

## Chapter 3: What Remained

On a stifling July day a few weeks after graduation, I walked in our back door, surrounded by the silver kitchen wallpaper that reminded me of gift-wrap. There I saw my mother's scribbled note on the white Formica counter—"Papa collapsed at store rushed to St. Alexis—Hurry!"—and I did, running out to the old Chevy Bel-Air that was parked out back. The rusted out Chevy had become mine the year before, when my parents bought my grandfather a new car, another blue Chevrolet.

St. Alexis Hospital was located near East 55<sup>th</sup> Street, down in the old neighborhood by Papa's store. I didn't know the exact location of the hospital but headed southwest, retracing my grandfather's daily route along Harvard Avenue, the one he'd driven a thousand times in this same Chevy.

My grandfather wasn't physically imposing. In a picture on our family room wall there was Papa on his wedding day, complete with long suit jacket and cutaway tails, a pencil mustache, and a boutonniere. The man I knew still had the same hint of mischief in his hooded eyes, the same beaklike nose and thin mustache, now flecked with gray. But his body was worn down, his clothes dusted with ash and marked with cigarette burns, a testament to his love for smoke and the ever-present Camels that gave his voice its raspy quality, a mix of warmth and harsh.

Despite Papa's general air of fatigue, pride and self-satisfaction radiated from him; he knew his place in the world. He walked *through* it chest out, a bantamweight ready for whatever life could throw him. And life had thrown a lot, though I didn't know the details back then. He'd grown up poor with his immigrant parents, the oldest child

and son. A bright boy with a curious mind, he raced through high school, graduating at 16, and went on to pharmacy school at Ohio State, settling for a shorter path than the one he really wanted -- that led to medical school, to become a doctor. He met my grandmother, a few years older, on the train to Columbus. He was cocky, charming, a young *flaneur* with a mustache like Adolphe Menjou, and how could she not fall for him, which is exactly what she did.

Fay was going to visit her brother Frank, who was in dental school at OSU. In the freewheeling '20s, she was a young woman with a good job – office manager at the White Sewing Machine Company -- and on the side she modeled furs for I.J Fox, her fur-covered form gracing ads in the Cleveland papers. Soon they were dating, and then engaged. Ben seemed like a good catch; though poor, he'd become a licensed pharmacist at the tender age of 19, though he'd needed special permission from the governor to do so.

Then the losses began to pile up -- Jerry's deafness, Fay's Bell's palsy, her crying jags and "nervous condition," for which my grandfather never got a good diagnosis. How much of her depression was caused by her guilt in producing a handicapped child, a son who couldn't hear her silky voice or Ben's raspy one? Soon after Jerry was born, my grandmother lost much of her own hearing. The doctors called it "calcification," bone growth in the middle ear. A strange coincidence, a twist of fate, that her son would be born deaf, his auditory nerves dead, and then her own hearing faded. There was talk of German measles or rubella during her pregnancy, as well as a fall during her 7<sup>th</sup> month, as possible causes of Jerry's deafness. Regardless, he would never hear his mother's voice.

If Papa could not cure his deaf son, he was determined to help his hard of hearing wife. He took my grandmother to specialists near and far. One surgeon performed a fenestration, removing extra bone from Fay's ears, but it quickly grew back, like her guilt.

Through it all Papa kept working, until he became the man I knew; if not content, then resigned to the various frustrations of family, adjustments that must be made. Still, he had his daughter and her marriage to a good provider, and their three sons to go along with Jerry's little girl, who was born, thankfully, with normal hearing.

He had the store, too, a testament to a half-century of day-in and day-out work, his hard won respect in the neighborhood, the business that put his daughter through three years of college, *which should have been four, if only she hadn't dropped out to marry Bill, and why couldn't she have waited a year?* And Papa had Jerry *who would always be needing help, but at least he was working, had a stable job if not a good first marriage and it was too bad his first wife was not just deaf, but crazy, and now Jerry had issues with his second wife who was just as crazy as the first and his son could sure pick 'em, but what could he do beyond giving Jerry advice he didn't want to hear?*

Through it all Papa ministered to Slavic Village, gave his customers their medicine with bits of advice he dispensed for free. In his store, he was secure among glass jars, metal scales, dusty shelves. This was life in balance as it rarely was within the confines of his family. My mother, his oldest, the one who should have earned the college degree that Jerry could not, urged him to cut back, sell the store, retire. The idea held no allure for him.

*And do what?*

His life was pressed into those shelves, the sweat-stained wood, the cluttered counters and magazine racks at the corner of East 71<sup>st</sup> and Harvard Avenue. In the gray light of Harvard Drug, Papa could be the healer he'd imagined himself to be fifty years earlier, the aspiring doctor who earned his pharmacy degree in three years and put his brother Itz through school, too, who took care of his parents and his sister Lil until she was married off to a young accountant.

The store supported Fay, Rita and Jerry, along with Itz and his brother's young family. It took care of Fay's doctors and Jerry's endless rounds of speech therapy, of all the services the boy needed just to speak so that people could -- sometimes, but not always -- understand him. The store provided Papa with a good living, so he couldn't complain and rarely did.

Even now, long after I'd taken possession, the car still smelled of my grandfather and his Camel filters, burning ash held between tapered fingers. He would set them down, forgotten, where they bored into the Chevy's blue dashboard and gray cloth seats, pockmarked like a teenager with acne. Papa smoked constantly, absent-mindedly. Half-smoked cigarettes lay around him at the store, turning the air sour, blue smoke tracing curvy lines through the air, his nimble fingers stained yellow from nicotine.

A layer of gray film coated the windshield and windows. Still the car ran, stubbornly resisting my grandfather's and then my own inadvertent attempts to break it down.

I sped west down Harvard as it bisected the city, from Green Road in the eastern suburbs into the city of Cleveland itself, my stomach tensed. Heading toward the old Polish neighborhood where the store was located, the houses grew closer together, in formation, two-family homes with sagging front porches and splintered paint.

As I passed John F. Kennedy High School the neighborhood was suddenly all black. Eventually I passed into the ethnic enclave that had, after several decades, woven my grandfather into its heart while holding out against integration, against outsiders. Still, its days as a center of Polish life were numbered, the sons and daughters flowing out to suburban Parma on the west side and Garfield Heights on the east.

I reached 55<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway, the commercial center of the neighborhood, and found my way to the hospital. It wasn't far. I must have asked for directions, but I remember only running through the parking lot, heart pumping, and entering the dark coolness of the building. Even then, it seemed ironic—my grandfather Cohen, a proud if unobservant Jew -- in this most Catholic of hospitals. Stepping out of an elevator I saw, on a cushioned bench, my mother and grandmother huddled together beneath a gold cross. I knew I was too late.

A few minutes later a black orderly wheeled a gurney, body covered by a white sheet past us and into the elevator -- all that remained of my grandfather.

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Over the next several weeks, I worked in the dank confines of Papa's store without him, though the counters, walls, and floors were infused with his being. Those plank floors, remnants from the 1920s, when Papa had purchased Harvard Drug from another druggist, creaked under my feet. *How many times* had he paced those same

floorboards, searched the rows of dark shelves stuffed with toiletries and medicines in a system known only to him, looking for one particular remedy?

In my memory the store is brown and gray, dust motes circling in the filtered light, which streamed in along with dirt and noise from the intersection of East 71<sup>st</sup> Street and Harvard Avenue. The store sat too close to that busy interchange—one driver in the early 1970s destroyed the plate glass storefront when he lost control of his car. During those oppressive days of summer the front door was propped open, a ceiling fan stirring the thick, coal-dusted air, which floated up from the nearby steel mills that hummed along the Cuyahoga River.

I stood behind the front counter, selling cigarettes and candy bars as I had on occasional Saturdays as a boy, when I'd accompany Papa to the store. Once there, I'd stock and re-stock his magazines, sell Necco wafers, Chesterfield cigarettes and Polish newspapers to the men and women who trickled into the pharmacy. By 3 or 4 o'clock, Papa would close up and we'd head out to Cleveland Heights to a greasy luncheonette called Mawby's, famous for its mouth-watering grilled hamburgers topped with onions, their scent making me salivate like one of Pavlov's dogs.

Now I worked behind that same counter, making change out of the register drawer, the crank of the gilded cash register broken years before. The smells of the store and the surrounding neighborhood—diesel fuel, soot, and ash—mixed with my sweat in those days when my parents brought in a rotating cast of pharmacists to fill prescriptions, to keep the store going, to find a buyer.

What remained in the weeks after my uncle's and grandfather's deaths were magazines that would never be read, beauty powder that would never be sold, and the old

phone booth with the 1930's-style Ohio Bell Telephone symbol embossed in gold leaf, which sat silent, empty. What remained were the old folks, neighborhood women in worn print dresses and babushkas and men in sweat-stained collared shirts, who came in to pay their respects to Uncle Itz, Papa's long-time partner, now partially crippled by a stroke. He could no longer fill prescriptions but sat at a small table in the front of the store, sipping coffee and silently weeping.

There were no buyers for Papa's little business. Instead, my parents sold his customer list to another pharmacist, a younger Jew with a store in the neighborhood, for \$2,000. Then they hired an auctioneer, a grizzled hillbilly with white hair and a matching beard to strip the store clean. Working under his direction, Alex and I salvaged anything we could, from the rusted out '*Drink Coca-Cola*' sign, which was anchored into the brick on the Harvard Avenue side of the building, to bottles and bottles of unsold medicine. The sign, a burnt-red bottle cap perched above the store's entrance, groaned as I leaned out a second-story window and strained to dislodge it. Eventually, with an assist from the lean but powerful auctioneer, the cap popped free and clattered to the sidewalk below. It was hard, in that moment, not to think of my grandfather.

The auctioneer, focused on his task, loaded everything into a large truck. Back outside his store we emptied those liquid medicines into a plastic bucket, creating a toxic blend that made me nauseous. A mound of colored glass, purple, red and sea green, lay alongside the bucket, the remnants of potions for customers long dead and gone. Over time, I came to see Papa's death, so soon after Jerry's as a rupture of the heart, a final loss my grandfather could not contain.