

Excerpt from – First 20 Pages . . .

THE GRANDFATHER CLAUSE

A Novel by Philip A. Genovese, Jr.

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This is a work of fiction. All the names, characters, locations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons - living or dead, places, or events is either purely coincidental, unintentional, or a fictionalized version created solely for entertainment value.

For my wife, MaryAnn, and our children - Taylor, Melissa, and Tommy

And in remembrance of my grandfathers, Tom and Vito.

Acknowledgments

It has been said that writing is a lonely pursuit. But thanks to all the many early readers of my manuscript and their kind words, I was rarely alone and always encouraged. You are too many to mention but too few to forget. I never will. Thank you.

When I announced to my parents my sophomore year in college that I no longer thought I would be a doctor and had switched my major to English Literature, they bought me an electric typewriter. I'm still not sure that was a good idea, but I love them for their support of my dreams, their wonderful grand-parenting, and darn good proofreading.

If you have a demanding day job and decide to write a book, you better plan to have five years worth of missed weekends and vacations with your laptop. It is also best to have great friends and good neighbors who excuse your absences and tolerate your book funk way longer than reasonably necessary. The 'hood rules.

Mostly, though, you need a wonderful family that forgives each others' weakest moments and celebrates the best. There would be no book without their peace, love, and understanding.

GRANDFATHER CLAUSE - A provision exempting persons or other entities already engaged in an activity from rules or legislation affecting that activity. Grandfather clauses sometimes are added to legislation in order to avoid antagonizing groups with established interests in the activities affected.

lectlaw.com

People may be "grandfathered" to receive new benefits they are not otherwise entitled to.

wikipedia.org

Prologue

Sunday, March 1963

Red Bank, New Jersey

What I remember about Sundays back then was that they were always the same. Even knowing that our memories play conveniently with the truth and most often live longest the closer they reside to the boundaries of comfort and sorrow, I think this is mostly correct. Certainly, it was God's day and, I guessed, it was by His design that Sundays were meant to be a mix of pain and pleasure, punishment and reward. Week after week, I'd find my hidden pleasures amid a strange brew of uneasiness, resignations, and small wonders, one of which being that Sundays were always the same. That is, of course, until this Sunday.

The day began at seven-thirty with a glass of orange juice. In those days, the Catholic Church decreed a three-hour fast prior to receiving the Holy Sacrament. However, to ease the suffering of the faithful, liquids were allowed up to one hour before. My brother and sister were younger and having not yet made their First Holy Communion, they were exempt from fasting. As I sipped my juice, they would taunt me with delicious moans and closed-eyed groans as they ate their cereal. I remember this as one of the early signals that being the oldest was not simply a chronological fact but also carried with it some weight.

My parents woke up cranky on Sundays. We were not morning people and I suspect that their mood was in anticipation of the mad dash to get everyone ready for the glorious peace and light awaiting us at the nine-fifteen at St. James. Tension draped the house from the moment my mother came into our rooms and snapped up the shades. I went about my morning routine carefully, the way you walk through a minefield. God forbid you were caught lingering or engaged in anything not directly related to the grand preparation. This is not to say that my parents were mean or ugly people, quite the opposite. They were simply victims of the angst born of the prescribed routines and responsibilities of young family life, which occasionally can suck the breath out of living.

A benefit of the being the oldest was that I had learned the program. I knew when the tempest was nearing its end. I would close my eyes and breathe in the sweet powdery smell of my father's aftershave as he bent to tie the Windsor knot under my chin. And when he would overdose me with enough Odell's Hair Trainer to stiffen the wind, and comb my hair so roughly that the tines felt they would leave bloody tracks across my scalp, I would smile to myself and wait for the command we heard every Sunday. "You three just sit on the couch. Don't talk. Don't touch. Don't even look at each other. Just sit there until your mother and I are ready."

For me, this was the true beginning of Mass. And the only part in English.

Receiving Holy Communion was the best part of Mass. I was starving by then so I savored the thin wafer, letting it dissolve slowly in my mouth, imagining it was a warm cinnamon bun, the ones from Freiman's Bakery that my father would buy on the way home. It also signaled that Mass was almost over. A few more mumbles in Latin and my family would earn another week of Sanctifying Grace. Thank God. I reckoned that religion was another one of those things that only adults could understand, even if they couldn't speak Latin.

After Mass, my family ate a big breakfast at our big dining room table. My mother liked it that way and that's how most things were decided around our house. She would say, as long as it was her house to keep, it would be kept her way. After breakfast, I would secretly watch her clear the dishes and simultaneously reset the table for dinner. She did this with such grace and economy that I wondered if she practiced it during the week. This Sunday, she didn't speak until she was done.

"Mike, are your father's *friends* coming again today?" she called to my father in the living room.

"Of course, nothing's changed. Things are still unsettled. You know that," he answered from behind the newspaper. Lowering the paper. "Let's not start this. Just set them a place in the kitchen like he wants and pretend they're not here."

"Pretend they're not here? You've got to be kidding. We need to talk."

My father crumbled the newspaper and walked deliberately into the kitchen. I strained to listen, but they argued quietly. Even so, I knew what the problem was. My mother didn't like my grandfather or his friends, Mario and Nico. I couldn't understand then why she felt that way. Sure, he was a very serious man, but there was something else about him. Something special - there had to be. If not, how could he have been friends with my favorite Yankees, Mickey Mantle and Whitey Ford? One Sunday, he brought me a baseball they both had signed and it wasn't even my birthday or Christmas. I was more surprised to hear my mother say under her breath, "I wonder how he got that?"

My grandfather's friends, Mario and Nico, were always very polite to my family. They dressed in suits and always did whatever my grandfather asked. They were a lot younger than my grandfather, maybe around my father's age. But Pop Pop Carmine had a lot of friends of all ages, which made it more difficult for me to understand why my mother couldn't love him, too. But I was just eight years old and my attentions turned quickly, unencumbered by the unresolved, looking forward to the best part of every Sunday.

Just before one o'clock, I began to watch for him through the living room draperies. Soon I'd see my Pop Pop Carmine's sky blue Chrysler Imperial rolling to a stop in front of the house. I remember thinking how nice it was of my grandfather to let Mario drive his new car and Nico sit up front while he rode in back. I watched Nico and Mario get out and look up the road and behind the towering elms and sycamores that lined our street before they opened my grandfather's door. They even carried all the boxes of pastries and fruit and the warm loaves of bread for him. Nico and Mario couldn't speak English very well but they sure knew their manners. It was a mystery to me why my mother couldn't recognize that Pop Pop was lucky to have such good friends.

However, soon the aromas of Pop Pop Carmine's meat sauce would fill the kitchen and displace my disappointment. All the ingredients - the garlic and olive oil, canned plum tomatoes and paste, the sausage and pork, cheeses, seasonings, pasta and wine were carefully arranged beside the stove. Like the priest's Sunday altar, everything had been set out in advance by my mother. After lifting his grandchildren one by one high over his head and following quick pleasantries with my parents, which my mother dutifully endured, Pop Pop Carmine would take me by the hand into the kitchen. Shortly after, the heavy incense of sizzled garlic and the sweet smell of the thick red sauce would waft to every corner of our house, rendering it redolent and warmed.

I remember one Sunday the garlic wasn't fresh.

My grandfather had cursed, "Mannaggia, Michael, this garlic is stale. You can't cook with this. I don't ask for much. My grandchildren and fresh garlic once a week. My son can't give his father that?"

"Dad, calm down. I'll get you s fresh garlic," my father called from the other room.

"Your wife can't do that?"

My mother hurried to the kitchen and handed my grandfather another clove. He took the clove and without a word drove her from the kitchen, her eyes red and pooled.

But this Sunday everything seemed to be just fine. Pop Pop Carmine carefully prepared the sauce while I sat close by on a stool and watched and listened. Like the altar boys at Mass, I had learned to hand over each of the ingredients without being asked. I would sit patiently waiting for my grandfather's outstretched hand, the right moment to tender the

next offering. Then I'd hold my breath for the faint nod, the signal I had done well. This was my church.

We sat and stirred the sauce for hours. Mario and Nico played pinochle at the kitchen table and talked Italian to each other and to my grandfather. I couldn't understand the Italian any better than the Latin at Mass but I could somehow feel the words. Their cadence created a rhythm that beat deeply and naturally in my core. Normal conversation lulled me like soft music. I had even come to sense a certain buoyancy in the meter before they would laugh and I'd smile along with them. But, if the words came quickly, clipped and sharp, I'd pretend I wasn't listening and concentrate on stirring the sauce slowly and evenly as I had been taught.

And, as always, while the meat sauce simmered, my Pop Pop Carmine told me long stories about great Italians. These might be gospels about the adventures of Marco Polo, Cristoforo Colombo, and Amerigo Vespucci; or testaments to the genius of Brunelleschi, Da Vinci and Michelangelo, Virgil and Dante, or Galileo, Fermi, and Marconi. By my grandfather's telling, it was the Italians who had single-handedly discovered America, created all the world's masterpieces, and laid the foundation for modern science. In fact, he would conclude that without the Italians the world would not be what it is today - certainly, it would be devoid of culture and true civilization. I sat enthralled by these homilies and begged for another when each would end. This Sunday, the sermon was in praise of Puccini, which my grandfather punctuated by closing his eyes and humming the defining arias.

Finally, when my grandfather tore the heel off the loaf of bread, like a good altar boy, I tilted my head back and opened my mouth to receive the holiest of communions. The bread dunked in the hot sauce burned my mouth and watered my eyes. My grandfather dipped a piece for himself, swallowed slowly, and wiped his chin with the dishcloth. I waited while he neatly refolded the towel and sipped his wine.

After a moment, he patted my head and smiled, "It's ready, Joseph. Tell your father." There was no mystery to making a good meat sauce.

After dinner, my mother and sister washed the dishes in the kitchen. My brother and I ate pastries and fresh figs at the dining room table with my father and grandfather. The two men smoked cigars, drank espresso and poured Strega into tiny glasses. We picked from a bowl of nuts, finding fun in cracking walnuts and pecans for the older men. Mario and Nico smoked cigarettes on the back porch. My mother insisted on that. And she always made a lot of noise banging the pots and pans on Sundays. I had come to know that this was no accident. No matter the weather, Mario and Nico knew to stay on the back porch until the racket stopped.

When the last shiny pot was put away and the kitchen was quiet, my father called, "Are you girls all done in there? Come and join us for dessert."

Little Annie came but never my mother. Not until the doorbell rang. As usual, some of Pop Pop Carmine's other friends had come to visit. Only then did my mother come into the dining room and only to take Tommy and Annie upstairs for their baths. My father and I moved into the den to watch television. Mario and Nico joined Pop Pop Carmine in the living room.

The Wonderful World of Disney was on by that time and I pretended to watch. I had learned to position myself just right. Davy Crocket was one of my favorite movies but through the half-opened doorway was the real show.

The first to arrive were two men dressed in suits. Mario opened the door for them and Nico took their coats and hats. They must teach you a lot of manners in Italy, I thought. The visitors walked softly to where my grandfather sat and stood there until he motioned them to the sofa. They spoke quietly and sometimes leaned forward to whisper in Pop Pop Carmine's ear. When my grandfather raised his voice for a moment his friends became very quiet and still. But soon they were all talking again. When they were ready to leave, Nico helped them on with their coats and Mario held the door for them.

Soon more men came and left. This Sunday three groups of friends came over to talk with him. Every visit was more or less the same. The visitors were polite and respectful. They seemed very thankful to have Pop Pop Carmine as their friend. One man even kissed his hand, which almost made me laugh out loud. And, they all called him by his nickname, Don Carmine.

Just as Davy Crocket was ending, Mario and Nico leaned into the doorway to say good-bye. My grandfather came in wearing his coat and hat.

He winked at me and said, "Hey, Joseph, I need some help finding something in my car. How about getting your jacket and helping your old Pop Pop?"

This was the way every Sunday ended. Mario and Nico would go out and start the car. Rain or shine they'd stand on either side of the Chrysler and wait for my grandfather and me to come out. When we reached the car, my grandfather would say, "Some change fell out of my pocket today. You can keep whatever you find if you share it with your brother and sister."

But this Sunday was unlike all the Sundays before. Mario and Nico were not standing by the car and the trunk was open. It was dark, but as we got closer we saw Mario bent over into the trunk. We didn't see Nico.

My grandfather called out, "Mario, abbiamo una ruota sgonfiata?" *We have a flat tire?*

Mario didn't answer. He didn't even move.

"Mario!" Louder this time. "Nico!"

In the silence I felt my grandfather stiffen. He put his hand across my chest and motioned for me to stay behind. As he walked around to the rear of the car, I followed instinctively.

My grandfather stopped suddenly. “Figlio di puttana!” *Son of a bitch!*

I saw what caused my grandfather to swear. Mario’s right cheek was pressed against the floor of the trunk in a pool of blood. His eyes were wide open and brain tissue blossomed from his forehead. My grandfather reached down to touch Mario’s shoulder as if he could somehow still feel.

I was mesmerized by the horror of the moment. My grandfather’s voice hissing through clenched teeth startled me.

“Nico. Tu!”

I looked up to see Nico pointing a large pistol at my grandfather. It was the type soldiers used in World War II movies but it had a black pipe extending from the barrel. Nico looked past my grandfather at me.

“I sorry for you, Joey,” he said.

“Noooo!” my grandfather screamed and swung up wildly from the trunk.

Nico never saw the cross-shaped tire iron fisted in my grandfather hands. It struck diagonally across his face, knocking him hard to pavement. I heard Nico’s gun clatter on the street.

With the quickness of a much younger man, my grandfather stepped across and stood astride Nico’s chest. He leaned forward and, holding the arms of the iron cross, shoved one end into Nico’s mouth until he started to gag and grab at my grandfather’s arms.

My grandfather looked over his shoulder at me. “Go, behind that tree.”

I heard his voice but the face was one I had never seen before. The mouth seemed smaller and thinned under flared nostrils. The tendons in his neck were raised and corded to jaw muscles that rippled over clenched teeth. But it was his eyes that I would never forget. Flaming holes cut into a furnace of rage and cast-iron will. Maybe this was the face that made my mother cry. I froze.

“Joseph, go! Now!” My grandfather’s voice again. “Stay there ‘till I call you.”

I stumbled backward, then turned and ran toward an old sycamore. I could hear Nico gagging.

“Chi, Nico?” *Who?* My grandfather demanded. “Baressi?”

Nico choked loudly. I peeked from behind the tree trunk. My grandfather hunched lower, putting more of his weight on the cross.

Nico moaned low in his throat and his hands flailed at my Pop Pop’s forearms. But these were the forearms of an old longshoreman, thick and hard.

“Baressi, si?” My grandfather asked again.

Then in a soft and calm voice, my grandfather said, "Nico, metti le mani giu." *Put your hands down.*

Nico let his arms slide to the road beside him. My grandfather whispered something in Italian, or maybe Latin, and in one powerful motion rose up on his toes and leaned forward onto the arms of the cross. Nico's legs and arms shot up wildly and shook like a puppet. I could see my grandfather pushing down hard, rocking the tire iron back and forth until Nico stopped moving.

My grandfather stood up and threw the tire iron into the trunk of his car. He lifted Mario's legs and swung him in, too. Then he grabbed Nico under the arms and grunted as he wrestled the dead weight up and over the edge of the trunk. He glanced around before lifting a can of gasoline from the trunk, which he used splash away Nico's blood.

My grandfather looked down at his soiled and bloodied camel cashmere overcoat. "Bastardi," he cursed between thin, tight lips.

He took off the coat, wiped his hands on it, and tossed it into the trunk before closing the lid. I continued to peek as he went to the driver's seat and used the rear-view mirror to adjust his shirt collar and comb his hair. When he had resettled his fedora, he called for me.

He swung his legs out the door to face me. "Joseph, do you understand that I have to protect myself? That sometimes men must die for others to live? Nico would have killed your Pop Pop tonight. He shot Mario, his old friend from Napoli. He may have hurt you, too."

"But Nico was your friend," I said.

"Nico was my second cousin's son. But no, Nico was not my friend. You remember this, Joseph. People aren't always what they seem to be. Sometimes it's hard to know who is your friend."

His eyes slipped from mine. He drifted back to me with a weak, sad smile

"It seems the longer you live the fewer friends you have," he said.

"You have me, Pop Pop."

"Yes, I know, Joseph. And now we have this secret."

My grandfather touched the first two fingers of his right hand to his lips and then moved them slowly to mine and rested them there.

"We must never tell another man what happened here tonight. No one, not even your father must know. Never."

I nodded unconditionally. He studied my face for a long moment and then slowly withdrew his fingers. I followed his mutilated forefinger as it fell away, remembering a year earlier when it had been nearly torn off by the metal blade of a table fan.

"Pop Pop?"

“Yes.”

“Will Mario and Nico go to Heaven?”

“Mario will. Nico called you Joey, though. That is not a name men say with respect. Joseph was my father’s name. Never let anyone call you Joey. For that, and other things, Nico will go to Hell.”

“Will you go to Heaven, Pop Pop?”

“If you pray for me, Joseph.”

I watched him drive away and round the bend in the road, the red lights on the tail fins of the Chrysler flickering between the trunks of the elms and sycamores before they disappeared. I smelled the gasoline and looked down at the spot where Nico had died. I kicked leaves from gutter and spread them over the wet area with my sneakers. Something hard and heavy banged against my toes. It was Nico’s gun. I picked it up and was surprised by its weight. I tucked it in my belt under my jacket.

Before I went to sleep that Sunday, I wrapped the gun in my Davy Crocket frontier shirt and hid it with my ‘coonskin cap in a box of toy soldiers and matchbox cars in the back of my closet. In my bed, I closed my eyes and smelled the meat sauce and prayed for my grandfather.

Today

I've never told anyone that story, not even my wife. There are unquestionably a lot of reasons I haven't. I'd like to think that at least one of them has to do with me keeping my promise to my grandfather. Maybe, though, it's about living my father's life and not my grandfather's, and wanting to be defined by *my* deeds and not by the salacious nature of my grandfather's chosen work. But most likely, I never told anyone because I was afraid they might believe me.

So, why do I tell it now? Well it's not because I struggle with any deep psychological requirements to ventilate and heal from what I witnessed that night at such a tender age. I seem to have skirted any major consequences, moral or otherwise, from having kept this secret. Frankly, some recent events have more soundly trampled my psyche. It is true, though, that unlike the rest of my childhood, time and distance have failed miserably to dim even that most insignificant detail of that Sunday. Looking back, even as I stood at the curb making my promise, I knew that the weight of that moment would never leave me and, now later, nor will its occasional night rides through my darkest dreams.

And no, breaking my promise to my grandfather has nothing to do with me suddenly finding myself much closer to his age or him being long gone, that Sunday in 1963 being the last time I ever saw him. I've learned a lot about Don Carmine Napolo over the years, the side of him I never knew, him being someone I might be afraid to know today. Say what you will about him, it's all probably true and not much of it good. But he was a wonderful grandfather to me, my Pop Pop Carmine, and because of that there was never a question about me keeping our secret. Not until recently.

I told that old story because you need to hear it now, in view of this new story. They go together, hand in hand, like my grandfather and I walked to his car that chilly March night. And, I believe, knowing what I know now and what I had to do not too long ago, releases me from my promise. I think he'd understand because this involved my family and people I care about, and each of them was made fearful and diminished by it.

So now that you know the back-story and what it costs me to tell you, we can move forward to a week in May some years ago to the events that brought us here. But know first, that while great literature has been built around defining events in men's lives, don't be mistaken, this isn't one of those stories and it's certainly not great literature. The defining moments in my life have been those that most men pass through without much notice or even that expectation. No, this story has nothing to do with greatness; weakness perhaps,

and from some perspective, comeuppance. I am no longer afraid who might believe it, or not. I do wonder, though, if enough time has passed to make the telling safe.

One thing is certain, none of this would have happened if my grandfather had been a cobbler. And for that, he and I are now inexorably coupled and likely to meet again someday in Hell.

So, we can continue now. I'll tell you exactly how it happened, all that I know and what I have come to learn in the years since, clearly understanding that this telling will not serve to further me from the sins - his or mine.

Joseph Carmine Napoli