



Grace, Theresa and Charlie Martoche

Gracie was seven-years old when the handsome nine-year old Charlie proclaimed that she was his girlfriend and that someday she would be his wife. She was naturally beautiful and graceful and, even as a child, there was something that set her apart from the others. Her full name was Mary Grace (Maria Grazia

to be exact) Pignone, but everyone called her Grace or Gracie. Charlie, true to his word, pursued Gracie until they actually did marry at Holy Cross Church on Saturday, October 28, 1933. They were married at 7:00 A.M. because Msgr. Joseph Gambino, the pastor, wanted more money than they could afford to perform the marriage at 10:00 a.m. Msgr. said a 10 A M wedding required a fifty dollar donation and "would impress all the neighbors." However, a 7 A M wedding was only fifteen dollars. So 7 A M it was.

The church was fully lit, richly decorated with flowers and packed with friends when Gracie and Charlie tied the knot. Having the ceremony at that early hour was a good thing for Gracie and Charlie. Most of their friends worked on Saturdays and thus were able to attend the ceremony before going to their jobs. At the end of the day, the whole gang spruced up and went to celebrate at the old house at 497 Seventh Street where Gracie lived with her family.

The mothers of the bride and groom had been cooking and baking for days. By all accounts, everyone enjoyed a wonderful Italian dinner, sauce, pasta, meatballs, sausage . . . well you know, loaves of freshly baked crusty Italian bread and literally gallons of homemade Italian wine. Of course, there were the obligatory candy-coated Jordan almonds tied in little bags along with orange pop, peanuts, Simon Pure and Iroquois beer, oranges, tangerines and on and on. That night the

old house rocked as the party stretched on past midnight. Because all of the neighbors were there no one complained about the noise. It's good that old Mike La Rocca had not yet moved next door because he might have been the exception. He always went to bed early and was not much of a party guy.

The Panaros, the Della Neves, the Costellos, the Martones, Jenny Mordino, Mary Maggio, the Ferraras, the Carrieros, the Custodis, the Petocks, were there as was old John McKean who was affectionately known as "Mac," who was Gracie's boss at the Buffalo Athletic Club. Of course there were many relatives including beautiful Aunt Mary Soldi and her husband Frank. She was Charlie's mother's sister. Charlie's uncle Dominic Pascale, the photographer, was there both as a guest and in his professional capacity. Gracie's uncle Lorenzo, who everybody called Louie, who later owned the Turf Club on Jersey and Busti, was there with his wife, Millie, and their kids. Sam and Anna, Ralph and Grace, Mike and Rose, the whole Russo clan from Niagara Falls, along with the Paragons and Pignones from Carthage, New York, near Watertown attended. Gracie's cousin Rose from the Bronx and her cousin Adam from Staten Island took the train to attend the wedding. As kids, we wondered where all these people slept while they were here.

One can only imagine the fun they had as Angelina, Gracie's wonderful stepmother, played her concertina and castanets. Many people called the groom Wally instead of Charlie, because he was a great pitcher and the greatest pitcher of his era was Walter Johnson (Big Train). Charlie might have been a good baseball player and earned that nickname, but he couldn't dance worth a lick so Gracie had about two dozen men, young and old, waltzing her around that night. She even got her father Carmine and Zio Alessandro to dance with her, as well as her brothers, Joseph and Anthony.

In those early days prior to their marriage, Gracie and Charlie worked in the laundry department at the Buffalo Athletic Club. They often were lucky enough to work together throughout their married life. When Charlie managed at the Buffalo Psychiatric Center and later

at the newly opened West Seneca State School he took Gracie with him. They were co-workers, best friends and lovers for their entire married lives.

When an infrequent circumstance prevented them from working together, like when Grace was a cleaning woman at City Hall on the afternoon to evening shift and Charlie ran the laundry at the Protestant Home for Children on Niagara Street and Grace couldn't be home for dinner, she could still have lunch daily with her husband and sweetheart. He often brought her flowers or candy or some other little treat when he came into the kitchen with the irreplaceable grin on his face.

As Charlie got older he developed a bad heart that finally would take him to his maker at far too young an age, 62, on March 20, 1975, just months after he retired. Grace would never be quite the same. She always said she lost her "better half" when Charlie died. Truth be told, he was as generous and forgiving a person as you could ever hope to meet. He was incapable of holding a grudge and always willing to see another's point of view.

Grace was tougher and not as forgiving but, as loving and loyal, as any person God ever put on this earth. When Grace was working at the Buffalo Psych Center, a posting pointed out that a GED exam would be coming up and there would be some courses offered to prepare those employees who were interested. At first, Grace who was in her 50s dismissed the idea, but she made the mistake of mentioning it to her son and daughter. They knew how sad she was at having to leave Hutchinson Central after completing just one year of high school to help the family make ends meet. She also was not able to dress the way she would have liked for school and did not have the funds necessary to socialize with her classmates, so at 15 years-old, she quit school and went to work at the Buffalo Athletic Club, lying about her age.



Grace, Charlie and Sal Martoche

Her children hounded her to fulfill her dream of graduating from high school, which she had mentioned to them many times. Her son, in particular, was unrelenting. Grace often complained about how hard it was at her age, then in her late forties, to concentrate and learn new ideas. She was afraid that she would embarrass herself and wanted to stop taking the classes but, Charlie and the two children kept encouraging her. Her son, Salvatore, still remembers his excited mother calling him, uncharacteristically in the middle of the afternoon, and breathless with joy giving him the good news

that she had passed her exam with flying colors to get her high school equivalency. What neither of them realized at the time was that she had compiled one of the highest scores on the exam in the entire state.

A few days later while the family was celebrating this milestone, Salvatore looked at his mother and said, "So, when are you going to start college?" She stared at him quizzically and horrified and said, "Are you never satisfied? Isn't this enough? It is enough for me." Despite prodding from her husband Charlie and her daughter Terry, she decided that she neither had the time nor the funds to pursue higher education. Salvatore always regretted that he had failed to convince her to go to college, but Grace would always be supremely proud of her accomplishment and the fact that she had outscored all of her young coworkers, it really was enough for her.

When she observed with pride and love the accomplishments of her two children and their families, after Charlie's death, she would always give him credit for being their inspiration and mentor, but that time she was only half right. On January 17, 1997 she left this world to rejoin the man she referred to as her "dreamboat." When they read this I'm sure they will laugh and Gracie will squeeze Charlie's hand in that special way he loved so much.