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## Mostly True: An Exploration of My Family History

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# Mostly True: An Exploration of My Family History



Honors Thesis

Jessica Urban

Department: English

Advisor: Albino Carrillo, MFA

April 2015

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## Abstract

Family histories are tricky things, especially when the people in the stories don't necessarily want to talk about their pasts. My family immigrated to the US in the early 1800's, many to escape the anti-Semitism that was rampant in their countries. Through a series of personal interviews, family stories passed down from generation to generation, and my own imagination to fill in the gaps, I have compiled a series of short stories about my family and their lives in America from their arrival here in the 1800's to the present day. Although each family has a different story to tell, the stories of love, loss, and faith unite all of us, no matter our backgrounds.

## Disclaimer

These stories are as true as I could make them, based off of the stories I heard and the things I learned about my family. I've filled in the gaps where stories were left stilted and unfinished with my imagination. However, these are only my interpretations of my family, and others may see it differently.

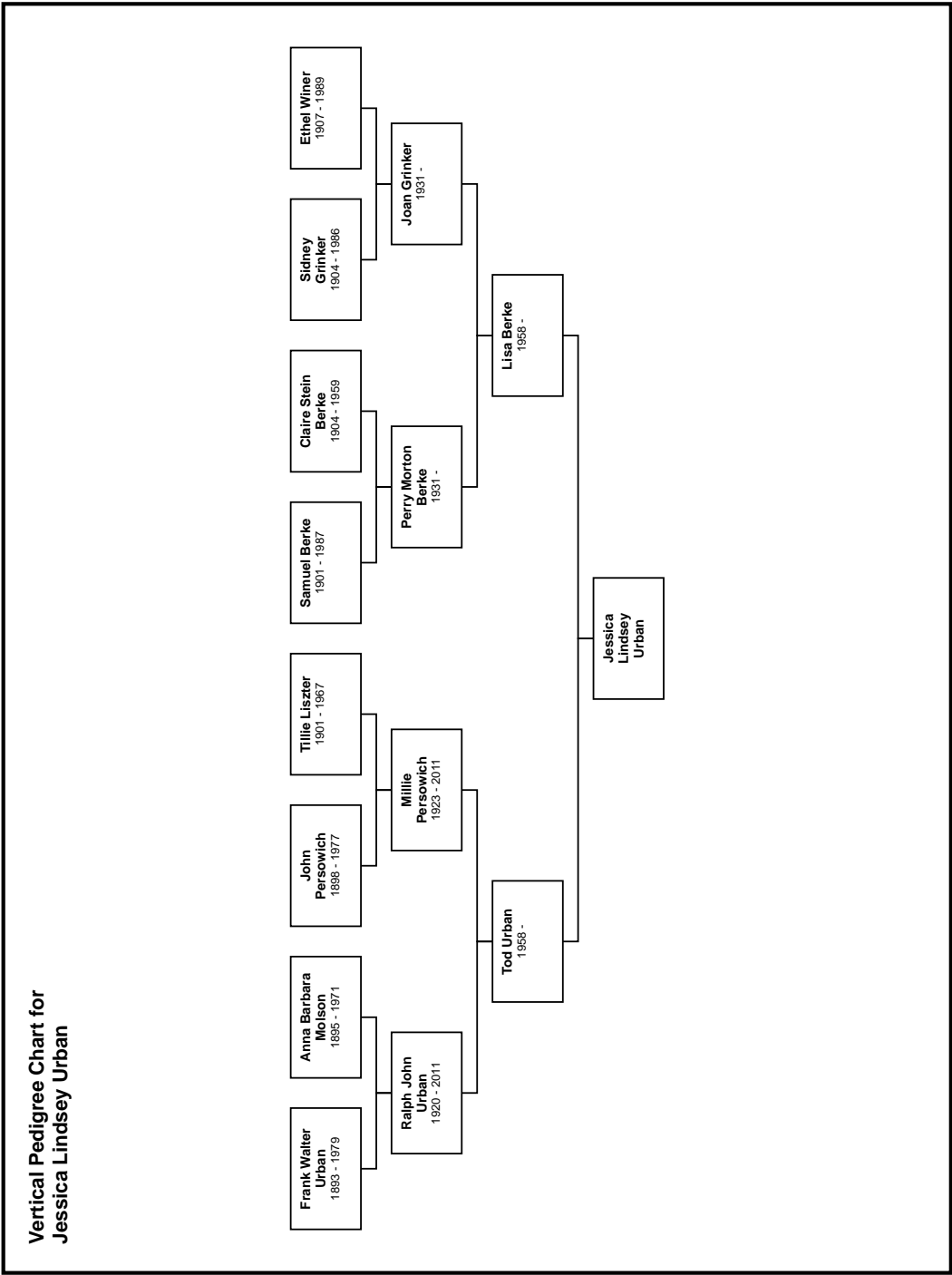
## Dedication

To Professor Carrillo who believed that these stories were worth sharing. To my family for the countless questions they answered and stories they told, even when they thought I wasn't listening. To those who have since passed away but whose stories will not be forgotten. And to my Grandma Joan, who will beat cancer again, because I got my stubbornness from her. I love you all.

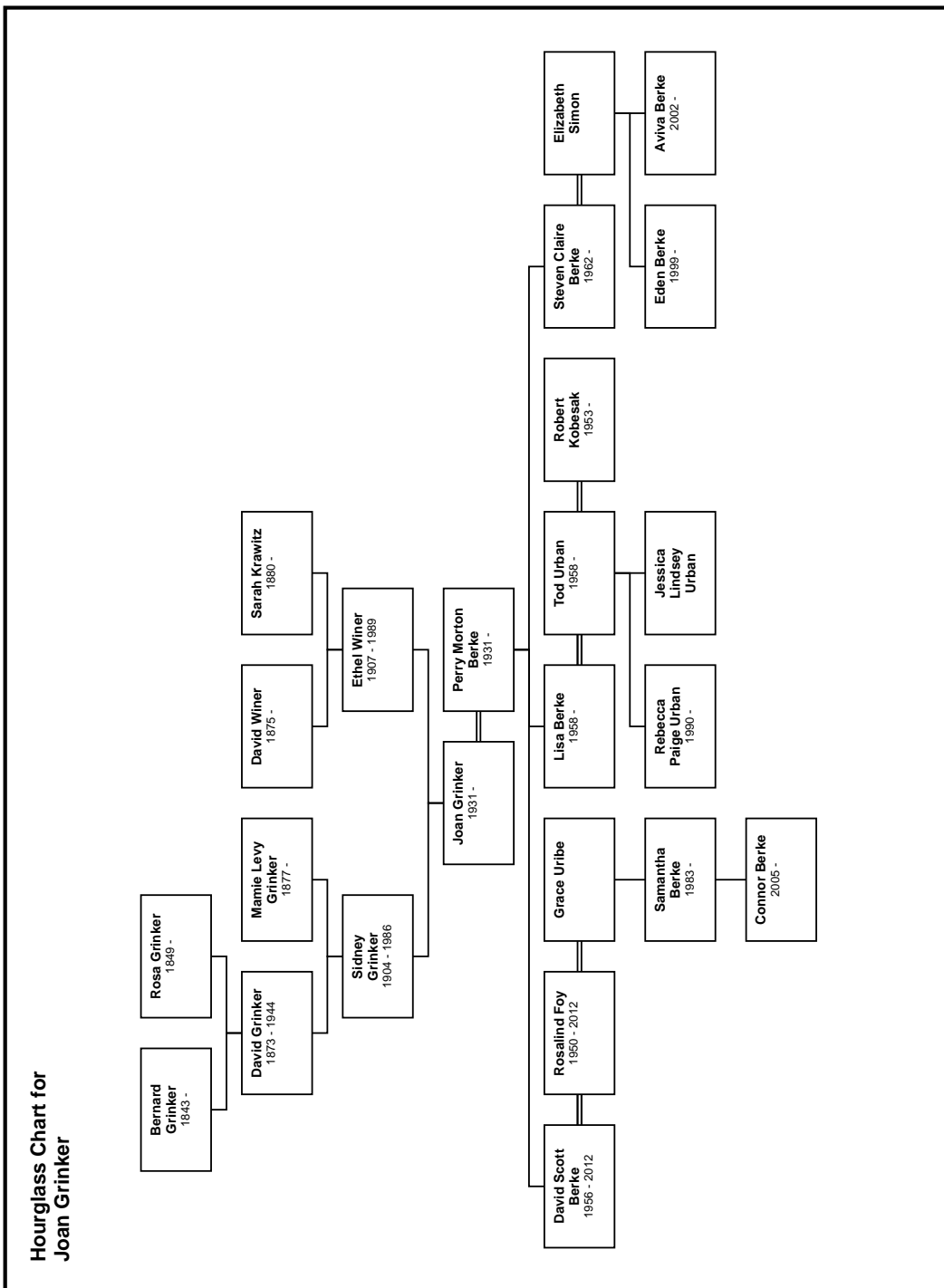


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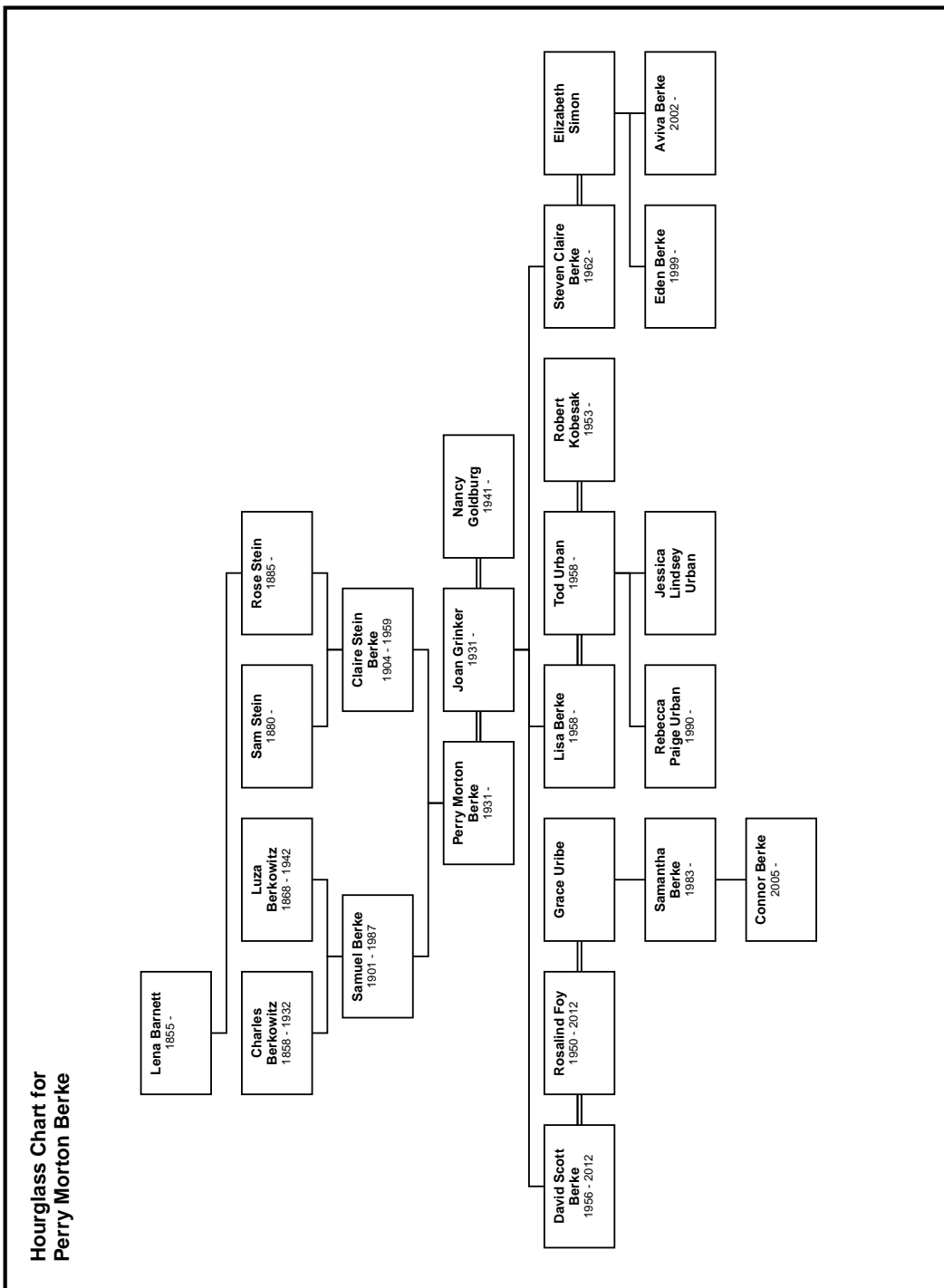
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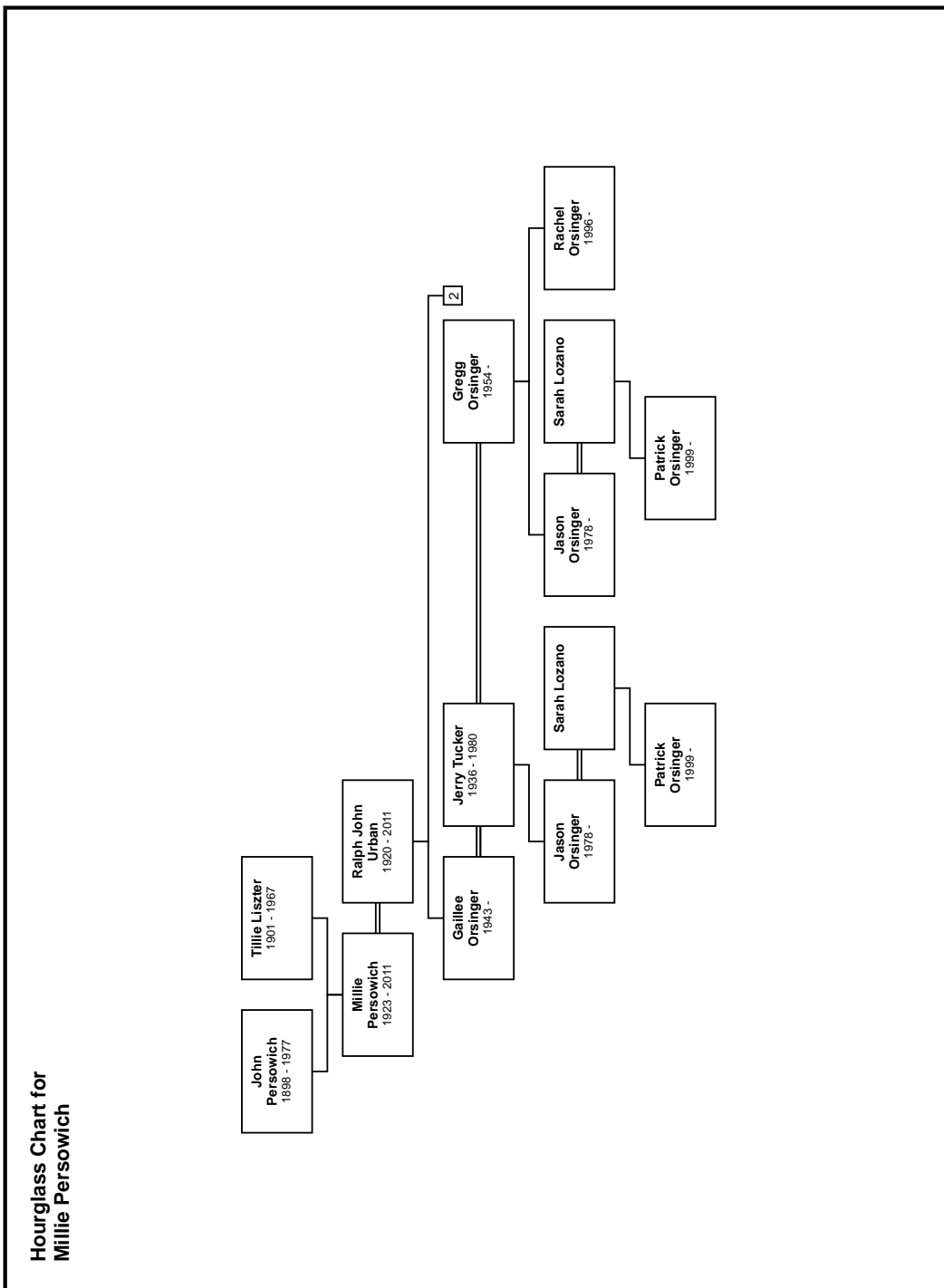
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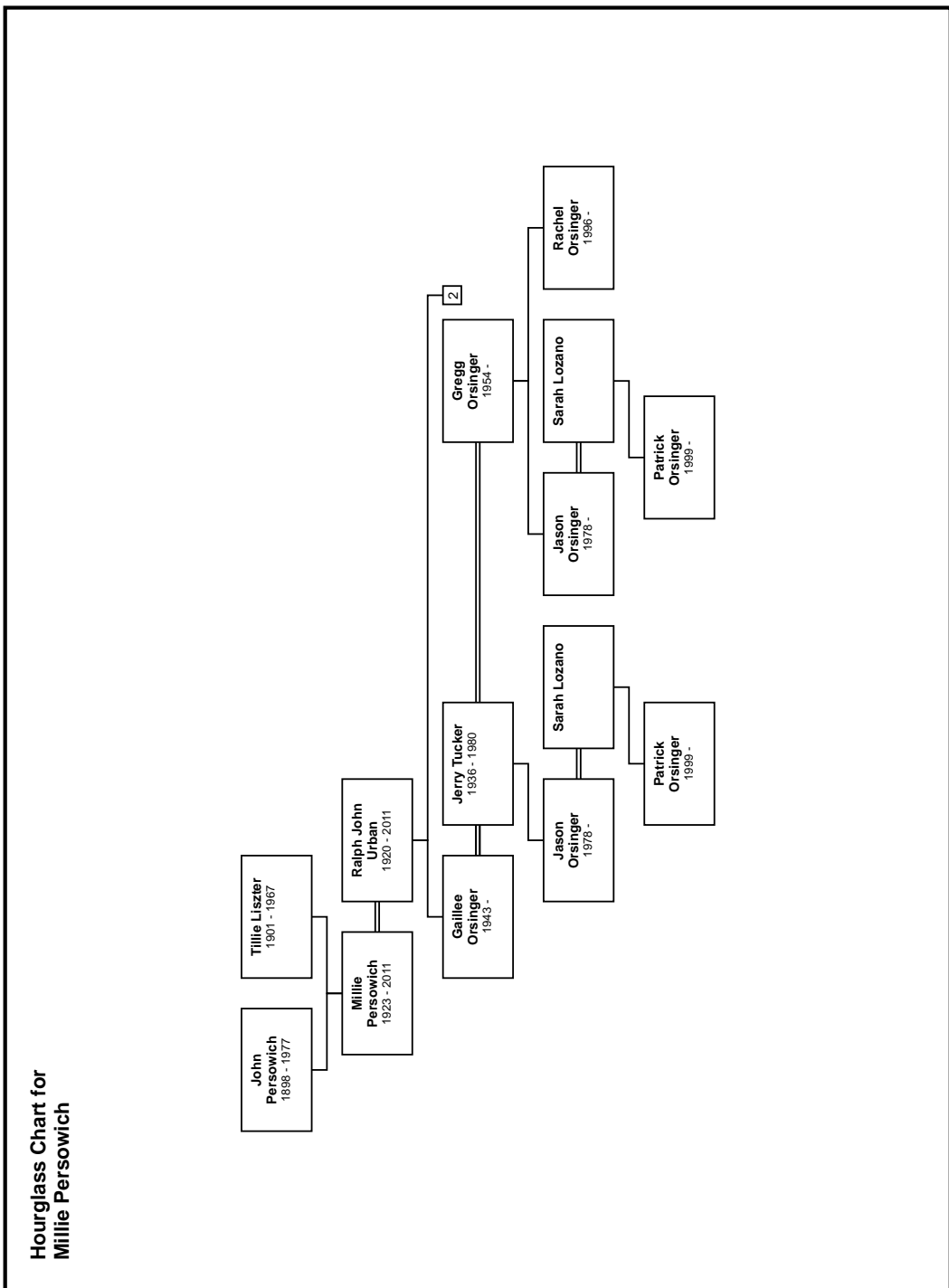
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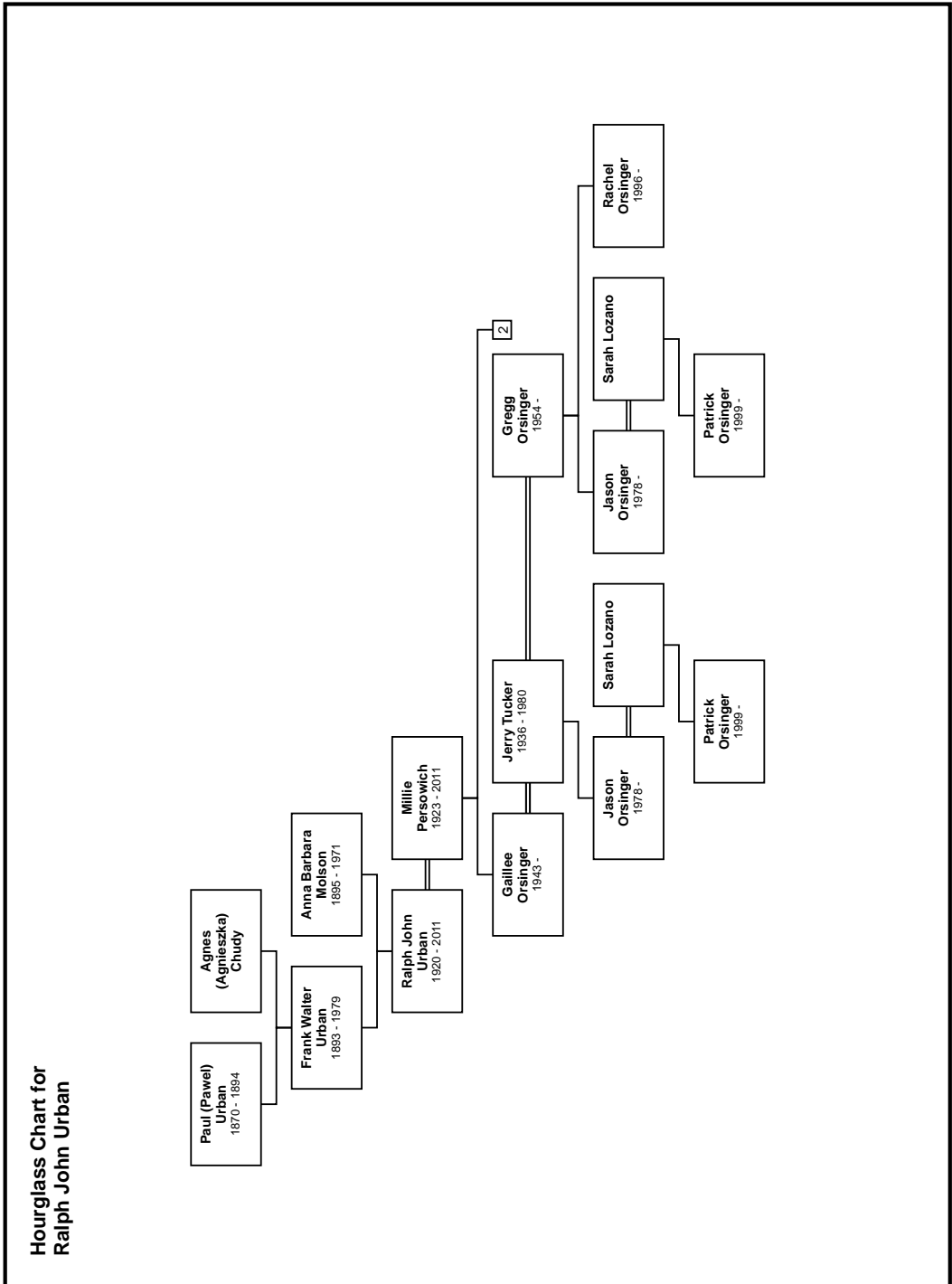
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Hourglass Chart for  
Ralph John Urban

Hourglass Chart – Ralph John Urban

“Because the story of our life  
becomes our life

Because each of us tells  
the same story  
but tells it differently

and none of us tells it  
the same way twice

Because grandmothers looking like spiders  
want to enchant the children  
and grandfathers need to convince us  
what happened happened because of them

and though we listen only  
haphazardly, with one ear,  
we will begin our story  
with the word and”

~Lisel Mueller

I'm a natural storyteller. And I say that not as a statement of how I tell stories or who I am, but rather, how I was raised. Of course I have the English degree and the Theatre degree – which is a different sort of story telling in and of itself. But the desire for words came directly from my family.

My family has always communicated best through written word. My mother and father were both lawyers, which means that they spent long hours in front of a judge or jury weaving their words together in a persuasive, compelling, way. My father still does this. My mother has not for a long time, but she is still responsible for helping me craft my stories. The rhyming scavenger hunts until we were 14, the notes in our lunches, the letters that we wrote when we were hurt or angry at each other.

My favorite story about the letters is when my sister finally decided to come out to my mother. (I had proofread the letter earlier that week at her insistence, learning something that the rest of my family had already pretty much guessed.) She was on her way to visit her girlfriend in Colorado and left a letter neatly folded on my mother's bed telling her *I can't describe why I love Anne and not a guy – because that would be like trying to explain how water tastes. Impossible.* That same day my mother had slipped into Becca's room and left her own letter in her backpack. *I know that you're dating Anne, it read, and I will love you no matter whom you chose to love or marry. I'm ready and willing to listen when you want to share.* Mom had come home from work, Rebecca had gone to pull out homework on the plane and they had both breathed a quiet sigh of relief and acceptance.

Poppy's stories always started with his favorite one liners – and to this day I don't know if they're true – but that doesn't stop me from retelling them again and again,

waiting for the day that Rory or Finnleigh will repeat them back to me. And eventually my own children will hear “I was in the fourth grade for four years – and then they burned the school down to get rid of me.” Maybe these stories will be heard from me, maybe from my own father. And in all those years, they still won’t know what the truth is.

My family, like most families, is a patchwork quilt of people from all over the world, divorced, remarried, deceased, stitched together to tell these amazing stories. At various points I have sat down and sketched out family trees for amused friends showing them the twists and turns that divorces and remarriages have left in my life. Five siblings – only one whole, and at least eleven step aunts and uncles, more if we count my moms stepsiblings. Adopted cousins, deceased great-grandparents and grandparents, and several excellent stories have made all of this worth writing down.

My great-grandparents came from Romania and Russia and Austria, and when great-papa Sam speaks, the tapes my grandfather has of him now a treasured family heirloom, you can hear the heavy accent in his voice. Hearing him speak even though he’s been dead since ’86 is like hearing a ghost back from the dead. Sam is always present in our lives, in our stories anyway, but having that presence morph from a handful of stories and expectations to a fleshed out person demands a different kind of respect. Hearing him cry about disappointing his father when he was a boy is one of the strangest, most touching experiences I’ve ever had.

My maternal grandmother prefers to leave the past in the past – where it belongs she says. But I worry about these stories being lost forever. Even if it is just the story about the time Papa had to go get a very ill Uncle David and met a man with claws for

hands and fought off a rabid dog. Or the forehead-dot riddle, which to this day Nancy cannot answer, but is told at all family get-togethers. Or the time Great-Aunt Babs, and her children went to spread some of their fathers ashes but ended up instead spilling him all over the back of Kathy's van. They ended up having to vacuum parts of him up. None of them can tell that story without breaking into laughter, thinking about how amused he would have been, knowing that part of him was not only in Kathy's car, but her vacuum as well.

These people all made their place in the world, changed it for better or for worse, and their stories deserve to be heard. Poppy and Nana defied the odds with nearly seventy years of marriage, and Great-Papa Sidney lived through the race riots in Chicago with somber acceptance of his pharmacy being destroyed. Rae came home all the way from China to join the wacky family, only to find out that she had a full-blooded sibling living not 45 minutes away with *her* adoptive family. Three generations of lawyers at Northwestern that stopped with Becca and I. Two weddings of my parents to other people, and five funerals - all within a year and a half - of people who left far too soon. Christmas sing-alongs and summer vacations and far too many trips to Oak Park and back have all helped shape who I am. It is this history that led me to UD, to my English and Theatre majors and to this thesis. These stories helped make me who I am, and they deserve to be told, to give a voice to my past, and help me form a future.

Let me tell you what I know about my family. All of this has to be taken with a grain of salt of course. The stories have been passed down from generation to generation and sometimes the details are blurry. For example, the names of my great-grandparents are all from census records where their last name is spelled five different ways with at

least four different pronunciations. Only two of those are correct –Berkovici from when my family first immigrated from Romania and the Berke that it was shortened to sometime during the 1900's – Ellis Island wasn't interested in spelling last names correctly.

Samuel and Dave "Toiv" were young then, just children when their parents Lucy and Charles moved them to the 9<sup>th</sup> District in Chicago. Charles worked hard to keep his family afloat, and Lucy stayed home, ruling with an iron fist. Samuel became a lawyer and married Claire Stein, who had moved here from Russia with her parents Samuel and Rose Stein and three siblings.

Tillie Liszter on the other hand, traveled to America from the Ukraine by herself at the tender age of eleven in 1912. Once here she met up with some family in Chicago, but spent most of her life living in Michigan, married with five kids. One of those five children was Millie, my paternal grandmother.

That of course, is just the beginning of my family history; as far back as I can trace it in these moments.

Each story is more than just that, it's a history of a person too. The rest of the stories can be found within.



## Remembrance

*“For the dead and the living, we must bear witness.”  
— Elie Wiesel*



*Arbeit Macht Frei*

Rory looks at the German words above the entrance before turning to my father who is a few feet behind us. His high school German is rusty, but he remembers enough. Finn is on my hip, playing with my hair.

“Work Makes You Free.” I answer the unspoken question and both girls are surprised when my father merely agrees with my translation. These are words I have seen in books and photographs, words that are burned in my mind forever.

The Holocaust portion of the Dayton Air Force Museum is not large – maybe 7 by 15 feet, a sixteenth of the size of the rest of the rooms, if that. Finn struggles in my arms, interested in getting down, so I ease her to the ground where she surveys everything as only a five year old can.

\*

I don't remember learning about the Holocaust the first time. I remember reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* when I was about Rory's age, ten or eleven, and *The Devil's Arithmetic* a few years before that – a book that I bring to school and back every year. It is faded and well loved, falling apart at the edges, but I cannot part with it yet.

Rory and Finnleigh are my half-sisters though. They are Catholic and Protestant, raised neither, never baptized, and lapsed in all religious education, much like I am. I celebrate the High Holidays, Passover, Easter, Christmas, and Hanukkah. I light the Yahrzeit candle for Uncle David, and stumble through the prayers.

We break the matzo, light the candles, ask the four questions – *Ma nishtanah halailah hazeh mikol haleilot?* - Why is this night different from all other nights?

Finn is peering at the Star of David on the wall, the word JUDEN in angry bold strokes. I wonder when she will connect the star around my neck to religion and world wars and pogroms and the deaths of six million people. Rory hasn't yet. She was only three the last time Rebecca and I lit a menorah at her house, under Kimberly's distasteful gaze.

*“Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam asher kidishanu b'mitz'votav v'tzivanu l'had'lik near shel Hanukkah. Amen.”* – Blessed are you, Lord, our God, sovereign of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to light the candles of Hanukkah. Amen.

We had joined hands with Rory after the prayers, whirling her around the kitchen while we sang “Oh Hanukkah” and she giggled. We don't bring the Jewish holidays to Oak Park anymore.

Instead, I brought them with me to Dayton. It had never occurred to me not to, but it had also never occurred to me that my religion was a party trick. For as long as I have been alive, I have lived in a community where religious beliefs were split almost fifty-fifty. Many of my friends were Jewish, others were Catholic. There was also a healthy mix of Muslims, Mormons, Protestants and Lutherans.

Within my own family we maintain a large mix of religions and races, and I was shocked that once I arrived at Dayton people would exclaim that I was the “first Jewish person they had ever met!” That could be a commentary on the state of Ohio, or the fact that University of Dayton is a private Catholic school, with many students from small towns.

There is no Hillel, few temples, only a deli or two, none of which are close to my house (or have good bagels and lox), and two and a half other Jewish kids that I know of. I had never been defined by my religion in that way before – in fact, in Arlington Heights I was considered an outlier, merely because I was much less religious than most of my friends on any side of the spectrum. Of course when it comes down to it, I could be considered more religious than some of my friends at Dayton, having attended more Catholic Masses than they have in their lives.

\*

The religious breakdown goes something like this: dad was raised Catholic, attended St. Raymond's de Penafort until eighth grade. He has broken one too many commandments and only attends church for weddings or funerals. He never had a desire for his children to be raised Catholic, and didn't seem to care about religion. Mom was raised Jewish, but after her and dad got divorced, lost whatever religious faith she may have still had. When Rebecca and I were born, they decided to let us make our own decisions on religion, which is how Rebecca came to be the quiet atheist she is today and I floated somewhere on the spectrum of Jewish and agnostic. I spent too many summers going to Camp Chi and too many hours reading about the Holocaust to be able to renounce my religious heritage.

Bob came into our family with two grown Catholic children, while he himself was a lapsed Baptist. Kimberly is Protestant, and proud of it. But she too is lapsed, and opposes most religious organizations in general. We celebrate Christmas and Easter, as most erstwhile Christians do, but nothing besides that.

For a while, at Rory's request, my dad and stepmom were attending an Episcopalian Church. Rebecca and I were dragged along one Christmas morning, angry at the interruption of tradition. The Eucharist there is believed to be simply bread and not the Body of Christ, like we were always taught in the Catholic Church. My father told us that, told us to take some bread from our sisters at the children's service. Rebecca and I merely stared at him. We remembered holiday masses all too well and *you can't receive communion* was one of the major rules. Also *please don't kneel girls* from our mother every Easter and Christmas. Of course *sit quietly, don't fidget, do not hit your sister* were all rules as well, but those were also the rules for court and dinners out and life in general. To this day I have never knelt in Church. I have never received communion or confessed my sins, or accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior.

The only psalm I know is 23:4 *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death....* That I know from Saturday mornings in the car with dad rapping Coolio, which was a whole different religious experience than anything that we could have gained in a church or a temple.

I know the words to most of the Jewish prayers though; can recite them without looking, without stumbling over the Hebrew. I thought I would have a Bat Mitzvah for a while, but it was just one of those things that never happened.

\*

Rory is reading *The Book Thief* this year. I recommended it to both her and my stepmother. My copy sits worn and loved on my shelf. It has traveled the world two times over, to Germany and India and back again, and now sits in Dayton, ready for the next adventure. The books I love most do that. *Night* by Elie Wiesel sits on my shelf at home,

because I cannot bear to read it again. Nor would I ever be able to part with it. There are some things that you only need to bear witness to once, but still need to hold onto forever.

This winter, Rory asked our father why they didn't have a menorah in their house, and then asked if they could celebrate Hanukkah. To her, it was all about the presents and the fact that Rebecca and I get to celebrate both – a childish unfairness in her eyes that we got eight more days of presents.

My father tried to explain, but I simply bundled her into my car one day and drove to the Skokie Holocaust Museum. Yad Vashem hung their cattle car from the ceiling so it could be seen and remembered, but so that no Jew would ever have to set foot in one again. At the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C., we wove our way through the cattle car, holding hands and our breaths, careful not to disturb the ghosts that resided in it.

In Skokie, though, you are given the option on whether you want to enter the cattle car or not. I stood outside of it, hands balled into fists. Rory stepped inside, curious and as I watched her, my throat tightened. The field trip had been my idea, a way to explain that the holidays were not about presents, but that we lit the candles to say *never forget*, to raise our chins up defiantly and say *we survived and we remember and honor all of those who didn't*.

She was almost twelve at the time, and as we made our way through the museum, I explained the war, and the death marches, and the fact that people were murdered simply for what they believed in or what they looked like. We watched the videos of the survivors, stared at the pictures of the neo-Nazis march on Skokie, with its 7,000

Holocaust survivors, listened to speeches by Hitler. She was shocked at some moments, upset at others and questioned how people just *let* all of this happen. There are still parts of me that are unable to comprehend that she did not know all of this already. But she is not asked to remember, not asked to carry this burden of numbers and stars and cattle cars.

Our family was already in America at that time. My great-great grandparents left Russia to escape the pogroms. The other side left Romania in search of a better life. They made it to America in the late 1800's and the early 1900's, when things were bad in a different way.

Great-Aunt Babs, all 88 years of her, recalled a family trip to Canada in the 40's where there were still signs at hotels saying *No Jews Allowed*. All these years later, the harsh sting seemed to have faded, as she didn't seem bothered by it. Merely sipped her coffee reflectively.

I'm sure that if I traced the family tree far enough sideways I would be able to find family members who were there, cousins and aunt and uncles removed time and time over whose names are now forgotten, become merely a number to most. But that is not the important part of the story. The important part is remembering.

\*

When my now ex-boyfriend told me the latkes would be better with ketchup because they were like hash browns, I knew that that was the beginning of the end. It sounds like part of a cheesy romance novel, but its true. Latkes can be eaten with sour cream or applesauce. They can be eaten plain. But they can never, *ever* be eaten with ketchup.

My religion is not something to be shown to other people like a prize. It is not meant to be sung *at* me as we walk through the streets of an entirely different kind of ghetto, like I should be proud that they know the words to *Hava Nagila* while drunk on a Friday night. I should not be told I'm going to hell because of my religion, (or lack thereof) and when I eye people up and down and tell them that making stereotypical money jokes to me aren't funny, I usually get a stumbled wide-eyed *god its just a joke!*

I was named Jessica, for its meaning, *God Beholds*. But I know, with a sense of irony that *Jessica* comes from Shakespeare, from the *Merchant of Venice*. (*I didn't even make the connection until you told me that*, my mother murmured last time I questioned her) the daughter of a Jewish villain who runs away with a Catholic man, whose soul is in question the entire play. And I cannot be that Jessica, the one who turns her back on her old life, a betrayal of family and faith.

I watched with a kind of spiteful glee when my college friends told me that they would grate the onions for the latkes. I had spent the morning bemoaning the burning sensation and *really Jessica it couldn't be that bad*, they had all insisted. I spent the rest of the day giggling when they had to open the windows and run outside because grating onions is much worse than chopping them. I made matzo ball soup for *Yom Kippur* and watched a table full of ten friends poke at the food before consuming it with lightning speed. There was no soup left at the end of the night, and I made sure they all dipped their pieces of apple in honey for a sweet New Year.

I apologized three times like I was supposed to, and let the weight of my sins wash away into the New Year. I love New Years Eve, but I also like the quiet grace that comes with the holiday *Yom Kippur*, the day of atonement, that is meant to be about



forgiving others and forgiving yourself – wiping the slate clean, so to speak, before beginning a new year.

\*

We don't spend the day in temple on Yom Kippur. Instead, my mother takes us hiking and we spend the day in quiet reflection with nature. By quiet reflection I mean there is a lot of dancing, picture taking and goofing off, but it's our version of religion.

Our religion has always been more of a chose your own adventure novel. And just like when you were a kid, you can backtrack and change the adventure if the ending isn't to your liking.

We write our own stories, always have.

Hanukkah happens over eight nights, and we celebrate all of them, lighting the menorah and saying the prayers, dancing around the kitchen and exchanging gifts. We do two nights of latkes – one for grandma, and one for Papa and Nancy. The candles flicker against the lights on the Christmas tree, and we let them burn themselves down to their wicks, waiting for the day that they will burn for eight nights straight.

Christmas Eve at Gaillee's house we rush through the front door to find our cups. They are small mugs with the 12 Days of Christmas on them, and although Rebecca usually goes for *2 Turtle Doves* I am much more likely to try for *9 Ladies Dancing*. Dad will go for *5 Golden Rings* because he is the man of the family now, and it used to be Poppy's cup. After all of them have been chosen, we are rounded up into the living room where we dutifully sing the entirety of the *12 Days of Christmas* up and down and back again.

Dad's first wife, Mary, sits next to me during this and bemoans the fact that she is still doing this, still singing and attending Christmas dinner with the Urban family some thirty-odd years later. I point out that she has been divorced from this family long enough to not have to attend – she could be with her family, or her husband Dave's, but she just smiles at me.

There were a few years we spent in Michigan with Kimberly's family, doing the drive on Christmas Day back to Chicago, eating at 24-Hour Denny's or nearly empty Chinese Restaurants, before they finally realized what a drag it was to be a kid spending your Christmas morning in the car for five hours, your presents from Santa two states away.

Christmas morning we do on our own now, just the six of us, and then our extended family comes over in their pajamas. We have lasagna and play games, the little girls show off their new toys. It is our responsibility to do the dishes, Rebecca, Rachel and I. I'm not sure at what age or location this task became ours, but we do it without malice. Cousinly bonding, if you will. Rory last year sat in the kitchen playing on her tablet. We made her dry the silverware. This year she might be old enough to dry the fine china. We'll see.

Until dad got remarried, my mom did the Easter egg hunts at our house every year. It was a huge deal, waking up to see what the Easter Bunny had brought us, but I was so bad at finding things that mom used to label the eggs so Rebecca couldn't take them all. Then we would get dressed and dad would take us to Easter Mass and Easter Brunch.

The first year we spent the night at my dad's apartment for Easter, they forgot to hide the eggs. Rebecca and I were shoved unceremoniously out into the hallway of the apartment complex with a box of munchkins from Dunkin' Donuts, the weight of disappointment thick in our mouths.

Sometime around then we would go to Passover at Grandma's. The last Passover we all had together, Uncle David was still alive. So was Aunt Ros. They brought Mia, Ros' granddaughter, and she sat at the kids' table with us. She was seven, but we had been doing this for so long that even Aviva, who was only nine at the time, had forgotten to warn her about the water.

At one point during the services, a small bowl of salt water is passed around and each person must dip a piece of parsley in it to symbolize the tears and sweat of the slaves in Egypt. *She-b'khol ha-leylot 'anu 'okhlin sh'ar y'ragot ha-laylah ha-zeh, kulo maror* – On all other nights we eat all kinds of vegetables and herbs, but on this night we eat bitter vegetables. The trick is to only dip the tips of the parsley in for a quick second, and then eat the parsley right away. It helps ease the bitterness.

No one had told Mia that though. The look on her face made us all laugh. If only we had known how bitter our tears would be that year.

But that was *before* and although our lives may be a chose your own adventure novel, no one can bring back the dead.

*Oseh shalom bimromav, hu ya-aseh shalom aleniun v'al kol-yisrael, v'imru: amen.* He who creates peace in His celestial heights, may He create peace for us and for all of Israel; and say, Amen.

You say the Mourners Kaddish for 30 days when someone dies - eleven months if it's a parent. The Kaddish is meant to focus on the present, on the future, on all of the gifts that God has given *in spite* of the death of a loved one. The Kaddish is for peace and life, for repairing ones relationship with God. Not for mourning. Which is ironic given its name. And probably why it is so difficult to say – how does one thank God for death?

Passover was always my favorite. Uncle Steven, who knows all the songs by heart, singing, still the boy who wanted to be an opera singer. Uncle David teasing Aunt Ros about her pronunciation all these years later. The frantic search for the afikomin. Mom and Aunt Liz refusing to let Grandma do dishes, even as she argued with them up and down that *this is her household and she can do what she likes!*

This is the way my religion has come to be, just like my family. We are a mashed up patchwork from all over the world; a somewhat tattered quilt and we all bring our own traditions to the table. And there are different types of families. There is my immediate family, the one I have spent all this time talking about. But there are also those people who will never be related to us who we have adopted as our own, who we bring our traditions to. That's why this year, while I slave over latkes, my roommates will be working on their own family traditions and meals. Dinner will be a mix of Irish and Jewish and Greek and broke-student food. And green bean casserole of course. Green bean casserole – the Midwestern unifier. There will be Hanukkah gelt to mix in with the Christmas candy and maybe stockings, hung by the chimney with care.

Every family has a burden to bear, has something to remember. For me it is six million people come and gone before me. But it is also the words to all of the prayers in

Hebrew. It is Uncle David's laughter and pebbles on far too many graves. It is the haunting picture of David, Ros and Jeanne all beaming, all dead less than a year later. It is the way Grandma talks about Papa Sidney and his store, her eyes saying everything her voice, hard as steel, will not. Sam's voice cracking as he talks about his father, no longer the tough lawyer everyone loved to hate. It is Poppy trailing off while singing *Polka Dots and Moon Beams* and how after 70 years of marriage he still called his wife his girlfriend. How Tilly came to America by herself at 12 and if that's not absolutely *terrifying* then I don't know what is. It's the dot-on-forehead riddle that will eventually puzzle more than just Nancy. It is everything I need to remember to pass down to my sisters and eventually my children.

I may be the one who has a way with words in the family, but I'm not the only one who has a voice.

\*

I tell Finn about the Star of David and that the words on it identify people as Jewish, and that they were put in jail because of that. Kimberly has tried to drag her away from the exhibit once already, but Finn is enraptured. I stand by silently, letting her comprehend what little she can understand about things that I still can't wrap my head around some days. Finn doesn't have an inside voice, so even though she has clamored into my arms again, it is still an almost shouted question when she says, "Jessica, were the Jewish people *bad*?"

The easy answer is of course a vehement 'no.' But I try to expand, stumbling to explain that people on two different sides of a war always think they are doing the right

thing. It's hard to say that while Finn is staring at a man in a concentration camp, skin and bones, clearly almost dead from starvation.

“But what did he *do*?” She finally asks.

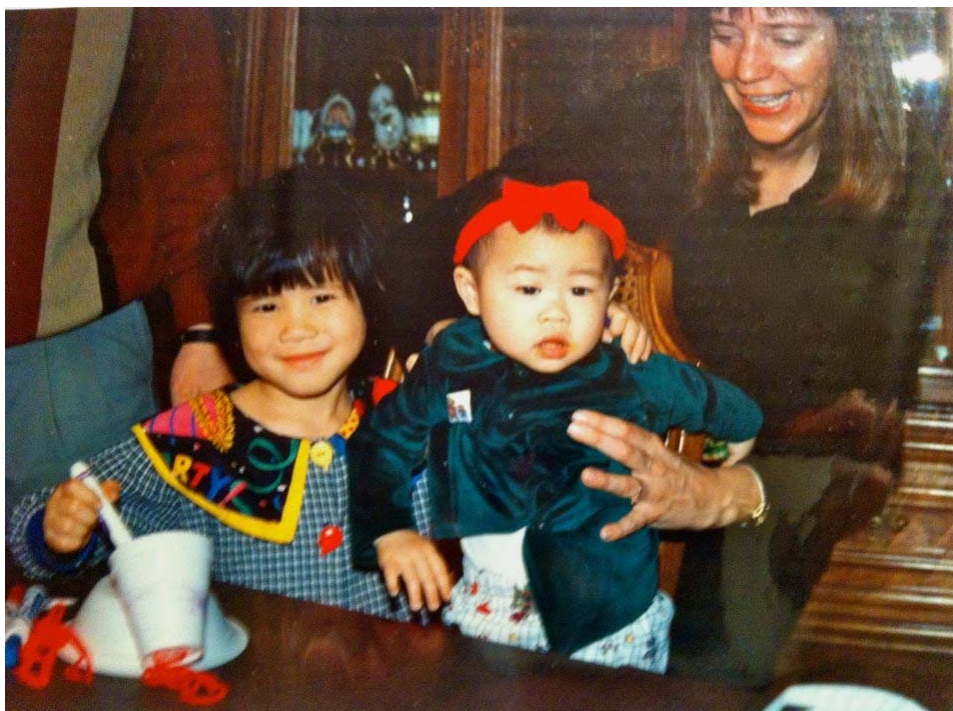
“He lived,” I offer.

*Tell Me Again – Rae’s Story*

*“Tell me again about the night I was born. Tell me again how you would adopt me and  
be my parents.*

*Tell me again about the first time you held me in your arms.”*

*~ Jamie Lee Curtis*



Rachel looks nothing like the rest of the family. She is a tangle of long limbs, dark hair and almond eyes. When Rebecca and I pose with her for pictures, she hovers a few inches above us. There were adoption books upon adoption books before she came home from China, but I barely remember any of them. Except for the one called ‘Tell Me Again About The Night I Was Born’ which was all about a mom and a dad rushing to the hospital to meet their newborn baby. Of course, that was a story about a domestic adoption and not the story of my cousin who was left in a rice paddy field. No one got a phone call about Rachel and rushed to see her. Rachel didn’t come home until she was ten months old.

Rachel Joi Ling Orsinger – just ‘Ling’ originally, was found abandoned when she was only days old. The story here isn’t told often – it’s been collected from vague pieces of childhood memories. And really, it’s not my story to tell. Rachel was found along a railroad track, which may have been next to a rice paddy field, or maybe it was in a rice paddy field that was next to a railroad track. The point is, her parents left her. No note, no name, no nothing. They – “they” being the orphanage - declared her birthday September 2<sup>nd</sup>, but no one actually knows if she really *was* born September 2<sup>nd</sup>, and that’s the part that always strikes me the hardest. No one will ever be able to fill in those blanks for her.

Our family is a mash up. Not only of cultures but also of ages. Rachel’s older brother would technically be her ‘half’ brother. Jason was born a Tucker, but his dad Jerry died of cancer when Jason was three, and years later he was adopted by Rachel’s dad, Gregg, so he became an Orsinger as well. Jason was born in ’78, seventeen years before Rachel was even a thought. Rachel, Rebecca and I are each three years apart from each other, but our youngest family member, my half-sister, is sixteen years younger than



me, six years younger than *her* full sister. Jason's son Patrick is only three years Rachel's junior. His grandmother – Rachel's mother, mostly raised him and Patrick has always been the closest thing to a 'real' sibling that Rae has had.

But I digress. Back to China.

\*

It was 1996, right in the midst of the rush to adopt all the "China girls" – the unwanted daughters that came out of the One Child Law. Gaillee and Gregg Orsinger anxiously awaited their travel confirmation to get their daughter. That was where Paul and Paula Gottemoller came in. They were adopting from the same orphanage – a little girl they would name Jennifer. The Gottemoller's came home with videos and photographs of a smiling baby Rachel for the Orsinger's.

Every year for almost twenty years my aunt threw a Christmas Party. It was always held a few weeks before Christmas and these parties were a long-standing tradition until Nana and Poppy got sick. The adults drank eggnog and put lights on the big evergreen tree outside. All the cousins and their friends would make ornaments and cards to hang on that outside tree while waiting for Santa to come. In a few years the tree would be struck by lightning and the top half would disappear. There was food and laughter and towards the end of the night my aunt would line up the children and we would dutifully sing a variety of Christmas songs – *Santa Clause is Coming to Town*, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, *Frosty the Snowman* – you name it, we sang it. After about four or five songs and some Christmas cheering, Santa would appear.

'Santa' varied – it was usually my Uncle Gregg but it was once many years ago my mothers father and has been a variety of family friends since then. Santa always had

presents for everyone, even the adults. We would all obligingly line up for a photo after Santa's visit, bundled up to our eyes in winter wear. Some years it was so cold that you cannot make out who was who in the picture, and can barely see noses or eyes, just small children looking like Randy from *A Christmas Story*. Rae's "China Sisters" would run around with her, dodging the older kids with ease. Throughout the years the number of China Sisters would multiply and divide until there were only a handful of girls and then ultimately it was just Rachel and Jennifer.

I still remember being a child and one of her friends being openly shocked that Rachel was adopted, asking if Rachel *knew*. My aunt looks much more like my sister than anyone else in the family, the same face and eyes, hair a perpetual dirty blonde even though she is in her seventies. In the years since, it has become an ongoing joke.

"Look what we have to look forward to Rae, an entire family of drunks and heart attacks. Our futures look bright."

"That's your and Becca's problem, *I'm* adopted." This is then accompanied by a lot of shouting and wide-eyed looks of *really?* It was never a secret – Rae's adoption papers hang in the foyer of the home, framed. She looks nothing like the rest of the family, so even if it had been a secret, it wouldn't have stayed that way for long.

\*

I don't remember the day when Rachel was brought home, but everyone else does and there are photos to prove it. It's a story that I've heard so many times over, I feel like I actually do remember bits and pieces of it, but I know that's not true.

It had been before 9/11 and so we had been allowed to wait gate side for our new cousin with our "Welcome Home" signs ready to greet this child we had heard so much

about. Rachel screamed her way through the airport. Her face was bright red and it darkened every time she shrieked. Apparently this was what most of the plane ride was like. My aunt and uncle expecting a docile, sleeping baby and getting all of Rae's spitfire and passion instead. It's about the same now that she's a teenager. Two older parents wanting peace, and Rachel, ever so defiant.

Now that she's almost a college student, she's mellowed some, but she's just as stubborn. I claim that's a family trait, nature vs. nurture and all that. My aunt usually ignores me. *She* was a model child. No one is around anymore to dispute that claim.

Gaillee is her father's daughter, which means that she stops and talks to anyone who is willing to listen. It's one of the reasons that our holidays are always a surprising mash up of people. Thanksgiving this year will house 18 people. I am related to seven of them. Dad has always said that the best thing to do is to make your own family. My aunt has always agreed with him, like brother, like sister. It's probably part of the reason that my aunt stayed in contact with the Gottermoller's so long. She wanted Rachel to have that connection to another girl from China, and so she clung tightly, tenaciously to it.

\*

My aunt has always insisted that Jennifer and Rachel look alike. The family has learned at this point, raise eyebrows, but bite tongues. They know better than to argue with my aunt about such silly things. It never ends well for anyone.

My aunt reasons: The two girls came from the same orphanage a few months apart. We reply: They are about three years apart in age, and were found *years* apart. She claims that the two girls look alike, and although we scan their faces for similarities, I see us in Rachel instead. Her posture, the way she answers a question with an eye role and an

indignant hair toss. This is so much more of our family, more of the nature vs. nurture argument that is often had. The consistency is that they were both girls, abandoned by parents who could only have one child.

It is 2009 before my aunt finally gets her way. DNA tests for the two girls, she tells us smugly over dinner. The Gottermoller's fought against it, but finally gave in, extracting a promise from my aunt. Once the test results came back negative (and they would, *of course* they would) she would drop the whole thing. Rachel rolls her eyes uninterested. It was merely a cheek swab and not a story worth telling.

The DNA test gets lost temporarily. We laugh. Of course it does. My aunt begins to hound the testing center, calling twice a week until finally they call her back. They have found the DNA, don't worry. Don't call them *they'll call her*. We chortle. That line won't work on her. They do call her though, and it is her turn to laugh. This time, at all of us, as well as Jennifer's parents.

"Mrs. Orsinger," the DNA Test Center calls. She tells us the man on the phone was near tears after the story. My aunt has always found the best way to get what she wants is to go right for their heartstrings. "Their DNA is a match. 90%. The only way that they can be related is as full biological siblings." Chaos erupts.

\*

There was a party after all was said and done. We milled around my aunt's house, grinning and shrugging, *I guess they do look alike after all. Their cheekbones, their eyes, how they hold themselves*. Their laughs, startled bursts straight from their chests, had us turning to stare in surprise. It's easier to find similarities once you're actually looking for them.

Rachel and Jennifer stood side by side at various points of the party, allowing their family members to stare at them intently. The families have dragged out baby photos for the occasion, and so they are being investigated from adoption to present, being told of their similarities and differences in a way that Rebecca and I never have, because we have always known each other for what we are.

Rae and Jennifer smiled politely the whole time, letting elderly family members pinch cheeks and accepting long drawn out hugs, but confusion was evident in their eyes. The DNA test was supposed to be just that. Everything was supposed to just end there. At the party people kept asking what it felt like to have a sibling, a real sibling who shared your blood and unknown parents. Both would shrug awkwardly and let out half laughs. They are three years apart, and although they have known each other for years they are no longer the so-called “China Sisters”, but rather honest to god siblings. Call it fate, or luck, or whatever you would like, but really, what are the chances?



*De jure – Concerning the Law*

But there is one way in this country in which all men are created equal- there is one human institution that makes a pauper the equal of a Rockefeller, the stupid man the equal of an Einstein, and the ignorant man the equal of any college president. That institution, gentlemen, is a court.”

~ Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*



I think occasionally that I grew up at the Cook County Courthouse. It looms on the corner of 26<sup>th</sup> and California, an imposing building for those who didn't grow up with it, didn't grow up with the law on their side. We have always called it 26<sup>th</sup> Street, never feeling the need to specify it as the courthouse – after all, what else would it be? I have clear recollections of sitting in court rooms with my father and my older sister, bored out of my mind thinking *don't fidget, don't hit Rebecca – dad will be so mad if you and Rebecca start fighting in the court room. Sit up straight. Don't talk. Don't read. Don't lie down on the court bench.* A million and one *do not*s – it might have been the 'don'ts' that made me choose not to go into law. Theatre is much less structured in that sense. It has always been a question of what rules you can break, what magic you can create at the drop of the hat and not how well you know the rules and can argue them.

Let me tell you – bond court is boring. Bond court is Saturday mornings of people going up before the judge and either being granted or denied bail. Then they set a court date and move on. All morning. Lather. Rinse. Repeat.

I have paced the courtrooms with my father, sat in on murder trials and drug cases and multiple juries. The other lawyers used to call me 'counselor' when I tagged along and tease, "starting them young, eh Urban?"

My father would always laugh and place an arm around my shoulders. "Maybe not this one, but her sister, definitely."

Rebecca and I are the children of lawyers. Our half-sisters are also the children of lawyers, but not in the same way. My father always thought it would be much better if one of his older two daughters went to law school because of our legacy. Our mother was a lawyer as was her father and his father before him. If I had gone to Law School and I

had gone to Northwestern I would have been a fourth generation lawyer and a third generation Northwestern Wildcat.

Instead, I go to a private Catholic School and major in theatre and English. My sister went to school in Vermont and is going to be a social worker. At least she currently interns at the courthouse.

This, of course, was back when I only *had* one sister. Rebecca is my only full sibling, the only one who shares both a mother and a father with me. We have four other siblings total - two much younger half-sisters and two older stepsiblings. Becca and I share the smallest age difference and the same cheekbones. The same sense of sarcasm and dry humor. We haven't been mistaken for twins in awhile but we look the most like sisters.

That's not why she's my favorite though. It's because we share the closet thing to an identical history that any of the siblings do. Really that anyone in my family does. Our parents divorced when we were young and so it was Rebecca who traveled from house to house or state to state with me. With Rebecca whom I shared a room. Rebecca, who, with a simple gesture can complete my *remember when's...* Rebecca is my favorite not because of who she is, but because she was there.

But we are sisters after all, so we fight and talk about superfluous things, or don't talk at all. Sometimes our only contact for months is snapchats back and forth. But we have *always* been the children of lawyers – the children who refused to follow the path that had been so clearly laid out for them. And so, the topic had been on my mind for a while, and when I asked Rebecca why both of us had refused to go to law school –



especially she who everyone had just assumed *would* - she shrugged, a frown tugging at her lips.

*Guilty conscience.* I had asked if she had meant that she had a guilty conscience about not doing what everyone had expected of her, but she had frowned again and written *what if I'd lost?*

That was an answer in and of itself.

\*

The story of my father's journey into lawyer-dom is simple really. At age ten he decided to go into criminal law. That's it. That's the end of the story. Of course its much more in-depth than that. It's a tale of Clarence Darrow and the Scopes Trial and my father believing in right and wrong and *innocent until proven guilty*. When you spin it that way, it almost becomes the better story. My father became a lawyer because he genuinely believes that people have rights.

I didn't gain a love of law from him. Rebecca inhaled information about Clarence Darrow, about Scopes, and I looked at the Norman Rockwell on his wall, the one of Ruby Bridges, "*The Problem We All Live With*" and started reading history books instead. My father majored in History before he went to Law School though, so I guess there's that.

Because my dad hasn't lived with me since I was two, it doesn't matter what state I'm in - I talk to him almost every day. My college friends think it's insane. That I'm twenty two years old and my dad still calls to ask about my day, but they are all good Catholics with parents who have been quietly married for twenty plus years and multiple siblings and I'm on the other side of the spectrum- divorced everything and Jewish halves and siblings who don't share an eye color let alone a spec of blood.

Almost every phone call I hear about his clients, who after all this time have become almost like family to me. Rebecca remembers him crying when Moe-Moe died, and I remember Bond Court on Saturday's and picking up money from clients at McDonald's in Harlem and Cicero. We remember hiding in Judge's chambers and being fed candy on the sly and countless people who bought Girl Scout cookies from us every year, and now buy them from my little sisters. The stories of my childhood come complete with gang signs and *yes my father has a street name, they call him Lucky.*

Or the time that he made a woman cry in court and admit her testimony was false while Rebecca and I stared at him wide-eyed the rest of the day. *You made that woman cry dad! Couldn't you have proven her testimony false while being nice?* My father still tells that story to all of his friends with a sigh and a shake of his head. *Can you believe that they're mine?*

And how I almost cried when they found Knows shot and dead three months ago because he was one of the men with whom I had grown up. Even now my friends will say, *tell the story of Labar, or the weed-rito, or any of the other million and one things that you wouldn't believe, unless you knew they actually happened.* My father's stories have become my stories without me noticing, even if 26<sup>th</sup> Street is not my court.

\*

My parents met in law school. They were both attending Kent Law School in the city at the time - Tort Law, with Richard Convisor. He referred to all of his students by their last names, and finally in class one day my father asked 'Does Miss Berke have a first name?' Convisor played matchmaker or devil's advocate, or maybe just lawyer turned professor, and had the two of them debate on cases in the classroom. Professor

Convisor would set up a case and then call on my mother to stand up and defend her position. After that he would ask my dad if he agreed or disagreed with her and he would also have to defend his position. It seems almost funny now, that they got their start arguing with each other, because that's how they met their ending too – constant arguing.

Dad used to ask mom to go out and smoke with him after class – remember this was the '80's and they hadn't decided that cigarettes would kill you yet. My mother had a boyfriend at the time. Eventually they broke up though, and my parents went on their first date – dinner at Su Casa and then, because they were law students after all, an open panel discussion on Prison Reform. I still laugh about that part of the story. Other nights they used to go to the candy store and fill up bags for their three-hour evening classes so they would have something to snack on. They married in '85 shortly after graduation. That's really about all I could say about their marriage. Both are much more willing to share now that all of this time has passed, but at this point we have learned not to ask. Dad moved out in '95, two weeks before Christmas.

My mother has no lost love for the law. It doesn't fire her up the way it does my father. I don't hear stories about the people she helped. I hear about Buzy at my grandfather's firm who expected her to make him coffee and eyed her up and down suggestively and didn't expect to get a dose of my mother at her finest – hot tempered and not at all afraid to let it show. Even twenty years later he still avoids her.

My mother spent a semester interning at Jane Addams School of Social Work, from where my sister will soon graduate. The kids she worked with called her 'Snow White' and walked her to the bus stop every day 'just in case.' She loved it there. Loved helping the kids, loved feeling like she was making a difference in their lives.

Papa wasn't so sure though, about his only daughter working as a social worker, working in the not-so-nice parts of the city, so he asked one of his judge friends to talk to her about her plans to go into social work. This nameless, faceless judge convinced my mother that social work was not her forte, was terrifying, would only burn her out and leave her feeling helpless. Papa won that round, even if that wasn't his intention.

It boils down to this: my mother became a lawyer because a family friend scared her out of being a social worker – the irony of course being, that that is the field my sister now works in. When Rebecca told everyone that she was going into social work, neither of my parents protested. In fact, everyone in my family openly encouraged me to go into theatre, a field that is known for its hard and wandering lifestyle, because its what I wanted. I believe that there will always be a part of my mother that wishes she had gone on to do what she loved – which is why she was so welcoming about her children's career choices when her parents were not. Maybe we could have been a family of social workers and pharmacists instead. But it didn't work out that way.

My mom decided shortly after that conversation that since neither of her brothers were going into law, she should follow in her father and grandfather's footsteps. Writing the briefings and doing the paperwork she enjoyed – it was the public speaking that she hated the most. I really am my mothers' daughter in more ways than one. She no longer is practicing law, has not for many years, but there is still a part of her that will always be a lawyer.

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Perry Berke always just *knew* he was going to become a lawyer. He knew that law was in his blood, and that it was a good job. So he did what was expected of him, and

graduated from Northwestern as a lawyer. He's retired now but he spent almost sixty years as a Personal Injury Lawyer, part of Baskin, Server and Berke.

My grandfather is many things – musically talented, a comedian, a songwriter. It is that side of the family that presents Hanukkah presents with poems written to the recipient and recited in front of the entire family. Papa says that the only other job that he ever contemplated was Golf Pro – something that although he loved golfing, probably would never have happened.

The only son of Samuel Berke, and the oldest child, Perry must have felt a heavy weight on his shoulders to do his father proud. To this day he claims that it never crossed his mind to do anything else, and also never crossed his mind that his father would be disappointed if he didn't follow in his footsteps and go to law school. Law was a good field to go into – people had steady jobs and made good money doing it. Times were different then though. He graduated in '54, 22 years old and already married.

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Samuel Berke is the one who started all of this. He was a lawyer, a judge, and a magistrate in the high courts. Really, pick a job a lawyer could have, and he held it.

In the end, most things can be traced back to Sam. Of course, the story goes back much farther than Sam, back to Romania and back even before that, but Sam was the catalyst for change. It was Sam who was the first lawyer in the family, Sam who was a Berke and not a Bercovici and Sam who on the Census Records is noted as speaking English while both of his parents only knew Yiddish.

Sam became a lawyer, because it was easy, in a sense. It was wartime, and John Marshall Law was one of the only schools offering night classes. It took him three years

of night classes, three evenings a week, before he graduated. During that time he worked six days a week at a music store and spent his time off courting his soon-to-be wife Claire. They married just weeks after he graduated from Law School, although he wouldn't be sworn in for another few months.

Sam did not really enjoy public speaking, at least at first, but he learned to speak up and think on his feet pretty quickly. He became a law clerk, working for little money. Shortly after he came back from his honeymoon though, he ran into a man named Roy Barnett, a family friend, who was a law clerk for a man named Ben Cohen. Roy had just quit, and Ben Cohen was looking for a new law clerk. So Sam went right to Ben Cohen's office, and waited around all afternoon for him.

Sam was not making much then as a law clerk, only \$15 a week. Since he was newly married, his pay was going to be raised to \$18 a week; after all, he now had a wife (and eventually would have children) to support on top of himself. However, he told Ben Cohen that he could start tomorrow and was making \$25 a week at his other job, which Ben took at face value. The two of them got along very well, and Sam was constantly busy. Ben represented plenty of mob guys, so they were always getting business from a large group of people. After two months of working for Ben Cohen, Sam was earning \$50 a week.

Ben Cohen either died or retired, or just plain moved on from his mafia dealings. Sam worked for himself for a while, but in the early 1930's he was appointed Master of Chancery for Judge Robson. He was one of the youngest people to ever hold that position, being in his early thirties at the time. Master of Chancery's are no longer a part of the court system, but they were for many years. Sam's task basically involved doing

research on all of the cases that passed through Judge Robson's court and recommending sentencing. This is the first job that Perry remembers his father having, and he held it for many years. As a Master of Chancery during the depression he made quite a bit of money, which he carefully put away – never would Sam forget growing up in the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward with little money but a lot of love. In the late 40's Robson was appointed to the Superior Court of Cook County, and Sam went back to being a lawyer for a few more years, working for himself.

In 1962, Sam Berke was appointed as a bankruptcy judge in the U.S. District Court. It was a position he would hold until his stroke ten years later. The stroke caused him to lose the use of his left arm and hand. He walked with a cane for the rest of his life. Sam was still involved though. He was the receiver in the dissolution of City Savings & Loan Association, which basically means that he oversaw the Association disbanding and made sure everything went well. Sam had not necessarily started off loving the law, but by the time he died in 1987 he had been a happy and successful member of the law courts for over 40 years.

We're not lawyers, my sister and I. But times are different now, and our parents are different than their parents before them. My grandfather usually speaks of his father as 'Judge Samuel Berke' the man he knew and loved, but above all, respected. Perry became a lawyer to please his father, just as Sam became a lawyer to please his father before that.

I know that my father always wished that one of us would become a lawyer, spent years half expecting it from Rebecca. But, as both of our parents will tell anyone, Rebecca and I have never done anything, like declare our majors, to please only our

parents. It goes against our natures. We can be stubborn and argumentative. When asked who we get it from, both parent will exclaim 'Not I!' Of course, it comes from both of them. With that many lawyers in the family, it would be astonishing if it didn't.

Everyone in the family always talks about Sam's strict nature, his love of the law, his seriousness in and out of the courtroom. Rarely does anyone talk of the man who wasn't Judge Samuel Berke. I like to picture him though, a gangly awkward twenty-something, newly married to the love of his life, earnestly lying to Ben Cohen in his office, hoping that he could make a name for himself and support his new wife. And I like to think that, in that moment when Ben Cohen sized up Samuel Berke and took his hand, there was the tiniest bit of a spark which called out to Sam, one that said '*yes, you do belong here. And this will be the start of a beautiful legacy.*'





Polka Dots and Moonbeams



I almost imagine it as a Hunger Games type moment. The entire village gathered together in their Sunday finest, faces tense. *Is it me? Is it my child? I hope it is. But if it is who will be around to help me out?* And then the collective sigh of relief or disappointment when the voice reads *Tillie Liszter*.

A tiny 11-year-old girl with sharp blue eyes and light brown hair. No one volunteering as tribute or anything like that. It's not the Hunger Games. Instead, the small Ukrainian Village is sending one of their own to America.

It was a carefully thought out decision by the people in the village. They would send one person to America every year; one who they hoped would achieve great things. I have no idea what the criteria was, or if it was even anything specific. You couldn't be married with children of course, and you couldn't be too old – that would never work. And you had to be strong enough to survive the voyage to America. Otherwise, what was the point? But how did they end up deciding that this eleven year old girl, this woman who my aunt called 'tiny grandma' for her small stature was the one who should travel to America that year?

*Goodbye! Good luck! Follow your dreams. And above all make your family proud.*

Tillie Liszter was only eleven when she arrived in America. It was 1912 and she was alone. No one traveled with her. The family is pretty sure she stayed with a cousin in Chicago for a while, but although the records have her arriving in 1912, she does not reappear until the 1930 census, married with five kids. There are a lot of blanks to be filled in, but no information to be found.

There is a lot to be said for the ideal of following the American dream. Tillie Liszter was my great-grandmother on my father's side. She married John Persowich, and they had Millie Persowich, my grandmother, whom we called Nana Millie. She married Ralph Urban, and that's where this story really begins. Most things before that have been lost, due to old age and death, and the fact that my family doesn't always like to talk about the past.

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The best thing that my paternal grandparents ever did was love each other. My mother's side of the family is fraught with tension and harsh words and stories that call out to be heard because they make everyone else feel alive. The maternal side of the family is interesting because they wear their humanity on their sleeves and in their eyes. It is not difficult to look at them and find stories upon stories. Their stories pull people in. It is easy to paint pictures of that family, because they always spoke the loudest, always had the most to say. To this day I fall to stories of mom and her family. Dad's side has always been much more silent.

Their stories are human too, of course. But they don't ignite the same fire, the same passion. The people who would have told me those stories are long dead. But, even if they were still alive, I don't know what they would say - if anything at all. My grandparents did not like to talk about the past. It could be because no one ever asked them. Or it could be because the past was painful, or so long ago. These are questions I will never have answers to.

My father is fifteen years younger than his two siblings, the baby of the family by far – a shocking surprise to everyone at the time. By the time I was born in 1993 Nana

and Poppy were in their seventies. Grandma and Papa, my moms parents, were only in their sixties. And although mom's side is full of cancer and heart attacks and blocked arteries, dad's side merely seems to slowly fade away until old age claims them and their bodies fail. When my grandparents died in 2011, my aunt asked me to write a eulogy. I was the one with words at that point. Rebecca was going to read it for me, because I wouldn't be there to do it myself. I sat and stared at my computer screen for ages before I finally wrote anything at all.

How can you write about people that you feel as though you never met? It seemed practically impossible at the time. I never *knew* my grandparents. They did not die before I was born, but I never *knew* them. Poppy died when I was eighteen and Nana followed six months later, just weeks shy of my nineteenth birthday. They were in their nineties at that point, not really present and hadn't been for some time.

A snowstorm, one that stopped all incoming flights and left people stranded up and down Lake Shore Drive, cancelled the memorial ceremony my aunt and father had planned for their parents. My aunt called it "nana's last act of defiance." When they started planning their own funerals, Nana made my aunt promise that they would not, under *any* circumstances, have a memorial ceremony for the two of them. So although we grieved, we did not sit around and laugh and tell stories about Nana and Poppy like we wanted. Not that there seemed to be that many great stories to tell.

It is tradition at *shivas* that everyone get up and tell stories, unlike at Catholic funerals where that is done in front of everyone at the actual mass. *Shivas* are meant to be more intimate, a way to quietly grieve. Both my grandparents' funerals were deathly still and quiet. There was barely anyone alive at that point to remember nana and poppy's

lives, something that still saddens me. Uncle David and Aunt Ros had died young, which was part of the reason that their funerals were so full of life, so full of mourners. But at Poppy's funeral the 21-gun salute echoed to a nearly empty room, the flag limp in my aunts' arms. Millie was too sick at the time to even attend her husbands' funeral.

Finnleigh had no idea what was going on. She was just a baby at the time, two and a half. A little spit of a thing, we all cheered when she hit the 15<sup>th</sup> percentile in height and weight. At six she still doesn't look big enough to be a kindergartener. Finn spent the funeral sitting on Rebecca's lap, touching her face. She understood the tears, had cried more than a few of them herself, but had always done so due to fear or pain, could not understand tears of gut wrenching sadness.

Halfway through the service she turned to Rebecca and inquired loudly why everyone was crying. Finnleigh will not know her grandparents, but not know them in a different way than I didn't know them. Her and Rory have started calling them grandma and grandpa, not nana and poppy like we were raised, something that none of the cousins can stand. They have become abstract images to my sisters, people that they can't identify at all. Finnleigh has clearer recollections of their gravestones than of the people that they were. And most times, none of us take the time to tell her.

Poppy was a man of few words. Nearly everyone who knew him called him 'Harvey' or 'Harv' instead of Ralph, a nickname from when my father was just a child. Poppy made friends with everyone and anyone no matter where we were, a trait that my aunt and father have both inherited to the embarrassment of us all. We oldest cousins recite his poppy-isms as we always have when we're together. *I was in the fourth grade for four years and then they burned the school down to get rid of me. I walked uphill both*

*ways in the snow to get to school every day.* And when asked a question or corrected, Poppy would merely shrug his shoulders and say, “what the hell do I know?” His favorite song to sing was “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” but he never actually finished a song, merely breaking out into chorus and then slowly fading away again. Every time we saw them, Poppy would pull dollar bills out of his pocket and hand them to us, one by one, accepting a kiss on the cheek as payment and warning “now don’t spend it all in one place” with a gruff smile.

Nana was the louder of the two. She was constantly exclaiming “Ralph!” to his “What the hell do I know?” She had run house and home for years, kept the family together. Nana had a large collection of pins that I remember growing up with and I have a small collection that all belonged to her, most of which I took from her as a child. She loved her children and grandchildren fiercely.

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*An image: 212 S. Hi Lusi the day we sold it. A nondescript house in the northwest suburbs of Chicago. It was a small house, not suitable for their needs really, but they loved it. A brick ranch with large front windows. Three bedrooms, one bathroom, beige carpets and white walls. Dad still had hockey pucks in the freezer from when he was a goalie in high school. I don’t think the house changed in the 40-some years they lived there. The basement was used for Poppy’s plating business – the scorch marks from the fire were covered by cheerful Christmas wrapping paper. Very rarely did anyone but Poppy spend time down there.*

*The whole house could be navigated in one large circle. Dad’s room had a door that led to the backyard that he could sneak out of. It had a large tree in it; right next to*

*the garage. Dad can't ever recall climbing it. A long narrow driveway that we would use to park cars and say last good-byes more often than we used them for chalk drawings. Pictures. Everywhere. Nana hated change, and so the family portrait from when my parents were still married was displayed in the living room until their death. Before that was dad and Mary's wedding photo – only taken down once Rebecca was born, five years into my parents marriage.*

\*

The story goes like this:

Millie Persowich lived and worked on a farm in Michigan until she was a teenager. At some point during high school her entire family moved to Chicago where my city-raised grandfather lived his whole life. One of his friends was set up with her, and Poppy and another girl were going to be joining them on a double date. Poppy and his friend met the two girls and Poppy and his friend did what I have dubbed the classic date switch – originally Poppy was supposed to be going out with the other girl but once the guys saw their dates for the evening, they changed their minds. Millie and Ralph had their first date at Russell's in Elmwood Park. The restaurant still stands to this day, and we can all pinpoint the booth the two of them sat at the first time they met.

It was a small wedding. Millie was 18 at the time, Ralph, 21. Thirteen days later they would wake up to a different world. The United States would declare war first on Japan and then on Germany, and World War II would officially begin for thousands of young men all over the country.

Poppy was colorblind and only had one kidney, so he didn't go overseas. His army records were lost in a fire, but near as can be told, he went to war sometime in late

1941 as a photographer. He traveled around the US taking black and white photos – of what, no one is precisely sure. There is no evidence of these photos even existing now. Gail Lee Urban was born in April of 1943. Between her birth and her brother Ralph Jr.'s, in October of 1944, Ralph Sr. was honorably discharged from the army.

The next few years passed quietly and calmly. The family of four lived on the second floor of a building on Richmond Street in the city. Ralph's parents Frank and Anne lived on the first floor and his sisters Sylvia and Iggy and their husbands split the third floor. When everyone wasn't getting in each other's business at the family home, they were working at the Atomic Plating Company, the family business – which was actually the brainchild and creation of Ralph.

Ralph Jr. has long since moved to Texas, and doesn't interact with us much, if ever. When he moved from Chicago there were lots of tense words and fighting between him and my grandparents – no one knows exactly what happened, as everyone involved in the fighting was very tight lipped about it. But Ralph rarely came back, and when he did it was to see old high school friends or to see a sporting event and eat some Lou Malnati's. I only have vague recollections of this man, nothing concrete. Although Uncle Ralph is a part of the family history and story, he has been gone for so long, it would be difficult to factor his life in at this point. The biggest story that Ralph plays into is the fact that his son Tim, my cousin (who is far closer to my fathers age than mine) gave my Aunt Gaillee her nickname – we've always referred to her as Annie, since we were kids because that's what Tim mispronounced 'Aunt Gail' as.

But this was back in the 50's, back when they were still living in Chicago. I can only picture the insanity that went on in that three story apartment complex, my aunt and



uncle cheerfully running up and down to visit relatives and everyone fighting, loudly but happily as the Urban clan is known to do. That side of the family has never had a problem with making their feelings known, often quite noisily. We have always referred to it as my father's 'court voice' but the soprano notes my aunt hits when angry are eerily reminiscent of her mother.

Then Nana and Poppy moved out to the suburbs of Chicago – Mt. Prospect to be precise. It didn't go over well in the family, but Poppy and Nana wanted a house to call their own and a backyard for their children to play in. Their youngest child, my father, was born when they were living at Hi Lusi, and it was the only place he ever called home. The small ranch on Hi Lusi Street would be home for my grandparents until their deaths in 2011.

\*

*It is spring 2008. My grandparents are in a nursing home. We are saying good-bye. It is 2009, and we say good-bye. It is 2010, more good-byes. It is June 2011, a month before my grandfather dies. It could be later than that; it could be earlier than that. The good-byes at this point have all blended together. How many different ways can you say 'I love you, I miss you, they'll be in a better place, I promise' before the words no longer mean anything?*

*They refused to leave their house at Hi Lusi even once they got sick, so they have live in help, a man named Michael who is also basically family at this point. It had been three years of live in care, three years of 'he's sick' or 'she's having trouble breathing today' or 'they don't know who I am' or, or, or – a million and one or's at this point, a frantic drive to the house every few weeks to say goodbye, again. I have said good-bye so*

*many times I have lost count, have no more tears to cry. When I leave the room and come back, Poppy mistakes me for my sister. It is easier to just pretend to be Rebecca than to try and explain that Rebecca is 1000 miles away in college.*

*Michael has been the one to make that phone call every time, the one who hovers in the doorway, the one who cried more at the funerals than some of us did. Michael comes with to all family events, gives the kids candy when no one is looking, swings Finnleigh up in the air until she giggles. Even after my grandparents die, Michael still talks to my aunt occasionally, just to check in on the rest of the family.*

*My grandfather lays prone in his bed, sleeping peacefully. My father is sitting in a chair at poppy's bedside, watching over him, but he too has fallen asleep. It is one of my favorite photos of the two of them. They sleep the same way, heads tilted, mouths open. The first time my father saw the photo he cried.*

*Poppy has no idea who any of us are, and Rachel and I stand guard at the door, not allowing the younger children in. Finn is only a toddler at this point, but Rory is old enough to be curious about death while still not being struck by the fact that 'dead' equates to 'gone forever.' Her stories will all be ones she has heard from us time and time again, not any concrete memories of our grandparents will remain.*

*Poppy was not a very tall or a very large man, but he always had some extra fat on him. Now though, he is a thin, old man whose cheeks sag and whose beloved sweater-vests hang limply on his form. Nana has been taking a variety of drugs – I could not tell you for what. Nana and Poppy died of old age instead of the cancer that haunts my mother's side of the family. She has been taking something that makes her flesh swell and the once tiny woman has become a swollen old lady that I do not recognize. On the good*

*days she doesn't have to use a wheelchair and instead can function with a walker. On the good days she puts her teeth in, and remembers which grandchild I am. We try not to talk about the bad days.*

*Nana sits in the living room and cries, asking for her boyfriend. Even seventy years into marriage they have always called each other boyfriend and girlfriend. The fact that she is not in the photo foreshadows the fact that soon she will be alone. In December of the same year she will be gone as well, and the photograph of their wedding will be present at her funeral, completing the cycle of life. Together again, boyfriend and girlfriend.*

\*

Although they were living in the suburbs, Poppy still continued to run the family business, just from a larger distance than a flight of stairs. It was a successful business, but their continued success would be short lived. One day while out driving, great-Grandpa Frank's brakes failed on the Kennedy Expressway. Great-Grandma Anne was in the hospital for six months recovering. The only way that the hospital bills could be paid was to pay ahead through the business. The details here get extremely murky, but it boils down to the fact that Atomic Plating went under and the family lost basically everything.

Poppy worked for Illinois Range after that, making sheet metal. He also had a side basement business called Reliable Safe Seal, which did basically the same thing that Atomic Plating had done, which was create lead seals, but this time by himself. He made a variety of machines that did the work for him, but never patented any of them, never tried to make any money off of them. When I asked my father and my aunt why, they

both agreed that poppy feared failure above all else, and trying to get these machines built and it not happening would have been the ultimate form of failure for him.

Dad was born January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1958. My grandmother went to the doctor because she wasn't feeling well and flat out refused to believe that she was pregnant at the age of 35. Back then it wasn't common for women to be pregnant that late in their lives, and Millie was understandably astounded. My aunt maintains that she basically raised my father, at least until he was old enough to be semi-independent. She was 15 at the time of his birth and was apparently much more interested in the idea of a newborn baby than my grandmother was.

There was no doubt that my father grew up in a loving, if somewhat eccentric household. Gaillee and Ralph were in their teens and although Gaillee enjoyed playing house with her youngest brother, Ralph had little interest in his baby brother. It is a difficult time to talk about, not because of anything bad that happened, but merely because it seems like so long ago. All of my great aunts and uncles, whom I have little to no recollection of in the first place, are long gone, as are my grandparents. Gaillee prefers to remember everything through the rose colored glasses of time, and my father was too young to remember or comprehend.

\*

*Labor Day Weekend. Uncle Ralph is back from Texas, and he has brought his family – his wife and two kids – kids being a relative term as they are both married and have also brought their spouses and children. Tim and Mindee are my cousins, but their children are closer to my age than they are.*

*If we were a normal family, we would take our family picture on the front steps, or some other idyllic, but simple location. Instead we go to Russell's and pose around the booth where Millie and Ralph had their first date in 1939. We cluster for a family photo, Nana and Poppy in the middle. This time he sits with his arm draped over her shoulder. It is late 2004.*

*They are by no means healthy, but by no means sick either – merely getting up into their eighties. It is pre failing health and hospital visits. Finnleigh is not yet born, but everyone else groups accordingly. Two sons, a daughter and in-laws followed by seven grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. Everyone is smiling and young in the photograph.*

\*

Time begins to travel faster. Suddenly Ralph is married and has moved to Texas with his children. My father is just a child at this point, apparently a solemn ten-year old. He played hockey, something my grandmother loathed, but my grandfather loved. Tod was a goalie, and a pretty good one at that. The one game they ever talked Millie into attending was the one game he got hit in the face with a puck and was knocked unconscious. She never attended a hockey game after that.

My aunt is married, pregnant and widowed in the span of less than five years. My father is married, for the first time, then divorced and in law school. This is where he meets my mother, where stories begin to even out and get told by more than one person.

Nana Millie was not a fan of my mother, never really had been. Mary Woss, dad's first wife, was her favorite of the three. Mary still attends family events, even to this day refers to Millie and Ralph as 'mom' and 'dad' – hell, she lived with them for an extended

period of time. My half-sisters call her ‘aunt’ Mary; don’t understand the oddities that come from being a blended family. It was only a few months ago that Rory realized dad had been married three times. Mary disappeared from dad’s life at some point – where and when, I couldn’t really tell you. No one talks about that time period.

But we could tell when we were kids that Nana was not mom’s biggest fan, the way her lips would half-curl when she spoke of her. It was a weird situation because my parents were divorced, my father was about to get remarried and my grandparents thought that they had to dislike my mother to like my new stepmother. Unlike the other side of my family, the Urban side was not full of divorces and remarriages until my father decided that three times was the charm.

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*It is maybe twenty years into their marriage. The war is over, everyone is home, and they have clustered around the couch for a family photo. Uncle Ralph looks like his father with the short crew cut and the wrinkled cheeks that never seem to smile. They wear their hair the same way, stand the same way, even speak the same way. Uncle Ralph has a Texas twang now, but there are pieces of poppy in him that can be heard clearly in his inflection and laughter.*

*Aunt Gaillee is holding my father. Anyone who does not know the family would think that she is his mother and not his sister. He is five, if that, and is trying to get down to play with his toy car that sits in the corner of the picture. This is the little boy who stood at the window when my aunt went off to prom and sobbed because he wanted to be her date, the little boy my aunt accidentally sent careening out of a car because the door wasn’t closed all the way and there were no seatbelt laws in those days.*

*The couch is white with flowers on it, and years later we will sit on it while holding this photo, looking at it and wondering where all of the years have gone. Millie and Ralph are sitting, surrounded by their three children. They are smiling in a confused manner, lips half turned up, as if amused by something but not quite sure what. Her hand rests in his on his lap, tentatively close even after all those years.*

\*

My cousin Rachel was adopted from China. She is three years my junior, and so I don't remember much about her homecoming or all of the work that surrounded her adoption. My aunt already had a child, her son Jason from a previous marriage. Jerry, Jason's father, had died of cancer when Jason was about three. Her husband Gregg had adopted Jason, but they had wanted another child to call their own, and so they decided to adopt from China, a little girl that desperately needed a home.

The way my aunt tells the story, everyone was somewhat opposed to the idea of adopting from China, of another child – my aunt was, after all, already in her 50's when they decided to bring Rae home. Poppy showed up to my aunts work one day, something that wasn't unusual for him. In his hands he held a carefully cut out picture of a little girl Chinese girl modeling clothes in a catalogue. Rae was still an idea at this point; they were still just filling out all the paperwork to find out if they even *could* adopt her.

Poppy was a man of few words, always had been, and most of those words were one-liners and jokes. Very rarely did we ever see my grandfather's serious side. He handed my aunt the carefully cut out picture and told her simply, "here's another beautiful little girl from China who needed a home. And when my granddaughter comes home, she will be just as beautiful and even more loved." To this day, my aunt can't tell

that story without crying. This summer was the first time that Rachel and I had ever heard it and my normally stoic, bored teenage cousin ended up sitting next to her mother also crying.

Of course, as soon as the rest of the family realized that this was actually happening and my aunt wasn't just having a mid-life crisis, they all jumped onboard. But Poppy was the first person in the family to declare that he was going to love this unnamed, half-idea of an adopted granddaughter unconditionally and that is something my aunt will never forget.

Patrick, their great-grandchild, Jason's son, is born three years after Rachel comes home. Rory and Finnleigh follow shortly thereafter, but Nana and Poppy are getting up there in age. Jason is the one who remembers the fun grandparents, the ones who went to Florida with him for band as chaperones, the ones who were well enough to attending all of his events and were constantly around.

Rebecca and I had a different set of grandparents. Dad had us two nights a week when we were kids, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and then every other weekend we spent at his place. Every Tuesday we would get in the car and drive to Russell's – not the one that Nana and Poppy had their first date at, but one slightly closer to our house. We would sit in the back corner booth. These are the memories I have of my grandparents that are the clearest. All of us sitting at Russell's, eating our hot dogs and pork sandwiches, laughing. I don't remember talking to them much during these meals. I remember getting ice cream with poppy and getting .25-cent prizes from a machine. Poppy was always able to crack the plastic balls open on the first try, a feat that never failed to impress the two of us.



There was also the time that the five of us went mini-golfing on Saturday, an adventure that ended up taking us almost two hours because they knew how badly we wanted to golf, but didn't have the capabilities to move as fast as two squirming children.

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*A family vacation – to where, no one could say. The photo is old and yellow, curling at the edges. There is no information on it, and my aunt merely shrugged when I showed it to her, asking for a good story to go with it. “Maybe we went to visit some people in Michigan?” she guessed. Some of Nana’s family still lived there, so it would make sense, but it is not the tale that I am looking for. They are standing in a field of some form, and there is a large cross visible in the background. It looks a lot like rural Ohio, honestly.*

*Ralph had to have taken the photo, as he is not in it. Instead Millie, probably in her late 20’s stands with Gaillee on her right and Ralph Jr. on her left. They both have their arms tightly wrapped around their mother’s middle, and she in turn has an arm wrapped around each one of their shoulders. They are all beaming brightly, clearly happy.*

\*

I am getting ready for my first formal at college, chattering excitedly with my friends, animated and flushed with delight. I decide to call my father before heading to meet my boyfriend, and his voice, when he answers, is strained. We have been talking every day, sometimes twice a day since the semester started. I am homesick at times, overwhelmed at others and used to talking to my father almost every day, whether he is

minutes away or hours. The past two weeks though, nana has been steadily declining, and that's what I am checking in on.

“I know you have your formal tonight. I was going to call you tomorrow.” My father is crying, I can hear it clearly through the phone. My father has always been sensitive though. He is the man who cries at Kodak commercials, weddings, funerals, when I do something especially nice or thoughtful for someone else.

I am still in my dorm room and I take a moment to sink onto my bed as my father slowly explains that nana has passed away, that just a few hours ago she took her final breath. I am more shocked than upset – I have said good-bye so many times there is a part of me that cannot be overwhelmed anymore.

\*

Their wedding photo hangs in my father's house. Millie, standing in her white gown, Ralph in a tux, the two of them staring directly into the camera, faces tight. There is an end table off in the corner and she clutches flowers in her left hand. Their arms are woven together, touching slightly at the elbows. It doesn't look like a wedding, but more like a funeral. This is the formal, stiff picture that we have always had hanging.

During the process of cleaning out the basement though, digging through 69 years worth of memories, Rebecca and I found a treasure chest of photographs.

*Ralph holding Tod for the first time, Ralph and Millie holding a toddler Tod, Gaillee with her mother getting ready for prom, Christmas with Ralph Jr. and Tod. A young Ralph, possibly before he even met Millie standing next to his first car, beaming. Gaillee and Ralph at her graduation from high school.*

And then, one final photo:

*Millie and Ralph are standing outside of the church. It is their wedding day. It appears as though they are about to leave and that someone stopped them just before that.*

*Ralph and Millie stand side by side, their arms wrapped around each other's backs. Millie is wearing elegant white gloves and she has a wreath of flowers in her hair that match the flowers she is holding in her other hand. Both of them are beaming into the camera, eyes slightly scrunched up because of the sun. They both radiate happiness.*

I never knew my grandparents. But sometimes when Rory parrots back a story or Rachel starts singing slightly off key and then stops contemplatively I think I know them a little better than I thought I did.

### *The 'C' Word*

Rosalind Foy-Berke, age 62, passed away July 24, 2012, beloved wife of David; and loving mother of Wayne (Traci) and Leslie; stepmother to Samantha; sister to Charlotte, Emanuel Jr. Dennis and Patrick; loving grandmother of eight. Visitation Monday, 11:30am. Donation made in her memory to American Cancer Society.



David S. Berke, age 56, beloved son of Joan Berke and Perry Berke (Nancy); fond father of Samantha Berke; and grandfather of Connor Berke; loving brother of Lisa Kobesak (Robert) and Steven Berke (Elizabeth); devoted step-dad of Leslie Foy and Wayne Foy (Tracy); proud uncle of Rebecca, Jessica, Eden and Aviva; fond step brother of Nell, Linda and Susie Balaban; and treasured friend of many. David had a passion for sports, which he shared with his late wife, Rosalind, especially the Bulls, Bears, golf and fishing.

David's humor, laughter and joy was infectious. He will be deeply missed by all who knew him. Funeral service, Thursday, Sept. 20, 2012, 11a.m. at Weinstein Funeral Home.

In lieu of flowers, memorial contributes in David's memory may be made to the  
American Cancer Society.

When I woke up to a text that Sunday saying, “Call me when you get this,” my heart plummeted. After nineteen years I knew my mother always greeted me with a ‘good morning,’ even when it was six am and there was nothing good about that particular morning.

I got up, brushed my teeth and changed out of my pajamas before making the dreaded phone call home. Mom answered almost immediately; her voice was so calm that I thought for a moment I had misinterpreted the text. But then she started speaking and her voice cracked on the words ‘David’ and ‘peaceful’ and had turned into muffled attempts to hold back tears on “he’s with Aunt Ros now.”

Eleven days before Uncle David died I received a phone call telling me that the doctor had said “maybe three weeks” and that the cancer had metastasized into his spinal cord cell fluid. I shouldn’t have been surprised by the phone call, but the grief was overwhelming nonetheless. I had already created a to do list a week prior and numbly added the flight information to it. When we hung up I allowed the numbness to drop and the sobs to bubble out of my chest.

My mother had promised multiple times, “he’s with Aunt Ros now.” What she had neglected to add was that no one in the family besides the Cantors, Uncle Steven and Aunt Liz, had utter faith that god, Heaven or Hell even *existed*.

Aunt Ros and Uncle David existed in my mind as one person. In all my years I had never seen one without the other. Uncle David showed up to Father’s Day dinner that June without her. It was a clear indication of just how sick Aunt Ros was. In July, my grandma called and told us what we had known since that meal. Ros’ cancer was

winning. The doctor had told Aunt Ros to say goodbye to the people she loved. She would not leave the hospital for the remainder of her life.

Aunt Ros' hospital room was full when we arrived. Uncle David had just started his own chemotherapy and lay on a couch next to the hospital bed, husband and wife looking thin and pale, his hand clasped in her darker one. Aunt Ros looked almost normal. Her skin was the same, too dark to show the liver failure, but her eyes were a terrifying dull yellow.

They were a couple that wasn't supposed to last. She, a southern Baptist African American born on the south side of Chicago, and he a Jewish white boy who grew up in the affluent northwest suburbs. What drew them together? Not their jobs. Possibly their love of all Chicago sports. It was mostly their love of the Bulls, but they were fanatic White Sox, Bears and Blackhawks fans as well. Just not the Cubs, never the Cubs. Maybe the fact that they were both single parents struggling to raise children was a defining point in their relationship. Whatever it was, it was enough for them to ignore the naysayers, whom soon got over whatever problems they had with the union. The lung cancer hit both of them equally though: cancer, the ever-present unifier.

Aunt Ros had not eaten that week. When I mentioned that we had eaten Panda Express at the train station her eyes lit up, and a niece of hers and I were off wandering down Michigan Ave. to find a Panda Express because that's what Aunt Ros thought she could stomach.

Aunt Ros ate slowly and carefully, watching with eagle eyes to make sure Uncle David didn't steal her food because he always did, and this was *my meal, stop it right*

*nowabela, I'm watching you* laughing and hitting his hand with a pair of shakily held chopsticks.

I had lost both my grandparents less than a year before but they had been in their 90's and I had no recollection of the two of them being healthy, vibrant people. Seeing the two of them acting like their normal selves was relieving and I almost let myself believe that the doctors were wrong. Aunt Ros didn't though. When I leaned down to hug her goodbye she caught me around the shoulders and pulled me close.

"A perfect Jess-hug" she had whispered, like she always did. "You give the best hugs." She paused and swallowed before adding, "When I'm gone I'm going to miss your hugs so much."

Two days later there was a horrible storm in the middle of the night, and when I woke up, it was to my mother telling me that Aunt Ros was gone. Later, some of her friends would claim that the storm was the coming of God to take her away, Jesus calming the storm of her body just as he had calmed the storms for the disciples in Luke.

Six weeks later I would wake up to another death. The doctors say Uncle David died of cancer. We know that he died of a broken heart. When Aunt Ros died, he lost the will to live, and everyone in the family knew it.

The Wednesday after Uncle David's death I flew home. A death between the high holidays, also call the Jewish New Year – Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, is confusing. It is supposed to be a time of rebirth, forgiveness and joy. Instead, the entire family was flying across the country to mourn.

Uncle David's funeral dawned a sunny, warm September morning – a perfect day for golf, had he been alive. People will tell you that there is nothing good about funerals.

And in a way, they are right. Between the actual arrangements, the sound of the coffin being slowly lowered into the ground, the way everyone is crying and caught up in their grief. It's painful all around. However, there is also something amazing about funerals. The people spilled into the funeral home in hordes. People that I was familiar with – my dad's sister, my best friend's mother, my grandfather's best friend since high school, and people that I had never seen before in my life: a counselor from Camp Ojibwa, who had known David 40 years ago, co-workers, his first wife Grace whom I have little to no memory of all the way from California.

My grandfather stood next to my grandmother, a protective hand on her back. I have no recollection of them being in the same room together, let alone touching. Their divorce was finalized in '82 amidst affairs and tense words. They had not spoken in 30 years, had attended very few events at the same location – a bat mitzvah here, a wedding there, and now some 56 years after their first-born son's birth, his funeral.

When the Rabbi called my mother to ask her for anecdotes about her eldest brother to talk about at the temple, she told him her own stories, but also the stories Rebecca and I recalled and laughed at over the years. Passover, and hiding the afikomin on Uncle David. Creating songs with the finger puppet representations of the ten plagues during Passover. Making Aunt Ros participate in all of the holiday readings only to stop the service every three words to correct her Hebrew, laughing all the while. Restless dinners where he would charismatically pick us up and wander back into the kitchen of any restaurant that we happened to be dining in. Uncle David always managed to charm a bus boy or chef to give him and his restless nieces a tour and a cookie.



After the funeral we gathered at our house before the *shiva* started. I spent most of that time attempting to peer edit a paper – homework, despite the circumstances. That particular week we had been learning about context and molding it into an analysis.

So here's the analysis: smoking kills, but it's all cancer in the end. What started off as lung cancer can turn into brain, or breast, or spinal cord cell cancer and no matter how someone gets from point A to point B, in the end the important part is that they're gone. Good-byes, no matter how prepared or unprepared you are for them are still a hideous part of life. Was it worse to lose Uncle David to his brain cancer, drifting in a haze of confusion and pain, unable to recognize anyone or Aunt Ros who knew that she was going to go to sleep soon and would never wake up? There is no answer to that. And that is an answer in and of itself. Death isn't easy. Its not supposed to be. Because if it was it would mean that you never stood up for anything in your life, or loved anyone hard enough to not want to let go or even did something stupid like smoke a pack a day for twenty years. But death also has the capability of unifying. It brought a family across country, an angry couple back onto speaking terms. Not that unity is the answer to anything, but it's a start in the process of healing.

Three days later we began the process of cleaning out seventeen years worth of memories from an apartment that was filled with ghosts. I walked away with a flask with my uncle's name on it, some clothes of theirs that smelled of them and Aunt Ros' paperweight, a rock with the word *hugs* written on it. Proof, that even if she was gone, there was a part of her that would never be forgotten.

## *Grinker's Pharmacy*



*Behind every small business, there's a story worth knowing. All the corner shops in our towns and cities, the restaurants, cleaners, gyms, hair salons, hardware stores – these didn't come out of nowhere. – Paul Ryan*

Papa Sidney's face is grim, his motions deliberate. His coat hangs over the chair he keeps behind the counter. A cardboard box is at his feet; he is slowly and carefully taking things and placing them in the box. His diploma that hung on the wall for almost 60 years, the picture of Sidney and his father David standing under the *Grinker's Pharmacy* sign shortly after they started working together, the gun that he kept in the back office and never used - even though he was robbed multiple times. A million and one IOU's from covering patients' drugs that he knew would never be repaid.

The cops are standing outside, armed and ready and behind them the crowd is growing. They are chanting angrily, things such as "Go home whitey." Or "We don't want you here." It is late 1967, before the race riots, before things really came to head in the rest of the country. At the head of the mob is Samuel - the homeless man that Papa Sidney convinced his father to hire all those years ago to help him out. They gave Samuel a place to sleep and food and clothing until he got back on his feet. Now he has returned, only with intentions to destroy the store.

Papa Sidney pulls his coat on, buttoning it slowly and picks up the cardboard box. He surveys the pharmacy and takes the keys out of his pocket. The lights are turned off and he locks the door one last time. When he steps outside he looks from the cops to the mob and his demeanor, usually so calm and gentle cracks. "Make them leave." He demands. "Shoot them!" The officers exchange sorrowful glances and shrug. They all know that this plea is impossible. With one final glance, Sidney walks away and climbs into his car. As he makes the half hour drive home from Ashland Avenue, Papa Sidney cries. He has the radio on and people are calling into the station in a panic. For the past few years there has been a divide between the people who want Papa Sidney to stay and

those who don't believe that an affluent white man belongs in the projects. Amidst stories of the riot some of his loyal customers are at a loss. What are they going to do without Doctor Grinker? He was the only one who cared about them. Sidney gets home, takes the box with him out of the car and wipes his eyes least his wife or two daughters see.

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I never knew my great-grandparents. Great-Papa Sidney died many years before I was born, and Great-Grandma Ethel died in '90 a few months before Rebecca was born. My grandma Joan wanted my sister to be named Ethel after her mother. My mother refused. Grandma settled with my cousin Eden getting the first letter of her mother's first name a few years later. (My grandma refers to them as if she is still speaking to her children, referring to her parents with a 'grandma' and a 'papa' like I call her, so when I tell their stories I find myself flitting into her speech patterns, pulling the nicknames onto me like blankets in a cold night.)

Papa Sidney never called anyone by their real name. My mother Lisa became Lucy, my Uncle Steven was called Spencer and Uncle David was referred to as Ace. Grandma Joan was Johnson and Great-Aunt Bernice was called Book – or Book a Book a Bindle. It was his way of showing affection, I'm told. I can't help but laugh when I hear that because I do the same thing and have for many years without knowing of the connection. I call my friend James, Steve and my other friend Travis, Blue. I've gotten most of my friends to affectionately refer to two of our friends as 'mom' and 'dad' as they always seem to assume the parental roles when crisis strikes.

\*

Papa Sidney was born in 1904 to Great-great Grandpa David (for whom my uncle was named) and great-great Grandma Mamie. Grandpa David was a pharmacist in Germany, and after he got his degree, they immigrated to America where they had Sidney and Sarah. They settled quietly in the city of Chicago, on the west side, right on Ashland Avenue. Grandpa David purchased a building with a pharmacy downstairs and a little apartment on top. They shared the top floor apartment hallway with a Dentist and Doctor practice.

When David and Mamie moved into the little apartment on Ashland Avenue, the area was full of Bohemians. Nonetheless they made their place in the world, and the pharmacy stood, weathering the storms of change as the surrounding area changed from Bohemians to African Americans to Jews and finally was mostly torn down and rebuilt to become what is now known as 'the projects' of Chicago. Papa Sidney became a pharmacist like his father in the earlier thirties, and helped run the family business. Oftentimes there was a homeless man wandering around by the store. Papa Sidney convinced his father to hire the man, Samuel, as a security guard in the evenings in exchange for food and clothing. This lasted until he was able to get back on his feet and get a better paying job. Eventually Samuel quit and moved on, but stayed in the neighborhood.

In 1927 Ethel Winer and Sidney Grinker were married. He was 23, and she merely 20. That particular story is lost now. All I know is that they met in high school. Sidney went on to Pharmaceutical School somewhere in the city, and they wed after he graduated. Ethel did not go on to get a higher education, but rather became a stay at home mom to Bernice in 1929 and Joan in 1931. The four of them lived on the North side of

the city, about a half hour away, but spent most of their time at the pharmacy as young children.

On Sundays, Sidney would drive to the pharmacy and take his daughters Joan and Bernice to Sunday school at the reform Temple three blocks away. Joan and Bernice would walk into the store with Papa Sidney after Sunday school and David would gruffly accept a kiss on the cheek before sending them upstairs to eat lunch, practice piano and play cards. Girls did not belong in the pharmacy, unless they were buying drugs or working as the soda jerk. It was a belief that David held onto his entire life, and a rule my grandma and great aunt followed obediently.

Even after Mamie and David died, Sidney refused to do anything with the apartment above the pharmacy. The four of them could have moved in, made the commute nothing, but it stayed exactly as it was, and Sidney only used it occasionally to take naps. Otherwise it remained untouched, a memory of those no longer living.

Of course there are certain stories that I always associate with the pharmacy, before the riot, before it was destroyed:

The summer Papa Sidney hired (and fired) Aunt Bernice on the same day because navy men off for a week in the city are to be fed, not flitted over by a teenage girl –

Grandma Mamie every day for who knows how many years calling David up to lunch with a tube specifically installed for that purpose –

Papa Sidney being referred to as ‘Doctor’ by all of his patients. He filled prescriptions if they didn’t have money and would drive to them in the middle of the night if they called needing help. A lot of the people in the projects were too poor to see doctors, so he functioned as both.

Sidney kept the pharmacy as it was after his father's death. There was a soda jerk girl and the actual pharmacy but that was it. No food or anything like that. Whenever we enter a Walgreens grandma will look around, shake her head and murmur, "If he could see this, he would be rolling over in his grave right now. Brassieres in a pharmacy!"

\*

It was in the early 1960's that things in the neighborhood started to really drastically change. The doctor and dentist left. Most people did. There was a photograph in the paper of the pharmacy with everything else torn down around it. The city of Chicago built Public Housing in 1961 and soon after, large groups of African Americans moved in. Dr. Grinker made house calls, paid for prescriptions of those who couldn't afford them and was known to hand out his telephone number so that he could be reached at all hours of the night. Many a times he had jumped out of bed at three am to bring a sick patient a prescription, making the 30 minute trek across town and back again. In 1967 the bad atmosphere began to get increasingly worse. One day, Papa Sidney was working and he noticed a large crowd of people gathering outside of the building. He sent the Soda Jerk girl home and gathered his things, locking the store.

There are discrepancies among my family about this day. Some claim that it was one of the riots of 1967 while others claim that it was the riots after MLK was shot in 1968. There is no evidence that really clarifies either. We know only this: in a neighborhood on the west side of Chicago Grinker's Pharmacy was destroyed.

By the time he got home, the police had called and informed him that people were going to destroy the store. So, Papa Sidney turned around despite Grandma Ethel's protests and drove back to the store. It was then that he locked the store up one final time

and watched his old worker Samuel lead a mob of people to destroy it. To this day no one is quite sure what provoked Samuel to help destroy the store, and it is not one of those conversations that is brought up ever, if at all.

\*

Papa Sidney spent the next two weeks sitting in his apartment, not responding to calls or visitors. He didn't want to see or speak to anyone. No one blamed him. The place that he loved, the people that he had strived to take care of, the apartment full of his parents' memories - they were all gone. Grandma Ethel firmly dragged him out of his funk and told him to get a hobby, get out of the house – something. The only problem was that Papa Sidney had no hobbies. He had been a pharmacist for almost his entire life – he had grown up in the pharmacy. It was his home, and his life. So, Papa Sidney went back to work. He never went back to Grinker's Pharmacy, but he worked at two or three more pharmacies throughout his life. The loss of the pharmacy meant that Papa Sidney suddenly had a normal nine to five job. He no longer was jumping out of bed at night answering phone calls and going the extra mile to help people. He was merely Dr. Grinker the pharmacist. He was no longer the beloved 'Doc' of Ashland Ave.

As it is with most true stories, there is no completely happy ending here. A few years after the pharmacy was destroyed Grandma Ethel had a heart attack. Papa Sidney quit his job and spent his time taking care of Ethel. However, he was in the beginning stages of dementia himself and was struggling with his memories. They went through round after round of hired help but Papa would get up in the middle of the night and find strangers in the house – forgetting that they had been hired to help him out with Grandma



Ethel and around the house. It was a vicious cycle of hiring and firing person after person.

Shortly after Grandma Ethel's stroke in 1982 the two of them moved into Brentwood, where they had a private room and a kind woman named Roberta who looked after them. Throughout the dementia he remained the same loving person that he had been all those years, never speaking ill of his patients or the men who had been responsible for the loss of his business and childhood home. His grandchildren and even a few of his great-grandchildren managed to make it through the halls of Brentwood, visiting and playing there for the four years the two of them resided there.

My Uncle David, the charismatic grandson named for the starter of the pharmacy, is the only one who would have remembered the pharmacy in all of its grandeur. But he lost his battle with cancer last year and some of those stories were lost with him. Mostly my great-grandparents were always after him to cut his long hair that he kept shoulder length for most of his teenage years. My own mother recalls 'sneaking' Papa Sidney cigarettes under his daughters nose, promising his grandchildren that, this time, he wouldn't get caught. Then he would walk out of the powder room smelling of cigarettes, a cloud of smoke hanging in the air while he smiled sheepishly. Needless to say, he always did get caught. In 1986 at the age of 82, Papa Sidney died – peacefully and quietly in his sleep. He worked 62 of those years in a pharmacy, most of them spent on Ashland Ave. helping the people that he had grown to love.

If I had gone to law school I would have been a fourth generation lawyer. My sister, though not a lawyer, is a social worker and walks the hallways of the courthouse as my mother, grandfather and great-grandfather all did before her. She wears their

solemnity on her shoulders. Always has. Oftentimes the generations of pharmacists and doctors is laid slightly wayside in my family. And no, I'm not going to be a pharmacist. Or a lawyer. In fact I've taken the family in an entirely new direction. I am like Papa Sidney in other ways. I laugh easily and quickly and am slow to anger. I've been told that I have a big heart and love fiercely. I have his same piercing blue eyes and although I would have rarely been allowed in the pharmacy, everyone tells me that we would have gotten along swimmingly, laughing in the corner at family gatherings. From what I know about Papa Sidney I'm inclined to agree. And I believe that even though he died years before I was born I do carry a certain part of him with me.

On the corner of Hastings Street and Ashland Ave. is where my family started a life in America. It was a home and also a pharmacy, a place that my grandma still recalls with a fond smile. It is gone. There is no longer a building with that address. Instead a barren, dirt lot sits. Grass pokes through in a few spots, but the area is mostly desolate. An auto parts store sits a few buildings down and the train tracks rumble from two blocks away, causing the street to shake with the noise of freights merely passing through. The temple is long gone as are the dentist and the doctor. If I took my grandmother there now, she probably would not recognize the place of her childhood. In fact, there is no longer any proof that Grinker's Pharmacy was there at all, except for the memories and the faded pictures, the photo of Grinker's Pharmacy hanging proudly in the living room of my grandmothers house where it's been for the past 25 years.

A story should have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order.

**Jean-Luc Godard**

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It's late March now. My freshman year of college, Passover fell close enough to Easter that I was able to be home for the Seder. It was the last Passover we had as an entire family at my Uncle Steven's house. David had just bought new golf clubs and was ecstatic to show them off to everyone. He would be dead less than a year later. Now as we prepare ourselves to go home for Easter break as seniors, Passover once again falls close enough to Easter for me to celebrate with my family. This time it is my grandmother who is battling cancer. I can't help but wonder if this will be the last holiday that we all have together, if it's some kind of ironic cycle of life. My Aunt Ros and my grandfather died exactly one year apart. Poppy and Jeanne had funerals on the same day, the same week in July that we had lost a family friend five years prior. Eden's Bat Mitzvah was the last family event we all had together, Aviva's Bat Mitzvah is this summer... it is hard to not draw the comparisons and find the parallels. I'm hopeful though, that it is only the writer in me who is finding them, and that we have a season in which everyone in my family survives, thrives even.

There are many more stories to tell. There always will be. I barely brushed the surface when I started exploring my family history, but I tried to focus on things that were universal, stories that all families had – the good, the bad, the ugly. The stupid jokes, the petty fights and how we did handstands in the grass at my uncle's funeral, my grandfather included (great-aunt Babs declined a back handspring, saying that her hips might give out in our backyard). David would have laughed until his face turned its signature bright red, putting a cigar between his teeth (*I'm just holding onto itabela! It's*

*not even lit!*) and shaking his head. There is a space now, where his voice should chime in, the oldest of the three siblings. My grandmother is fighting cancer for the second time in two years, but this disease that claimed her eldest son and her daughter-in-law will not claim her as well. Every year my family does Relay for Life – we walk a track for 24 hours. We don't sleep because cancer doesn't sleep. We light candles for those who have since passed, do a lap in silent reflection, look at the lights spelling out *Hope* on the bleachers above us. I look forward to the day when I won't have a new bag to write names and memories on, no more candles to light, no more funerals to attend or hospitals to say goodbye in. Based on my family history, I too, will probably eventually get this dreaded disease. It's something I try not to worry about right now, but it's always in the back of my mind.

There is a quote in *Carousel* (that's the pesky theatre major popping up) that goes, "as long as there's one person on earth who remembers you – it isn't over." My aunt and uncle died in July and September of 2012. Then entire idea for writing this thesis started with a simple story about them – parts of which have been meshed into "The C Word." My grandparents died sooner than that, but theirs were expected deaths. I like to think that I have said their names often enough – *David Scott Berke, Rosalind Foy Berke, Millie Urban, Ralph John Urban, Jeanne Wyman, Claire Berke, Samuel Berke, Sidney Grinker, Ethel Winer Grinker, Sophie Berke, Toiv Berke* – that they are not forgotten, not passed over. They are alive in our memories, even sometimes in our words and actions – something I am always pleased to see. Call it my version of the Mourner's Kaddish if you will. As long as there are people who are willing to listen, there will always be stories to be told.

Family is what you make it, often enough. My family is lucky enough to not have their names listed in the Hall of Names – the list Yad Vashem has that holds as many names of the victims of the Holocaust that could be remembered by their families and the survivors. Yad Vashem also holds the Pages of Testimony, a follow up to the Hall of Names. Each Page of Testimony has life stories, pictures, or anything else that can be provided by the remaining family members or friends who survived to remember those who were killed by the Nazis. This is so the people become more than just names or numbers – they become stories and full flesh and blood people. Yad Vashem is still adding to that book to this day. But we were some of the lucky ones. We escaped to America before then. Every family has their own burdens to bear. My father's family never had a problem with their religion, but they did have a problem with their ethnicity. Each person, each story, comes with its own pains and joys.

Writing all of these stories has been an exercise in remembering and in truth telling. I know I say *Mostly True* but the only things that really have been changed from life to page are some names here and there and a few fill in the blank facts when my research and my relatives' memories failed them. There are other stories I wanted to use, but could not find the time or the place for them.

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I would love to have time to talk about Samuel Berke's love of dancing and birdcalls instead of the serious lawyer that he was. He wasn't just a judge – he was a boy who broke the law and the Sabbath and made a bit of money gambling at school. He was a man who loved his brother Toiv more than anything else in the entire world and supported him for many years, never angering or tiring of his carefree brother.

When we visit the cemetery that my family is buried at, my grandmother will carefully lay flowers on David's grave as she recites the Mourners Kaddish. I will follow, placing pebbles on everyone's graves, a reminder *we were here, we haven't forgotten you* as Grandma lays the flowers down. For Toiv and Sophie. For Claire – stopping to say *hello mom, I miss you. I love you.* For her oldest son gone too soon. But she will merely stare at Sam's grave and say nothing before walking away. There is no lost love between the two of them, there wasn't when he was alive, and that hasn't changed in death.

What grandma neglects to say, or even think of, is that David had only one child, and this child, the only daughter of her favorite son, he named *Samantha* for his grandfather.

\*

Or about Buddy Cohen, my great-uncle who just the other day yelled at my grandmother on the phone, telling her that “he had put up with these stubborn Grinker girls for fifty-eight years and he was putting his foot down – she *was* going to listen to him for once!” And how my mother had turned away while they were on the phone and cried – not angry that he was yelling at her mother, but out of relief that someone was telling her mom that she was not allowed to give up like Uncle David had.

The only Uncle Buddy I can remember meeting is the soft spoken man who let me stand on his fancy dining room chairs to deliver the prayer over the wine and the one whose children would chase us around their huge house while we shrieked with laughter.

\*

Millie and Ralph have few surviving siblings between them and they are all well in their nineties, sick with old age and other things. The process of getting stories or any

information from them has been a much more difficult process. To be able to tell the stories of great-aunt Sylvia who was born in 1919 would be phenomenal, but getting in contact with her is near impossible.

What stories would she have to tell of her brother Ralph? Of her sister-in-law Millie? Of living with her husband and her family and the family business that is now merely a memory at this point? Not knowing may be one of the greatest disappointments.

\*

I wish I could put into words the Saturday afternoons spent driving around the suburbs of Chicago in my father's car, listening to Spice Girls and Backstreet Boys as loud as we could. There were silly little traditions that we acquired – what we would eat for breakfast and what activity we would partake in that day. Part of my love for libraries comes from those moments with my father. I learned many things on those visits and although my father is distant at times, those Saturday mornings are some of the best memories I have.

I could tell about countless trips to the Chicago Auto Show or the Wisconsin State Fair or Eagle River to my grandparents' lake house. The point is there will *always* be more stories to tell.

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I've noticed when people want to note a significant amount of time, they turn it into days instead of months or years to make the number bigger, create a larger effect. I've been working on this thesis for 450 days now – 10,800 hours if we're going for an even bigger number. A lot can happen in 450 days – a lot *has* happened in 450 days. And more will continue to happen – that's part of life. The growth, change and adventures

never end. And when they do for me, there will be more people to carry on the stories. So although this particular chapter of the story is closed, it is only until next time, when there will be more truths to uncover and more stories to tell.

During Passover, four cups of wine (or grape juice depending on your age) are drunk – the reasons vary depending on whom you ask and how religious you are, so we'll leave that for another story, for another day. The first cup is drunk after the *Kiddush* is recited; the second after the story of Passover from the *Haggadah* is told. The third cup is reserved for after dinner when we say the prayer after the meal (called the Birkat Hamazon) and the fourth is praise and thanksgiving of the Jewish holidays, that we have the freedom to celebrate them – usually at the closing of the entire Seder. There is, of course, a fifth cup of wine reserved especially for Elijah. The important thing about these prayers is that they all end with us raising our glasses up in a toast and crying out *l'chaim* – *to life!*

I do not know if this is merely a familial tradition or something that is observed in other Jewish homes as well but it seems a fitting end for these 450 days of work – *l'chaim!*