*“American Quilt” narrative*

*Angela Garrett*

In 1958, a feisty, Dutch red-haired lady convinced her brother, my grandfather, to cross the Atlantic with his wife and four children. He did, with $60 in his pocket, and as they crossed into the Ellis Island Harbor on the ship Rijndam, he dreamed of the promise in his newly adopted home. My mother was one of those children.

In the next ten years, Oma and Opa made a home in Patterson, Louisiana, a small town on the Gulf Coast, and added three more children to the family. Opa was a supervisor in an ironworks facility and Oma stayed home and raised their seven children. They were never wealthy, but they worked hard and did all they could to provide their brood with scouting, family vacations, band instruments, and the kind of happiness that is found in a close-knit home. Old-school hard work ethics were part of the fabric of their family from the beginning.

The Dutch culture is very much alive in all of our homes today. We celebrate the holidays with Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet. We eat wotelstomp en gehaktballen when the weather turns cold. Cheese is served with basically every meal. Dutch words are sprinkled in our conversations (mine are admittedly the ones I heard Opa say when he was very, very angry). Chocoladehagel on white bread is a favorite, favorite snack. From infancy, Dutch nursery rhymes are sung to all the kinderen.

Stubbornness from Oma and Opa is not only woven into my DNA strands, but it is also a huge facet of life in South Louisiana. Acadiana, where I was born, was settled by a group of French who were evicted from their community in Nova Scotia. Even after being forcibly removed from their homes, they made the best of their new place in life. New Orleans, too, is a city deeply rooted in stubbornness. By all geological rules, it shouldn’t even be standing, but it is, it will, and it always will, regardless of whatever tragedies may come.

I lived for thirty years in the orbit of that beautiful city, and if it is possible to feel like the offspring of a geographic place, I do. She carries herself with strength, grace, and acceptance of life that I envy and hope to accomplish one day when I am older and wiser. There is so much to be learned from the eclectic throng of people there, and even after decades, only the surface is scratched. It is a fascinating mystery to unravel.

In the purest sense of the word, I am a Southerner. I believe in Southern grace, Southern charm, and Southern hospitality. I believe that ladies should be ladylike and still be able to stand their own ground with grace. I believe that gentlemen should be gentlemanly and still be able to express their feelings. I believe in feeding people who come visit my house. I believe in noisy, huggy hellos and even noisier, huggier goodbyes. I believe that a rocking chair on a porch with a glass of sweet tea cures all ills of the soul.

In the nature vs. nurture debate, there is the assumption that the answer is found in black-and-white. With no disrespect to Mr. Galton and Mr. Darwin, I disagree. My genes gave me the stubborn ginger streak. My surroundings gave me inspiration and independence. There is no separating one from the other. To do so would be as impossible as trying to separate the flour and oil once they’ve become a roux. I am a product of immigrants and a city of more immigrants, and find nothing more enthralling than the gumbo resulting from these ingredients.

(608 words)