. We stored those in the living room of the upstairs apartment, what we used to call the parlor, until we could sell them to an antique dealer or at a garage sale. I was only interested in keeping a few pieces, particularly those that belonged to my grandparents. The last two trunks held little of value, but the trunks themselves could be cleaned up and sold. We put the croquet set in the garage sale area, along with some old decrepit fishing gear. A beautiful birdcage of delicate wire twisted into ornate designs went in the antique pile, as did the coat rack and a crystal decanter with eight glasses. Most of the remaining clothes were moth or mouse-eaten and were put in trash bags. We found a couple of boxes of books; one box was moldy, but the other had some possibilities, so we put that aside for further study. By 3:00, we were filthy, exhausted and starving. We hadn't even stopped for lunch, but most of the attic was cleared.

Dan could see my energy was fading. "We've made a lot of progress. Let's say we quit for the day. If I don't eat something soon, I might take a bite out of your arm," he threatened.

"I'm sure a ham and cheese sandwich would taste much better than my arm. All the crud on it might also give you the plague. Let's go."

“If we wash our faces and hands, do you think we can eat before we shower?”

“My mother always said you have to eat a peck of dirt before you die, so we should be fine. Of course, she was referring to wiping dirt off a carrot or strawberry in the field and eating it without washing it first. I don’t know how that applies to disintegrated mouse and probably other varmint poop.”

Dan’s mouth dropped open. “I think I just lost my appetite.”

“Sorry, I’m sure we’ll be fine if we wash up well. If I shower before we eat, I will fall and die in the bathtub due to exhaustion and starvation.”

As I made the sandwiches and cut up some fresh fruit, Dan pulled my parents’ vacuum out of a closet. “This thing is old enough to be an antique! I’m surprised it still works. Wow, it sure is heavy.”

“That ugly thing will go on working forever. I can remember vacuuming was my job when I was a kid, and I had to use that clunky thing. I called it Godzilla Vac. It’s not self-propelled at all, so it about tore my arms off, and it’s pretty loud, too. I hated it! I’ll tell you a little secret: when no one was around, I would just push it around the carpet without turning it on. It was so heavy, it would make tracks in the carpet, and so it looked like I’d vacuumed even though I hadn’t. I thought I was so smart.”

“You sneaky, little rascal, you! Didn’t your mom ever notice the carpet was still dirty?”

“Not really. Or if she did, she didn’t say so. She would comment sometimes that I didn’t do a very good job and to do better tomorrow. Then I felt guilty, so the next day I worked doubly hard to get it clean.”

“So you didn’t really gain anything by being devious, did you? And guilt got you in the end.”

“I guess you’re right, but sometimes it feels good to be sneaky and devious. Especially when you feel you have been unjustly overworked. Where are you going with that thing, anyway?”

“If I can carry it upstairs without getting a hernia, I thought after lunch I would take it to the attic and finish clearing the few things left, and then vacuum out the attic. That will be one less thing we have to do to get it ready to sell.”

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“Do you really think someone would actually buy this place to live in rather than just bulldoze it down? Or at the very least, gut it?”

“This house still has lots of possibility, Lil. Its age alone makes it worth something. And it is still pretty sturdy. If someone wanted to sink quite a bit of money into the place, it could be a fabulous house once it was restored. Remember, ‘One man’s trash is another man’s treasure.’ Some famous person said that. And besides, there is only one shower, so I’ll vacuum while you get cleaned up.”

“Thank you, Dan, my sweet husband.”

“Just try not to clog the drain with that half inch of dirt covering your body!”

CHAPTER THREE

MOUNTING EVIDENCE

I made Dan's all-time favorite food: baked penne with Italian sausage for dinner. Good thing our caretaker is Italian. He had stocked the refrigerator not only with staples, but with all the ingredients I needed—pasta, his wife's homemade marinara, ricotta, Parmesan, and fresh Italian sausage. Mangia!

It felt good to smell the aroma of Italian food in this kitchen again, even if it wasn't my grandmother and mother's amazing spaghetti sauce. I can remember when I was little, my older brother and I would be outside playing when we would catch a whiff of something delicious cooking. We would sneak in here to visit my grandmother—Boundary Rule Number 3: Don't go into Grammy's house unless invited—we knocked and she invited. She made everything herself—all kinds of pasta, ricotta, sausage, zuppa, cannolis, and so many other wonderful things. Store-bought could never be as good as Grammy's ricotta, warm and creamy; it practically melted in your mouth. She would give us each a bowl of it, sprinkled with a little sugar and cinnamon. Heaven! If caught by my mother, my brother Tony and I always said Grammy had invited us in, and that we were helping her. She always covered for us, but we really were there to sample the food.

Two of my aunts even gave Grammy a goat so she could have the fresh goat milk needed to make real Italian ricotta. I don't remember the goat, but I guess he was an ornery cuss, always nipping or charging

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at people. Mom told me that he tried to charge me one day when I was playing in the backyard. My grandmother saw him revving up to attack, and she ran over and swooped me up with one hand while she slapped the goat in the face with the other. Mom said both the goat and I were pretty stunned, and if it had been a cartoon, that goat's tongue would have been hanging out and stars would have been revolving around his head! Well, that was it for the goat; Grammy made my father stop work in the field and immediately take the goat to another farm that didn't have young children. She was a tough person, my grandmother, especially when it came to her family.

My father was second generation Italian, and my mother was second generation Irish. But thanks to my grandmother and aunts, my mother learned to be a fantastic Italian cook. I remember watching some of my aunts and my mother making ravioli as Grammy ordered them about. Ravioli takes a great deal of preparation, and my grandmother felt that if you were going to go to all that work, you might as well make enough for all her kids' families for several meals. My mother and aunts prepared a number of different fillings under my grandmother's watchful eye, while she, and only she, made the pasta dough. When everything was ready, my grandmother would almost reverently take down the special rolling pin from a shelf in the pantry. This heavy wooden rolling pin was long enough to extend from one side of the table to the other. Grammy would put a big glob of dough on the table. Then one woman stood on each side of the table and held a handle of the rolling pin. They would start at one end and slowly walk the length of the table, rolling out the dough until it covered the entire surface. Of course it came out perfectly and evenly rolled every time; Grammy's dough wouldn't dare do any less. This layer of dough was delicately folded and set aside while another glob of dough was rolled out the same way.

Then the women would spoon lumps of filling, probably about a tablespoon or so, on top of the dough, a couple of inches apart. They made rows and rows of these lumps across the whole surface of the dough. Next, the rolled dough that had been set aside was very carefully laid on top of the filling, so as not to smear it around. Finally, Grammy would use a cutting tool to cut the little mounds of dough into ravioli

squares, while the aunts and Mom followed behind and lightly pressed and sealed the layers. Cooking fresh dough takes very little time, so that was the easy step. Those were the best ravioli I have ever eaten, including when I was in Italy. Maybe I'm biased, but I still remember them well. I hoped I would find that old rolling pin, but I was pretty sure one of my aunts had taken it.

After dinner, Dan and I settled in the living room to look through some of the trunks and boxes we had brought downstairs. He concentrated on the guest registers while I concentrated on my grandmother's trunks. In the same trunk that held her wedding license and the birth certificates, I found a tissue-wrapped packet and opened it very gently. It was a long christening gown made of silk and hand-tatted lace. The fabric was very thin and somewhat yellow with age. With it was a bonnet of similar lace, so delicate and aged, it was almost falling apart.

"Dan, look at this! This christening gown must have been used for my dad and his brother and sisters. It's handmade, even the lace. Isn't it beautiful? Be careful when you touch it; it is very old and some of the lace is beginning to disintegrate. We have to keep this, and preserve it. I would love to get it properly framed."

"I think that's an excellent idea. Here, let me get some more tissue paper, and we can lay it flat between layers of tissue, and then put cardboard on the top and bottom. That should keep it safe till we get it to a framer."

"I've always found it difficult to conceive of my parents having a life before us kids—you know, that they were once children, and teenagers, and such. Seeing these things makes their lives so much more real, so much fuller. Sort of like when we found Grammy's wedding picture. Too bad it took becoming an adult to fully appreciate my heritage," I mused.

"I think all kids are that way, maybe a little out of selfishness or conceit, but mostly because they are too young to cognitively understand time and aging. Be thankful you have this opportunity to learn and appreciate them now."

"You're right. Thanks. Let's put this away somewhere where it won't get jostled around. Did you find anything interesting?"

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“I think so. I have been looked through a few of the guest registers from the Inn, and I found a few very interesting names in the 1880s. Did you know Susan B. Anthony stayed here? I also found an old flyer tucked in the book, advertising a speech given by her and a Lucy Stone at the Redmen’s Hall. Pretty amazing, huh?”

“I know Lucy Stone was from West Brookfield, not far from here. She wasn’t as famous as Susan B. Anthony, but she was a suffragette and women’s rights activist also. Maybe that’s how they ended up speaking here. Save that signature. Anyone else?”

“I found Clara Barton in the early 1900s. Didn’t she start the Red Cross? And listen to this: in 1912, George M. Cohan stayed here! Well I’ll be a Yankee Doodle Dandy!”

“Ha ha. Clara Barton was from Oxford. I went to a camp near her home when I was a kid. George M. Cohan had a house at a lake nearby and came here most summers. My vegetable stand historians told me he was very friendly. There is a place near here called Podunk, an old Indian word, I think. He loved Podunk, and used the name in his act, calling any small, nothing-happening town Podunk. The real place is quite lovely, lots of old homes and woods.”

“I have heard people say Podunk my whole life and never realized it’s a real place. I will definitely make sure we keep those signatures. I haven’t found any other names that I know yet. There sure are a lot of people named Howe in these registers.”

“There were a lot of Howe’s in early Massachusetts. One of them owned the Wayside Inn in Sudbury for a while and was a Colonel or General or something in the Revolutionary War. You know ‘The Tales of the Wayside Inn,’ which includes the famous poem, ‘Paul Revere’s Ride’? Longfellow wrote that book with the Wayside Inn as the setting. And Elias Howe lived in Spencer. He invented the lockstitch, aka the first useful sewing machine. He supposedly also invented the zipper, but he never patented it, so some other guy got credit. There is even a Howe State Park near here.”

“Well look at you, so full of all these old historic stories. You could be the town historian.”

“Please, I just want to clean out and sell this place and move on! I

didn't find much else in these trunks. Most of the stuff is falling apart. I did find a pair of very old pierced earrings that I think I will keep. They look like garnets, and I bet they were my grandmother's. Now I think I will switch to the bootlegging ledgers—if that is what they are."

"Still trying to find the Revenue Man, huh?"

"I always did enjoy a good mystery."

The 1922-25 ledger that I had already looked through contained more of the same semi-coded purchases. I also found some sales to places that sounded like other taverns. I'm sure they weren't selling vegetables to them. Then I picked up the 1926 register that did not have an end date. At first I found similar entries of debits and credits. Near the middle of the book, I found a section of names and payments made to them—John Turro, \$100. James Conlin, \$200. Sam Johnson, \$100. Each entry was for a large amount of money for those days, and always in even hundreds. The pages continued with payments every three months or so. A name might be entered several times in a row, and then there would be another name for a few entries.

"Hey Dan, look at this! I think I found a record of payoffs to Revenue Men. The amounts, the repetition of names, and the timing of the payments sure make it look that way."

"Are you sure it couldn't be repairmen or loan payments or something?"

"I doubt it. This goes from the early 20s, and this one is 1926. This must be bribe money to keep them quiet about the bootlegging."

I turned the page.

"Look here. It's kind of scratched out, but tell me that doesn't say Roy Abernathy. He was real, Dan!"

"Lily, are you sure you aren't trying to make those ink marks into what you want to see?"

"Dan, look. That is a capital R, then a short name. And that's a capital A, and you can see the TH and the Y at the end very clearly. It definitely says Roy Abernathy. And there is no record of money paid to him. He probably wouldn't accept a payoff, so they crossed his name out. Then, they snuffed out his life!"

"Snuffed out his life? Snuffed out his life? Now who sounds like Eliot

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Ness? But I will agree that you seem to be finding evidence to support those old stories. What a history this place has had! I can't wait until tomorrow to see what else we find. Right now, I am exhausted. Shall we pack up this stuff and call it a night?"

"Sure. I'm tired, too. We should sleep very soundly after all that hard work!"

CHAPTER FOUR

CONFLICTED DREAMS

I was sitting in the kitchen about 5:30 the next morning, drinking my first cup of coffee and watching the sunrise. I had tossed and turned all night, and I was trying to reweave the fabric of my dreams when Dan entered the kitchen.

“What are you doing up so early?”

“I kept having weird dreams, so I decided to just get up. Want a cup of coffee?”

“Sure, thanks. What were you dreaming about? Ghosts of revenue men?”

“No, just crazy dreams about the farm. Things that happened, but exaggerated. I was in the house trying to cook dinner for my family at the same time that I was keeping watch out the windows for customers at the vegetable stand. I was supposed to cook the meal, but also run out to the stand if there was a customer. Then more and more cars kept stopping at the stand, so I would have to shut off the stove and run out there, wait on them and run back, over and over and over again. The cars kept coming and blowing their horns, louder and louder. Then the food started burning and smoking. I was practically running in circles. I was getting more and more frustrated and so angry, I started to scream. I guess the screaming was not out loud since I didn't wake you up. It was insane! And it was exhausting ... so since I wasn't getting any rest anyway, I decided I might as well get up. Lovely sunrise, isn't it?”

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“Lil, you’ve been having dreams about the farm ever since I’ve known you, but this one seems more intense than those in the past. From all the stories I’m hearing you tell, there were lots of good times here, and you loved your family. Why all these negative feelings about the farm?”

How could I explain this to Dan or anyone when I didn’t totally understand it myself? Any mention of growing up in this place filled me with all kinds of anxiety and anger. I can honestly say I hated the farm! All my parents, brothers and I did was work. It often seemed our home life was more like a business than a family. Every spring, summer and fall from the time I was nine or ten years old until I graduated from college, I worked on the farm from sunrise to sunset and beyond. It was hard, it was dirty, it was not fun, and it was my childhood. No vacations, no birthday parties, no to so many things because we always had work to do. After college, I taught summer school every year just so I had an excuse not to go home to help on the farm. And yet I still feel guilty about that. Even after I moved as far away as Denver, summer would arrive and I would feel that I should be here helping on the farm.

I know lots of people who think growing up in the country, close to the earth is wholesome and healthy. They picture riding horses around green fields full of wildflowers and clean, fresh air. Or bountiful harvests with everyone happy and smiling. Remember the hippie movement, and their thing about living simply and returning to the earth? It had to be all those drugs those people took that made them so oblivious to reality. Believe me, farming has its good points, but it is not an easy life. It is ongoing physical labor, day in and day out, at all hours of the day and night and with constant uncertainty since farmers are at the mercy of Mother Nature.

When the Earth Mother was in a good mood, crops and harvests were plentiful, and though never wealthy, we got by. But a few bad storms, droughts, hurricanes or whatever else she could think of to throw at us could totally destroy a growing season and leave us with little or no income to make it through the winter months, until it started all over again the next spring. As a child, seeing my parents