Fish-Packing Tales
By Maria (Mia) Millefoglie

The Two Marias:
Maria (Zi Zi) Millefoglie & Maria (Mia) Millefoglie
Scenes of the Vietnam War, protests on our street, and hippies at sit-ins played out on our television screens. It was 1968 and people marched against injustices throughout our country, while I simply fretted about my body. That tumultuous year, our parish leaders announced news that shocked our community: Saint Ann’s High School would close its doors and release us from its parochial hold. Eight years with the Sisters of Mercy was a long enough sentence. My girlfriends and I celebrated the news with whoops of joy, delighted to shed the mandatory gray pleated skirts that would have made even Twiggy look fat. We bid farewell to the bells that signaled our hourly prayers; and good riddance to an invisible line that separated boys from girls in hallways, church pews, and in the schoolyard. With no other options in town, we were going public! I fantasized about Gloucester High School and how handsome boys would walk me to classes. I would go to prom and wear a sequined dress; I would be thin, flirty, and free. None of this ever happened.

Summer started with lots of beach time and hanging out with my girlfriends. We were the “West End Girls” who roamed the west side of town with the Fort in its belly, and Pavilion Beach—Pollution Beach to locals—on its borders. Dressed in hip-hugger jeans and billowing peasant shirts, we strode the streets hoping to get a sighting of one of our latest boy crushes. Shoes were optional. There was an air about us, a look that said we had somewhere important to go. But to be honest, I was aimless and clueless; that is, until my mom made a plan for me.

We were in the kitchen; Mom at the stove adding heat to an already sweltering room and I at the table complaining, as usual, why we always had to eat pasta.

“Maria,” she said, lifting the wooden spoon from the pan, “you’re gonna pack fish this summer.”
“Mom, I’m babysitting every weekend.” My protest sounded weak and defeated before the battle had even begun.

“Not enough. I gotta keep you off the streets and away from the boys!” Mom resumed cooking without even glancing at me, not noticing my face flushed to a hot red.

Mom had the street part right, but I didn’t even have a boyfriend. And now, no guy would come near me if I smelled like dead fish.

“Why don’t you go pack fish and stink at the end of the day!” I yelled with all the might of a teenager who still lived under her mother’s roof.

“It’ll do you good.” A satisfied smirk crossed her face, and she drained the pasta.

Mom sent me to the old fish plant in the Fort. The smell of rotten fish permeated the air, and the constant roar of grinding machines must have kept neighbors up at night. The Fort itself was a proud and worn-down neighborhood filled with Sicilian families who made their living from the sea. Fishermen there struggled as they lost ground to foreign fleets; families were losing too. Urban Renewal schemes were demolishing homes and businesses from our working waterfront. I didn’t see much renewal; it looked like destruction to me.

On my first day at the job, the boss handed me a sharp knife and never said another word. I stood next to Josie, the mother of one of my friends and the only person I recognized in the long line of women. Josie held the slimy mackerel down with the palm of her left hand. With her right hand, she swiftly brought the blade down, slicing through skin and flesh. Heads and tails flew in all directions. I tried to imitate Josie, but the knives scared me. Josie must have complained to the boss man that this was no place for a fourteen-year-old who let the mackerel slip like silk through her fingers.
No one said I was fired, but the next day I had a new job at the herring plant on the State Pier. I never learned how Mom managed to find these jobs so quickly, but her drive to keep me away from boys must have been intense. Maybe, my aunt Maria had some influence as she worked as a fish cutter at this plant.

The herring factory was cavernous, dark, and cold. I took my place at the station—a gray metal platform with two rows of tightly-packed girls and women. We faced each other like a firing squad, but our eyes never met. Instead, we looked down at the metal rolling station that separated us. I don’t remember chatting with anyone; maybe it was because of all the noise. The high-pitched beeping of forklifts and the grind of cutting machines assaulted us throughout the day. We worked with downcast eyes, reaching for fish sloshing in a stream of frigid seawater. Our hands moved quickly, stacking one row of fillet up, next row of fillet down, corners tight, and repeating this pattern until our boxes were packed to the rim. There was an intricate rhythm to this madness. Our filled boxes rolled down the belt to the men at the end of the line. They smoked as they weighed and laughed as they carted our work away. They were the fish carters and “not the lowest job, Gloucester.” I wanted that job.

My dreams of freedom and boyfriends seemed mangled like fish caught in nets. I learned to survive, live inside my head, and fantasize that I was not at this fish plant. I learned that if I sang all my favorite Grateful Dead songs, ninety minutes would pass. I played word games and solved math problems in my head. Whenever I glanced up, the boss man would be glaring down at us. He spent his days in a glass-enclosed station perched close to the roof, making sure we all did our jobs. We barely had breaks, or a bathroom of our own. I hated this friggin’ packing place, but others seemed grateful to have a job.

This monotonous routine continued every day. I got up at 5:00 a.m. and dressed in my uniform.
of worn jeans, a sweatshirt, black rubber boots, a rubber apron, and a red bandana around my head. It felt like preparing for war. My aunt—Zi Zi to me—arrived at 5:20 a.m. and summoned me with one short blast of her horn. She sat in her old Chevy with the engine running, eyes straight ahead, and hands gripped to the steering wheel for a quick take-off.

We continued this pattern until one sizzling, hot day in August. I jumped into the car and said my customary “Ciao, Zi Zi.”

“Hai mangiato?” My aunt tilted her head toward the back seat, where a metal, rectangular box overflowed with Italian cookies.

“I’m not hungry,” I said, staring at more than two hundred cookies in the back seat. There were almond biscotti, fig-filled pastries, and S-shaped cookies decorated with colored sprinkles.

“Zi Zi, what’s going on?” The box held enough cookies for a celebration, and she looked like she was going to a wedding.

She wore a brightly colored V-neck dress that cinched her waist and gold jewelry that must have weighed about five pounds. A thick gold chain with a gold cross and medals of her patron saints—Santa Rosalia, and the Saints Anthony and Christopher—decorated her chest. Bright pink lipstick shined her lips. Most workdays, she dressed in my uncle’s wool pants and red flannel shirts.

“Zi Zi” I tried again for some explanation, but her blue eyes pierced through me.

“Mangia!” she told me, but she really meant for me to shut up.

I entered the fish plant with Zi Zi’s arm around my waist. She walked with me toward the conveyor belt with the fish packers already at the station. I waved good-bye and watched her climb the metal steps that led to a small platform close to the ceiling. My aunt walked slowly, with her shoulders back and her head held high. She had pulled on a pair of black wool pants under her dress, and men’s high-water boots replaced her shoes. A heavy rubber apron—the color of dead skin—protected her clothes; a bright red scarf covered her brown, wavy hair. This
armor didn’t protect her from the guys who pummeled cold water throughout the plant. They hosed down fish and guts and any worker who stood in their way. Zi Zi pulled on a pair of thick, textured gloves that would one day prove useless: the day, several years later when she lost two fingers in the cutting blades. But now, she reigned strong and undefeated. She was a fish-cutter.

Boss man said we had to cut, pack, and deliver over 100,000 pounds of herring before day’s end. He worried about the mountain of ice-packed fish laying out in the sweltering heat, and I worried that we would be working into the night. Within an hour of the morning shift, I heard Zi Zi yell to the maintenance guys, “Shut the water off.” Water and fish gushed down the chute; she could not abandon her station.

“Shut the water off!” My aunt’s voice rose above the roar of cutting machines. The guys finally turned the water off, and the machines came to a grinding halt. An eerie silence filled our space. She removed her apron, marched down the ladder toward the packing station, and ordered us: “Outside, now!”

“Why?” I asked as droves of people left their stations.

“It’s mug-up time,” she said and strode toward the door.

I followed her to the front lot, a worn-out pier filled with discarded fishing gear, broken planks, and seagulls feasting on decaying fish. I squinted, trying to adjust to the glaring sunlight and the scene in front of me. A mob of workers drank coffee from tall thermoses and helped themselves to Zi Zi’s heaping pile of cookies.

A radio blasted music, and my aunt sang along to one of her Napolitana favorites when the owner, a portly, red-faced man came toward us.

“Everyone, get back to work,” he yelled, jumping up and down with fists clenched in the air.

My aunt took notice, stopped singing, crossed her arms against her chest, and faced him one-on-one.
“We no go back to work.” She dismissed him with the customary Italian flip of the wrist under the chin. “We want a union!”

The owner’s face became noticeably redder, and I feared he would have a heart attack. I didn’t like the man, but I didn’t want him to drop dead. I also didn’t want Zi Zi to get in any more trouble. At that moment, a burly man with a clipboard appeared from the back of the fish plant. He strode toward us, stared down the owner, and announced, “I’m Lou, and I’m with the AFL-CIO. These workers want a union.”

The three of them walked back into the fish plant, and we got some time in the sun. An hour later, Zi Zi and Lou returned with big smiles on their faces. Lou told us about a contract that guaranteed health insurance, a solid lunch hour, two fifteen-minute breaks, and overtime pay for overtime work. Best of all, we would have a new woman’s bathroom. My aunt nodded in satisfaction, put on her apron, and ordered us all back to work.

One day, this experience would inspire me to organize with the AFL-CIO and lead a union campaign for women office workers. But that day, I felt proud that my aunt had the guts to take on the bosses, fight for our rights, and change the rules between owners and workers of the herring plant.

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