

MY SON...MY SON

A MEMOIR

FRANK RAVIDA

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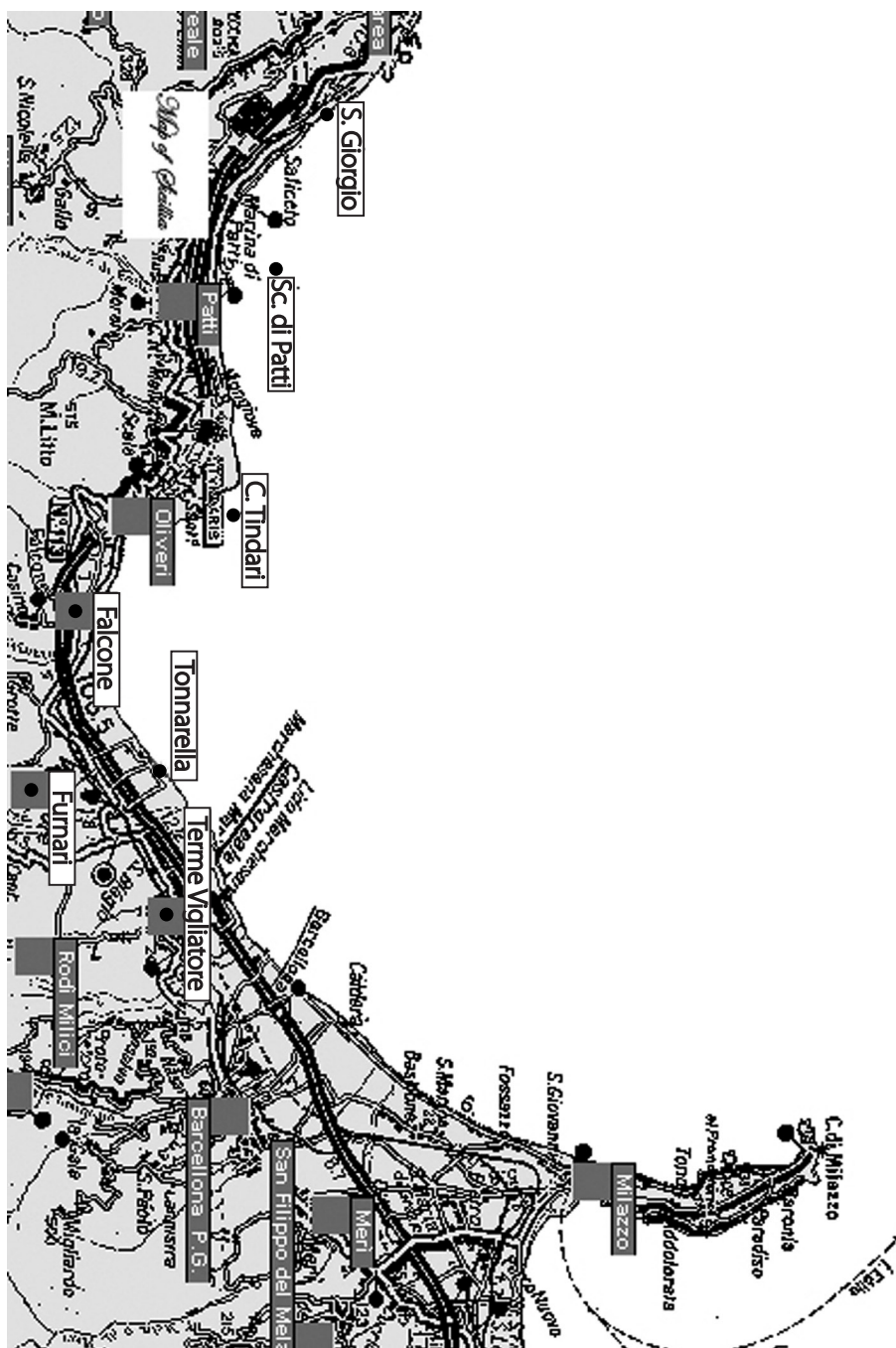
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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book firstly to my beloved father, Fortunato Ravida, whose life was cut so tragically short and who never had the pleasure of seeing his children grow. It is also dedicated to my grandfather, Francesco Ravida, for taking the place of his much loved son and for taking me into his home. Nonno Ciccio gave me so much inspiration and loving care through my life. He gave guidance through the letters he would write to me in a country he had never seen on the other side of the world, and guidance through spirit.

There have been times through my life when things were really tough. I would say a little prayer: “Nonno, help me. How would you tackle this situation? Help me. Please give me guidance.” And he has. Believe it or not, I believe he has helped me and looked after me. Even from far away.

I want people to know, I especially want my grandchildren to know, that I would have preferred to be a beggar, the poorest man on earth, as long as I had the privilege to have my most precious Dad, and the privilege to call him Papa. Children take for granted that their parents will be there for them forever.

I never had that. My young father...a flash of light on this earth...was on, went off and was no more.

I was born Francesco Ravida, in the small town of Vigliatore in Sicily, on 26 April 1940. At that time, no one, certainly not my parents, would believe what life had in store for them.

On my office wall hangs a red fishing net, a bright blue oar from my Grandad Ciccio's fishing boat and a branch of an olive tree. They are reminders of my homeland and of my life as a child in Sicily. They are reminders of my mother and my father, my dearly loved Nonno and Nonna, my aunts, uncles and cousins and a life, so very different to the one I live now. They are reminders of a terrible tragedy, but they also bring back memories of happier times.

This is my story.

1

The Elopement of Flavia di Giovanni and Fortunato Ravida

My mum, Flavia di Giovanni, had four brothers and one sister, Nunziata. They were Antonio, Nunziata, Peter, Nunzio and the youngest, Giuseppe. It was through them that she met Fortunato Ravida.

Down from Vigliatore there is a town called Falcone. Mum's uncle owns a very big olive oil plant, which he still has today and is run by the family. My father, who was a fisherman, decided to get out of the fishing industry and saw there was more money in olive oil, so he decided to branch out. He would take some olives to Uncle Rocco at his olive oil plant in Falcone.

On one of his trips, my father happened to be at Rocco's olive oil plant and bakery, when my mother turned up to see her auntie and uncle. She arrived, with her brother, in the old

truck in which they carried the olive oil drums and bags made of goat skins containing olive oil. She was staying there for a couple of days with one of her close friends, a niece of Rocco, from the Aeolian Islands. Her name was Lina Lopresti and she used to do the accounts for Rocco.

Whenever she could, Mum would hitch a lift with her brothers and go and stay at Rocco's place to spend some time with her friend. When my father went there and saw this lady he asked: "Who's she?" That's how they met. Dad was pretty keen on her and after a while, asked Uncle Rocco to arrange the marriage. So Rocco and Signor Mimi, known as 'Signor Ingegnere', organised the elopement. That sort of thing still happens sometimes in this day and age. The old traditions are changing slowly, but they're still there.

So my Papa went to San Pier Nceto to visit my mum's father, taking with him Uncle Rocco, my grandad Ciccio, my Nonna Maria, Auntie Carmel and Uncle Dominic. They all went to San Pier Nceto, where they had lunch and talked. My grandad, Mum's father, didn't like what he was hearing. They were in business and here was a humble fisherman wanting to marry his daughter. My dad sent letters to Mum through Uncle Rocco. There were no phones in those days so the best thing was telegram. But if you did send a telegram, your business and news would be all around the village in no time. The postman would come and announce to everyone, "Here's a telegram from your boyfriend." ... Yai, yai, yai, so you don't do that!

After they had been courting for about a year, my dad suggested that they should get married, but my old grandad, Salvatore Di Giovanni, wouldn't budge, "Nup. I'm not giving my daughter to a fisherman," he reckoned. But Papa wasn't really a fisherman anymore. He was trying to get into the olive

oil business. His dream was to restore an old olive oil plant on which he had paid a deposit and to have his brother and his family all working there together, as is the Sicilian tradition.

So the elopement was arranged. Plans were made in secret so that Grandad Salvatore didn't become suspicious. There weren't many cars around at that time, so if an unknown car turned up in the village, Grandad Salvatore would find out pretty quickly. So, on the appointed day, a local car was arranged to pick Mum up. They hastily shoved her into the car and sped away.

They drove down St. Georgio and along the coast to a place past the town of Patti for a day or so. They went to the church and the marriage ceremony took place. They then went to stay at Tonnarella at 'Ingegnere' Mimi's house. He moved out so they could have the house to themselves for a week.

Mum's parents finally got wind of something going on. Grandfather was furious. "Where's our daughter?," he demanded to know. Rocco sent them a message, "Eloped. Don't get stressed. Nothing's happened. She just eloped!"

The next problem for my Mum and Dad was finding somewhere to live. They couldn't stay in Nonno Ciccio's small house which faced the sea in Tonnarella. There just was not enough room as my father's siblings were still living at home. Nonno would drape his large fishing nets along the side of his house where they could dry and his four fishing boats would be pulled up onto the shore opposite his house. He had a lot of people working on his boats with him. I guess you could say share fish farming.

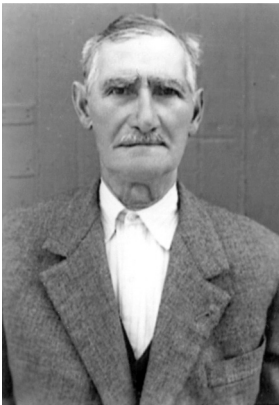
This is where their friend, Signor De Pasquale comes in. He said, "Don't worry. I've got a wing that's not used in my house. You can live there." De Pasquale was a very wealthy man and,



Nonna Maria & Nonno Francesco Ravida



*My father,
Fortunato Ravida*



Nonno Salvatore Di Giovanni



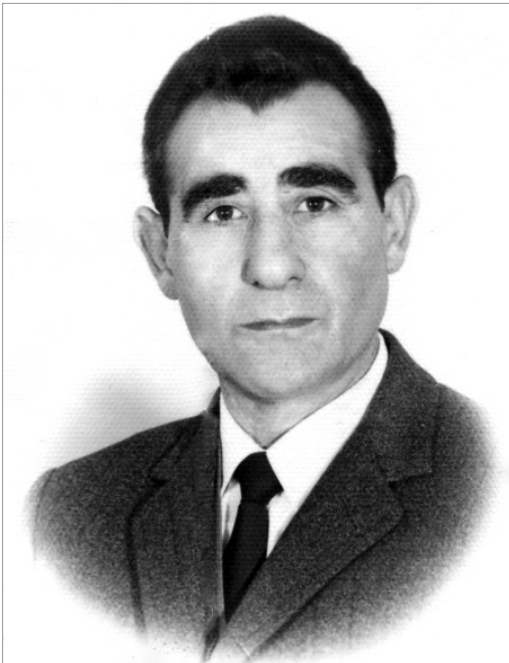
Nonna Carmela Di Giovanni



My mother and father Flavia and Fortunato Ravida



Uncle Nunzio Di Giovanni



Uncle Peter Di Giovanni



Me at about 3 years of age