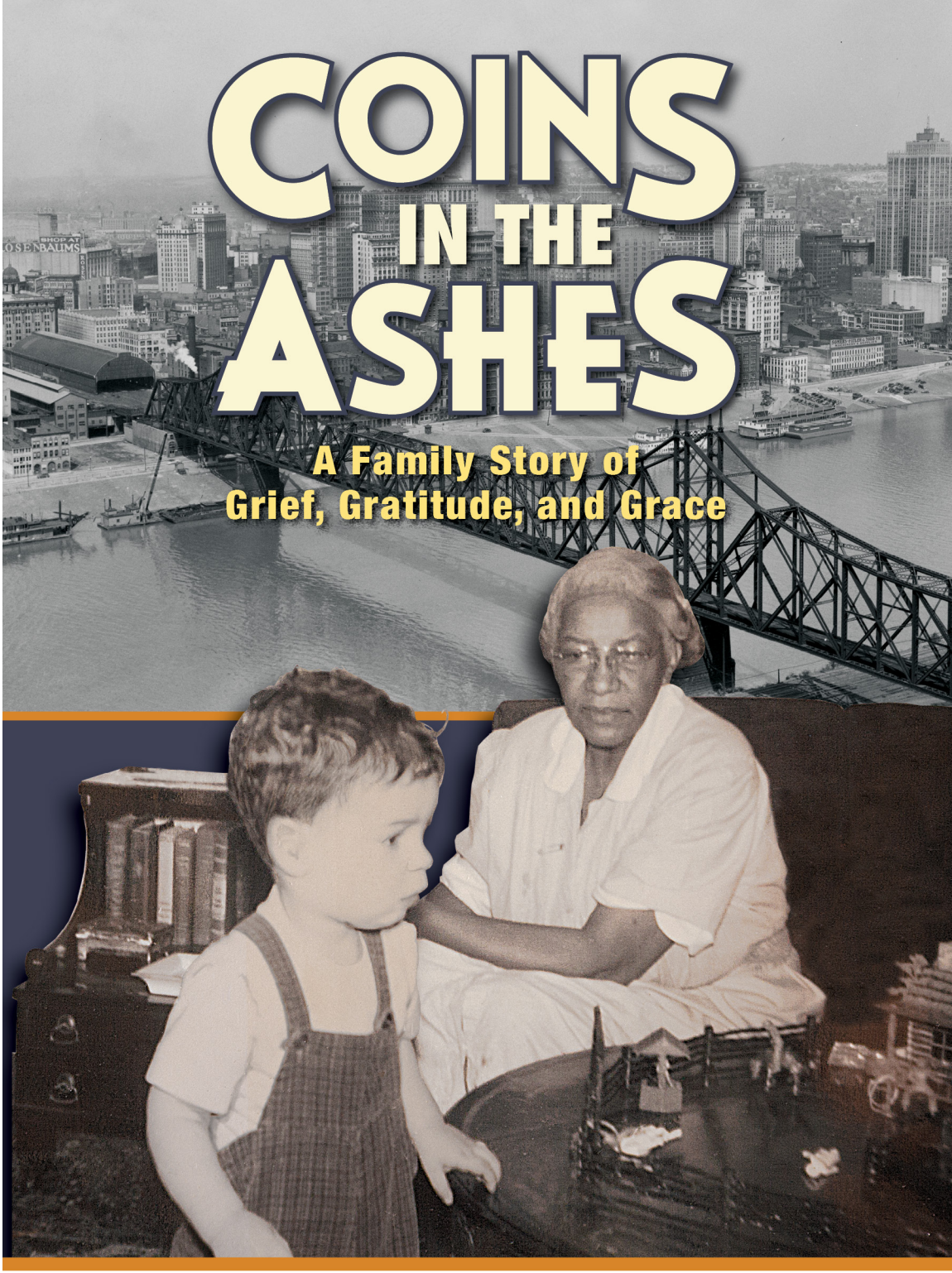
# COINS IN THE ASHES

## A Family Story of Grief, Gratitude, and Grace



JOE MCHUGH

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## A Tale of Two Families

Joe McHugh

Calling Crane Publishing
www.callingcrane.com



Cover Design: Paula McHugh
Front Cover Photo L - Beverly Quinn McHugh, R - Helen Spriggs
Rear Cover Photo L to R - Paula McHugh, Estella Belt, Joe McHugh

Printed in the United States of America

*To Lucy,*

*Spare me those tired mother-in-law jokes;*

*you're the tops*

# Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the many individuals and institutions who aided this pilgrim along his way. My special thanks go to the wonderful members and staff of First Christian Church in Olympia, Washington, my wife Paula, my daughters Anna, Emily, and Clara, my son Patrick, my brother Ed, my cousins Chris, Janna, and Michael, our dear friend Kathy Peck, my brother-in-law John Blasius, Carol Piening, Estella Elizabeth Belt, George Scott, Lydia Mallory, Joe Jackson, Alice Graham, Helen Jackson, James (Timmy) Jackson, Vivian Jackson, Gail Lee Thomas, Connie and Al Koenig, Thomas (Ty) Freyvogel, Bert Barnes, Ed Smyk, Giacoma (Jack) Stefano, June Johnson Dobson, Dr. Linda James, Evelyn Quinn, Sister Edwarda Barry, Sister Maria Cordis, Jimmy McManus, Roland Sainz, Roseann Berube, Jeff Kumar, Donald and Gay Reigel, Judy Bushell, Skip Houser, Denise Graham, Brian Walter, Dr. Louis Bloomfield, Bill Evans, Dr. Daniel Siegel, Dr. Bruce Perry, Dr. Stephen Bezruchka, Morris Kosman, Dr. Rebecca Boehling, Robin Bowers, Bill Shrewbridge, Angelica Santomauro, Jackie and Clair Ebersole, Chris Haley, William Wenner, Kerin Shellenbarger, Dr. Laurence Glasco, David Bukovan, Liz Nelson, Fr. James Garvey, Mary Lynne Pitz, David Grinell, Dr. Eva Simms, Elsa von Eckartsberg, Dr. Arwin Smallwood, Bryna Kaplon, the Loudoun County Black History Committee, Wynne Saffer, Bruce Conklin, and Christine Moon.

# Contents

# Prologue

On a cold winter night in 1931, a lone motorist driving along an isolated stretch of two-lane highway in Sussex County, New Jersey, noticed hungry tongues of yellow flame licking out from under the eaves of a small building next to the road. The building was a hamburger stand called Aunt Kate's, and the motorist, seeing no house nearby, raced down the road until he found a telephone booth where he called in the blaze. By the time the fire engines arrived, however, it was too late; Aunt Kate's was engulfed in flames.

The owners of the ill-fated restaurant were Al and Anna Quinn. When they arrived at the scene of the conflagration, what they found was nothing short of heartbreak: glowing sparks swirling upward in the fire's vortex, the roof caving in, the walls falling away, the despondent firemen in their three-quarter boots rolling up hoses and stowing axes, nothing more to be done.

Nine months earlier, Al and Anna lost their life savings when the bank in the nearby town of Netcong failed. Since then, they had stashed their hard-earned money inside a cigar box tucked behind a sack of Gold Medal baking flour on the bottom shelf of the storeroom at Aunt Kate's. Now the money was burned up, along with the building.

They returned later that morning to survey the wreckage with their daughters: Ruth who was fifteen and Beverly who was nine. The sky was overcast and the forecast called for snow

later that evening. Al handed his younger daughter Beverly an empty coffee can and told her to sift through the ashes to see if she could find any coins. The ashes were still warm and the acrid stench made her eyes smart as she felt about with her little fingers for the hard, round objects. When she found one—the coins were so blackened, she couldn't tell a penny from a dime—she dropped it into the can, where it made a hollow, plinking sound. It was a moment she would remember for the rest of her life: picking through the warm ashes for the meager gathering of coins that was all the money her family had left in the world.

Beverly Quinn was my mother. In 1996, I recorded her stories. I was particularly interested in her memories of her grandparents and her parents and what it was like for her growing up during the Great Depression. Seventy-four and a lifelong smoker, she was recovering from a bout of throat cancer. I had just received funding to produce and host a public radio series called *The Telling Takes Us Home, a Celebration of American Family Stories.* Part of the project required that I travel around the country recording people telling their family stories, not comprehensive family histories, but the anecdotal stories we like to tell at weddings and funerals and family reunions, or perhaps share with close friends and potential spouses. I had made my living as a traditional oral storyteller for more than twenty-five years, but this was my first public radio project and I hoped recording my mother would help me master the use of the high-end recorder and the digital editing software I would be using.

My mother was a delightful woman: witty, well read, and quick to laugh. She was also, like her father, a natural born storyteller, and I thought it likely that I had already heard most of her stories. I was wrong. For two hours and change she regaled me

with one engaging tale after another, painting upon the canvas of my imagination a vivid and detailed picture of what life was like for my family in America during the first half of the twentieth century.

* * *

Born in Paterson, New Jersey, in 1922, her father, Al Quinn, was an auto mechanic and part-time driving instructor. He owned his own garage and supplemented that income with a contract from the Ford Motor Company that paid him to pick up newly manufactured cars at the railroad station in Paterson and deliver them to the Ford dealerships in the area. Early in 1929, however, the number of cars being shipped dropped from dozens to just a few per shipment, and this spooked my grandfather. He had a feeling trouble was on the horizon for the automobile industry, so he sold his garage and convinced my grandmother to purchase a small roadside restaurant in northwestern New Jersey, an area of woods and small farms that was also blessed with numerous lakes popular with summer vacationers seeking to escape the heat and congestion of the cities. Aunt Kate's customers included hunters, road construction crews, timber hicks, and the occasional local stopping by for a cup of coffee and a newsy chat. Sadly, however, my grandparents' bright dream of financial success turned into a nightmare when the stock market collapsed that October and credit dried up across the country. Banks failed, businesses closed, and people were thrown out of work. It got so bad, in fact, that my grandfather resorted to selling illegal hard apple cider from a shack behind Aunt Kate's despite the fact that Prohibition was the law of the land.

Then came the fire in 1931 and that really knocked the props out from under my grandparents. Aunt Kate's was uninsured and they had no money to rebuild. But, as my mother liked to brag, her parents were survivors, the kind of people who

were dogged in their belief that better times were bound to return. And sure enough, after several desperate months trying to find capital to fix and reopen Aunt Kate's, an old friend from Paterson offered to put up the money in exchange for becoming a silent partner and owning the mortgage. By the time I was born in 1950, Aunt Kate's had expanded into a highly successful restaurant and bar, the pride of Sussex County.

As for my mother, she coped with these worrisome times by escaping into the world of books. Behind their rented house grew an old evergreen whose boughs hung to the ground, like a giant's cloak, creating within a room carpeted with a thick layer of pine needles. It was in this magical hideaway that my mother spent her days reading the novels of Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, and the Brontë sisters, familiarizing herself with the attitudes and customs of the wealthy and powerful as well as the destitute and vulnerable. This love of reading assured her success in school. She graduated at the top of her class first at Stanhope Grammar School and then at the Benedictine Academy in Paterson. She went on to college, the first in her Irish/English immigrant family to do so. After a semester at Wilson College in Pennsylvania, she transferred to Georgian Court College in Lakewood, New Jersey. Originally the 155-acre estate of the son of the railroad robber baron Jay Gould, Georgian Court was the school where many elite Catholic families sent their daughters to be educated and made suitable for marriage. As a student at the Court, my mother served as associate editor of the college newspaper and president of the thespian society. She also became friends with a fellow student named Nancy McHugh, whose family owned several woolen mills in Pittsburgh. Nancy's maternal grandfather, Patrick McGraw, founded the business soon after emigrating from Ireland, and it had grown over the years to become one of the city's top manufacturing concerns. The McHughs lived in a

large Tudor-style house with servants in an exclusive section of Pittsburgh called Shadyside. Nancy's older brother Edward studied at Notre Dame.

When the war came in 1941, Ed McHugh joined up, received a commission, and went off to fight with the First Army under Omar Bradley. As a lieutenant and later captain of infantry in an armored battalion, he served in France, Belgium, and Germany. He was wounded three times and received three Purple Hearts. He was awarded the Silver Star for exceptional bravery under fire and the Bronze Star with three clusters. He returned home soon after VE day and promptly asked for my mother's hand in marriage. They settled down to a comfortable life on a small street called Shady Lane in a hilly wooded suburb of Pittsburgh called Fox Chapel.

In 1947, a year after their first child, Edward Jr., was born, my parents hired an elderly black woman to serve as a live-in cook and maid and to look after young Teddy. Her name was Helen. I was born two and a half years later in 1950, and Helen cared for me as well. This was at a time when formula feeding was in vogue among middle class families and neither Ted nor I were breast-fed. Instead, Helen prepared a bottle for us by heating it on the stove and testing the temperature by sprinkling a drop or two on her wrist. She then cradled us in the crook of her arm as we suckled and she sang to us as we drifted off to sleep. My mother shared in the warming of bottles and cradling as well. She too cooed to us, changed our diapers, and fretted when we were colicky. But as the wife of a successful businessman, she had a slew of other responsibilities. She was expected to attend charity balls and dances at the University Club, play in golf tournaments at the Field Club, and go on fishing trips to Canada with my father, who was an avid outdoorsman. What is more, she entertained a steady parade of friends, family, and business acquaintances at her home. It was a busy life, full of unfamiliar demands on my mother's time and energies, but a

life free from the financial anxieties she had known all too well as a child.

In the fall of 1951, when I was a year and a half old, tragedy struck our family. Being the sole male heir, my father was in the process of taking over the family business, but soon after returning home from a trip to Boston to inspect and purchase a shipment of sheep skins from Scotland, he fell ill and was taken to the hospital. Two days later, he was pronounced dead from polio. My mother was four months pregnant with her third child, and she was overpowered by grief and terror that my brother and I had been exposed to the highly infectious virus. My father was buried on the morning of his thirty-third birthday.

Four months later, my mother gave birth to my brother Patrick, but he was a month premature and only lived for forty-eight hours. This second blow, coming so close on the heels of the first, very nearly destroyed my mother, and she fled to the only safe haven she knew, her books, shutting herself away in her bedroom, reading and trying to make sense of what fate had decreed.

Fortunately for my brother and me, Helen was there. She continued to bathe and clothe us, to prepare our carrots and peas as we slapped our palms on the trays of our highchairs. She played referee when we fought over toys and tucked us in at night with a story or a song. There was deep sadness in our home, but there was also light and love.

Time, it is said, is the great healer, and, after years of wandering amongst the shadows, my mother took up the business of living again. In the aftermath of my father's death, the McGraw Wool Company mills were sold and the money put aside for my grandparents to live on. My mother received a life insurance annuity, but she knew that inflation would devour much of it over time. She had to find a job or another husband to support us.

My mother never remarried. In 1953 when I was three, she moved us from Pittsburgh to New Jersey so she could be near her parents and her sister Ruth. She begged Helen to come with us and Helen agreed. My mother sold the house on Shady Lane and we moved to Andover, a small village in Sussex County not far from Aunt Kate's. My mother found a job teaching at a Catholic elementary school and Helen took care of Ted and me. When I was five, we moved again, this time to a house on East 40th Street in Paterson, and soon afterward Helen left us.

Helen was mentioned rarely in the years that followed. There were no letters or visits. It is both sad and true that the Irish handle separation poorly. Our history is marked by the suffering of too many forced partings. As for my family, I do not remember anyone ever explaining to me why Helen left or where she went. One day she was there at the kitchen table with a glass of milk and Oreos when I got home from school, and then she suddenly vanished without discussion or goodbyes.

I assume the social norms of the time informed our relationship with Helen: she was hired help, fairly paid and sincerely appreciated, but everyone was expected to get on with their lives.

"Do you have any regrets?" I asked mother after we finished our interview and I was packing up the recording gear. This wasn't a question I had planned to ask, it just sort of popped out of my mouth, and it felt a bit awkward. Regrets are a funny business. There are the relatively small, unavoidable regrets that come with living, a phone call not returned or a hurtful remark made in the heat of an argument. We may feel their sting for a day or a week, but over time they recede into the mists of forgetfulness. Then there are those regrets that pierce us to the core, perhaps not immediately, but in the years that follow. Rather than diminish, these regrets grow in strength

with the passage of time and come back to visit us, often in the lonely, still hours of the night. We might recall a smaller regret and be willing to share it with others, but the other kind of regret we prefer to keep locked up in some out-of-the-way chamber of our hearts. I know I do.

So what was I asking? My mother stubbed out her cigarette and I could see through the haze of blue tobacco smoke that her expression had grown uncharacteristically serious.

"I have two regrets," she said. "One has to do with Joe Walls and the other is about Helen."

This was far from any answer I might have predicted. Had she said she wished she had remarried or sent me to a military academy when I started to go off the rails in high school, I would have understood. Instead, her regrets centered on Joe Walls and Helen.

* * *

Joe Walls was a black musician who worked at Aunt Kate's for many years. After Prohibition was repealed, my grandparents added a bar to the restaurant, and Joe played piano while my grandfather sang songs to entertain the patrons. My childhood recollection of Joe is of a quiet, kindly man with sorrowful eyes. In 1960, my grandparents decided to retire, and they sold Aunt Kate's and moved to Paterson to live with us in the house on East 40th Street.

"There was a lot of discussion about what would happen to Joe," my mother said, "because he was getting old and had no place to go. The new owners didn't really want him, but after some haggling they agreed to keep him on. But I never felt that was the right decision. Joe was devoted to my parents; they were all the family he had. I wanted him to move in with us so we could take care of him. But Mother and Daddy were against the idea. They said Joe would be fine. I was working

full time and had you kids to take care of, so I didn't push it. A couple of months later Joe was killed when his cottage behind Aunt Kate's caught fire. I've always felt responsible for what happened."

My mother then talked about Helen.

"I remember Helen standing at the door when I got back from the hospital after your father passed away. She knew what had happened, and I was so desperate that I threw myself into her arms and said, 'Please Helen, don't leave me now.' And Helen said, 'I won't leave you, Mrs. McHugh, until you want me to.'

"Helen was true to her word. She remained with us even after we moved to Andover where she didn't know a soul. But after we moved to Paterson, she went to visit her family and didn't come back. I was kind of angry with her, to tell you the truth, because I really needed the help. But she sent a letter and then another saying she had things to take care of, and I stopped writing back. I didn't send her any money or go to her funeral or anything. Helen had done a great deal for us, but I let my frustration get the better of me. That was wrong. I should have stayed in touch with her."

"Do you know how she died? Or when?" I asked.

"No. I lost touch with her."

I too loved Helen, and even though I have only a few distinct memories of her I have always had a feeling that she is nearby, like a wise and kind guardian angel, watching over me and giving me encouragement as I face my own challenges in life. But when I interviewed my mother, I never thought to ask for Helen's last name or where she came from. I accepted as fact that Helen had passed away because she was already a grandmother when I was a child, and that was over fifty years ago. So my mother and I reminisced about Helen and that was that.

Three years later in 1999 my mother passed away. We knew the end was near, but the loss, when it came, was hard to bear. She was always interested in our projects and dreams. Perhaps because she had successfully weathered the storms of life, she was the one in the family everyone turned to for advice and to regain their confidence and optimism.

During 2000, I attended several juvenile justice conferences where I gave speeches on how popular culture and the entertainment industry influence young people. Soon after arriving home from one of these conferences, I was in the kitchen doing dishes or making a cup of tea, I can't remember, but the radio was on. It was tuned to our local public radio station and the host of the program was interviewing an expert on brain development in young children. Given my interest in troubled young people, I found myself paying close attention to what the expert was saying, especially when he mentioned a condition called "sad brain syndrome." He claimed that a young child develops sad brain syndrome when the mother falls into a prolonged state of melancholy during the first three years of the child's life. The developing neural pathways of the child's brain, in effect, "mirror" the emotional state of the mother, so that for the rest of the person's life, he or she will be prone to depression.

That moment was an epiphany for me. If the expert was correct, I reasoned, then the conditions for sad brain syndrome were present in my own life—I was only a year and half old when my father and brother died and my mother fell into a severe depression that lasted several years.

The interview continued but I was miles and years away. Was I temperamentally prone to depression? Did I have a sad brain? I remember my childhood as a happy time. The nuns at St. Therese's Elementary School taught me my lessons and I spent my afternoons and weekends playing with friends. We were the last generation of "free range" children, roaming

the backyards and alleyways of our neighborhood without restraint, ours a world apart from the adults with their cigarettes and jokes and alien concerns—until, that is, dinner or darkness drove us inside.

My Uncle George was fond of taking eight-millimeter home movies, and whenever the camera falls on me I am smiling. So I guess I was a happy kid.

However, everything changed during my adolescence. It was as if an invisible hand threw a switch. I lost interest in school and turned my attention instead to folk music, which in the 1960s was finding a new audience among young urbanites like myself. I bought an acoustic guitar and spent my weekends trying to bluff my way past the bouncers at the clubs along Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village, so I could listen to the likes of Dave Van Ronk and Richie Havens. I did graduate high school, but just barely, and the family packed me off to a small Catholic college in New Hampshire hoping that the good fathers would turn this fatherless youth around.

I liked college and was drawn to the natural beauty of New England. Best of all, I was given the opportunity to host a weekly evening show on the college radio station, where I could share the music I loved with my fellow students; artists like Blood Sweat and Tears, The Jefferson Airplane, and Bob Dylan. And I might have stayed, but the year was 1968 and the world beyond the college's walls was being turned upside down by political assassinations, antiwar rallies, and race riots. There were also outdoor rock concerts, communes with teepees, and roving troupes of actors and musicians, and my youthful, restless soul was powerless to resist these siren calls. So I packed my bags, bid the priests goodbye, and set out to hitchhike around the country, wintering first in Florida and then wandering back and forth across the Midwest. I eventually returned home to Paterson and worked through a summer selling ice cream from the back of a truck with the words

Frosty Maid painted on the side. With the money I earned, I purchased a used VW van and drove it across the country to California where I learned how to make custom leather belts, purses, and sandals and sell them on the sidewalk in front of Cody's Bookstore on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley.

Six months later, I moved up the coast to Oregon and traded my van to a farmer for a vintage school bus he once used to transport raspberry pickers. I converted the bus into a traveling leather shop with an old-fashioned wood cook stove and living quarters in the rear. I then drove the bus across the country, stopping for a day or a week in college towns along the way to peddle my leather goods. After some months of this pleasant vagabonding, I wound up in the mountains of West Virginia where, with a loan from the Kanawha Union Bank, I purchased an eighty-acre farm with a house and three barns for six thousand dollars. I also took over the recently closed shoe repair shop in the nearby town of Glenville. The previous owner, an elderly Italian man named Camelo Nocida, sold me his shoe repair equipment and the business for no money down and taught me the trade for free. He became a second father to me.

Next I got into a tussle with the Monongahela Power Company over a twenty-five dollar deposit, and they turned off the electricity to my farm. Thus, for the next four and a half years I lived without electricity, although I did have power in my shop in town.

Understandably, my mother was seriously distressed by what was happening to her youngest child. It must have seemed as if I had been taken over by aliens, like one of those movies that scared me when I was a youngster: Invasion of the Body Snatchers, or maybe Invaders from Mars.

Yet despite this, my mother never lost faith in me. She was sure I would come around in the end and she even braved the lengthy drive to West Virginia through countless steep hairpin

turns just to see how her son was faring.

My brother, by comparison, made his way successfully through college and went on to earn a law degree. All my first cousins graduated from college as well, and each found steady, well-paid jobs. Like my brother, each got married and settled down to the joys and challenges of a middle-class existence.

As for me, from age seventeen until my mid-twenties, I was a long-haired, self-styled mystic, perpetually broke, one of a small group of back-to-the-land urban refugees hiding out in the hollers of the Appalachian Mountains, growing organic vegetables and waiting for society to collapse under the weight of its mindless consumerism, war mongering, and disregard for the environment.

I learned to play the fiddle and the banjo. By luck or the decree of fate, the town of Glenville hosted one of the best old-time music festivals in the country. It took place in June and young folk musicians from all over the country traveled to Glenville to learn the old tunes from a handful of elderly men and women who had received their music, not from the radio or recordings, but from their mothers and fathers, their uncles and aunts. It was authentic American roots music, simple and unadorned, but imbued with a unique and potent mythical energy that reached back to the days when Europeans first made their way up into those ancient, trackless mountains.

I have many fond memories of that period in my life in West Virginia. But there were bad times, too: a pair of romantic disasters, the suicide of a friend and fellow back-to-the-lander, and the tragic murder of another friend. I was also separated from two children I dearly loved.

I have never been suicidal, which is perhaps interesting given my candidacy for having a sad brain, but those stretches of pain, confusion, and self-doubt shook me to my very core and helped me see what was truly important in life. One of those things was traditional music because it gave me the

strength and joy to persevere. I was so taken with the music, in fact, that I eventually sold my farm and moved to Scotland, so I could study the fiddle music of the Highlands, while working at a home for mentally disabled adults.

After a time my mother was diagnosed with cervical cancer and I returned to the United States to be near her as she underwent months of treatment until she was cured.

So these were my thoughts more or less that day in 2000 after listening to the brain development expert on the radio. And all mixed up with these reflections was the reality of Helen and the possibility that, during those early, formative years when my mother was emotionally unavailable, Helen had intervened to give me the psychological and spiritual capacity to handle whatever challenges fate threw my way. Helen had, in other words, saved me from having a sad brain. I used the word "possibility," because I understood very little about the mind, the brain, and the formation of neural pathways in response to cues from one's caregivers.

All the same, a plan took shape in my mind. I would try to find Helen's family and thank them for everything that Helen did for my family and me. During the interview, my mother mentioned that Helen raised children of her own before coming to work for us. Where were they now, I wondered? Where were the grandchildren, the nephews and nieces? Would it be possible to locate them? I imagined myself knocking on their door one day and saying something like: "Hi, I'm Joe McHugh. You don't know me, but your grandmother Helen saved my life."

How would they respond? Would they welcome me into their home? Would they tell me stories about Helen, show me pictures of her?

I had only one photograph of Helen. It was glued to a page inside my baby book and showed Helen in a starched white

uniform sitting on a couch watching me play with toy cowboys and Indians that are spread out on a coffee table. Underneath, written in my mother's hand, is "Christmas 1951," which means I am not quite a year old and my father is still with us. (On the next page under the headings for First discovered his own hands, First sat up, and First dressed alone, my mother wrote, "His nickname, given by Helen, is 'Pretty Eyed Baby.'")

There was, however, a problem with my plan. I never thought to ask my mother for Helen's surname, or where she came from. She had always been just "Helen."

I called my brother on the phone later that evening and asked him if he knew Helen's last name.

"No," he said. "We just called her Helen. Why do you ask?"

I told him about sad brain syndrome and explained that I wanted to find Helen's family.

"Do you know if she was from Pittsburgh?"

"I don't think so. She might have come from Maryland, but I don't know why I think that."

"I thought I heard she was from South Carolina," I said.

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"Would anyone else in the family know her last name?"

"Try Aunt Nancy. She'll know if anyone does."

My father's sister lives in an upscale retirement community just north of Chicago. Her husband died some years ago, and she is the last of her generation in the family. I got Aunt Nancy on the telephone.

"Aunt Nancy, do you remember Helen who used to work for us in Pittsburgh?"

"Oh yes, I remember her."

"Do you know her last name?"

She thought for a moment:

"No, I don't. We had a black woman who worked for us for years. Her name was Lucille."

"Was Helen from Pittsburgh?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think my parents used an agency to hire her?"

"I don't think so. It was done mostly through friends. They knew someone who knew someone. I don't remember how we got Lucille, but I'm sure that's how we found her."

"What happened to Lucille?" I realized Aunt Nancy had not mentioned Lucille's last name either. When Ted and I visited our grandparents in Pittsburgh as children an elderly white lady would come to the house on Devonshire Street to look after us when the adults went out. Her name was Mrs. Kuhns and she sat quietly in the living room reading a book, her hair tied back in a tight bun, while we watched TV upstairs or tore around the basement on tricycles. We always addressed her as "Mrs. Kuhns." Black servants, on the other hand, were just called "Helen" or "Lucille."

"We gave Lucille a pension after the children were grown and she was too old to cook and clean," Aunt Nancy said. "But I can't tell you anything about Helen."

I was no more successful in my conversations with my cousins Mike and Janna, two of Aunt Ruth's children. Mike is seven years older than me, and he remembered Helen quite well because he and Janna often stayed at our house in Andover. Janna, three years my senior, also remembered Helen, but neither cousin could shed light on Helen's identity or place of origin.

So I reluctantly gave up the idea of finding Helen's family and turned my attention to other projects, and the years passed.

Then late one night in 2008, my cousin Chris, the youngest of Aunt Ruth's three children, called me on the telephone from his home in Connecticut. He had come across a box of letters among his late mother's belongings. Many of the letters were written by my mother and mailed to Ruth or my grandmother, Nanny. Chris picked a letter out of the bundle at random and read it to me over the phone. We had never

discussed my desire to find Helen's family because he was too young to have remembered her. I am also quite sure Mike and Janna never mentioned it to him, nor did my brother.

The letter began with news about a snowstorm in Pittsburgh and a party my mother attended. Then my cousin read this paragraph:

*"On Sunday Helen got a message that her grandson burned to death down in Maryland. He was only nineteen and had a child himself under a year old. She left immediately for home and I got a message later that he burned in her house, so she is staying down there for a week to ten days to collect her insurance."*

I was stunned and elated at the same time. I asked if there was an envelope with the letter and he said there was. Could he make out the postmark?

"It's faded," he said. "It's either April 25th or the 28th, 1952. It's hard to tell."

My thoughts raced. Would it be possible to find Helen's family with just this scrap of information? I still did not know her last name, and, if the young man who died in the fire was her daughter's son, then he would have had a different last name. There was, however, one thing in my favor: Maryland is a small state.

The next morning I spoke with an archivist at the Maryland State Archive, and he told me I had too little information for them to be of any help. He suggested I consult newspapers from 1952 to see if I could find an obituary or a news article about the house fire that might lead me to Helen's family. He recommended I visit the Library of Congress because the library had microfiche copies of all the Maryland newspapers.

Then a friend who is a college professor suggested I hire an historian in Washington, DC, to conduct the initial research. An academic, he assured me, would have the proper training,

and, if he or she came up empty-handed, I would have saved myself the cost of the trip and a great deal of time. Failure was, I had to admit, a real possibility given the subject of my inquiry—a poor, young black man who met his end in some unknown town in Maryland in 1952. All the same, I was loath to outsource the work. As a boy I relished the Hardy Boys detective novels, and now fate had handed me a real mystery, and it was up to me to solve it.

However, I couldn't do anything for several months because I had two audio projects to complete, and as the weeks passed, a desire grew within me to expand the scope of my quest. I wanted very much to find Helen's family, if that was possible, but I also wanted to learn more about my mother's early life, to walk in her footsteps and experience the world, if only slightly, as she did. She had provided me with a wealth of stories the day I interviewed her, which taken together constituted a kind of map. I would begin my journey by visiting Hell's Kitchen in New York City, the rough and tumble neighborhood where my maternal grandfather was born and raised. Then I would visit Paterson, where my mother and grandmother were born, and Sussex County where my mother fell in love with books and picked through the warm ashes to find blackened coins. From there, I would travel to Georgian Court, now a university, and, if possible, talk to some of the elderly nuns who still live on the campus. It was a long shot, but perhaps a nun would remember my mother. I would then head south to Washington, D.C., to see what I could learn at the Library of Congress.

I also wanted to visit Pittsburgh and learn about my father's life before it was cut short by polio. I wanted to visit Shady Lane, the street we lived on in Fox Chapel, and the Field Club where my father and paternal grandfather played golf and hobnobbed with the upper crust of Pittsburgh society. I also wished to see if the woolen mills were still standing and talk to some of the descendants of the men and women who once

worked in the mills and whose sweat and toil enabled an Irish immigrant family to succeed in America.

I knew remarkably little about the Pittsburgh side of my family, even though we visited my grandparents in that smoke-shrouded city at least twice a year up through my teenage years. But no one ever told me stories about my father or the McGraw Wool Company. Perhaps those memories were too painful to share, even decades later.

Of one thing I was sure; I wanted more than raw information: birth certificates, census records, data of that sort. I hungered for the stories that would give meaning to the information, to gather and weave the disparate narrative threads from my family's past into a cloth from which I might make a garment of understanding, like my namesake's coat of many colors. What was it all about, the struggle and yearning, the grand dreams and bitter disappointments? How did my mother and Helen fit into all of it?

I once read that the primary purpose of a legacy is to provide the person who receives it the means to properly say goodbye. This sounds simple, saying goodbye, but of course it seldom is. Sometimes we need to take time off from work to grieve, to visit old haunts, or to patch up a disagreement with a sibling. We might spread ashes on a mountaintop or the surface of a cherished lake. One way or another, our task is to bring the universe back into balance so that each ending leads to a new beginning. A legacy can give us the time and space we need for reflection and the rituals of leave-taking and commemoration. And there was the unfinished business of my mother's regret regarding Helen. With luck, I might be able to complete that circle for her as well.

I decided to trust my intuition and follow the story both physically and psychologically from beginning to end, like reading a novel, no cheating by jumping to the last pages to see if it all works out. Maybe the end needs to be unresolved, a

cautionary tale about how culture, class, and race will separate us if we allow it.

But my heart told me that I would find Helen. And not just her descendants, but in some essential way, I would find her, my other mother.

I also hoped I would learn something about myself and how families—perplexing and unpredictable as they often are—can serve as crucibles in which our personalities and very souls are fashioned. I owe these two remarkable women, these two mothers, a great debt. The journey and the writing of this book are but partial payment.

Joe McHugh, 2009, Olympia, Washington

# Chapter 1

## *The Ten O'Clock Dunnigan*

*"So it goes like it goes and the river flows,*
*And time it rolls right on,*
*And maybe what's good gets a little bit better,*
*And maybe what's bad gets gone."*

—Lyrics by David Shire & Norman Gimbel

My mother's hazel eyes shone with pleasure and pride whenever she talked about Hell's Kitchen, the neighborhood in New York City where her father, Al Quinn, the man I called Poppy, was born and raised. She could have just as easily felt shame, because for much of its history Hell's Kitchen was synonymous with poverty and crime. Roughly speaking, it is a district on the west side of Manhattan between 34th and 59th Streets, and between Eighth Avenue and the Hudson River. Early Dutch settlers called it the Vale of Flowers because of the wild blossoms that blanketed its meadows in summer. The Vale was home to mostly small farms until the building of the Hudson River Railroad in 1851, which brought in industry and legions of workers with families in tow, fresh off the boat from Ireland and Germany. By the time Poppy was born in 1892, the neighborhood was a jumble of tenement buildings, slaughterhouses, glue factories, lumberyards, distilleries, and stables, flanked by a procession of wharves that combed the waters of the Hudson River for passengers and freight like the teeth of a giant rake.

I decided the best way to begin my quest to recover the past is to do a walkabout in Hell's Kitchen. I also decided to interview Jimmy McManus, the director of one of the oldest funeral homes in the neighborhood. I contacted Mr. McManus because my great-grandfather, John Quinn, was a funeral director in Hell's Kitchen at the turn of the twentieth century. Perhaps Mr. McManus can shed some light on the funeral business and living conditions back then.

After catching a flight from Seattle to Newark and spending the night at my brother's house in Montclair, New Jersey, I ride the bus into Manhattan. I push through the doors of the Port Authority Building onto 8th Avenue, my jet-lagged brain scrambling to process the intense aural stimulation that is New York City: the ever-present staccato of jack hammers, the squawking of car horns like so many excited birds, the squeal of bus brakes as they kiss the curb. Then there are the animated voices colliding and merging with each other: English, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Mandarin. New York is a city of talkers. It is also a city pulsing with purpose: a salesman flagging a taxi for an important meeting uptown, a mother hurrying her children toward Radio City, a shy Korean couple climbing the steps of a double-decker sightseeing bus—even the street hustlers go about their business with a determination that would make their mothers proud.

On this particular spring day in 2009, my purpose urges me west on 43rd Street into the heart of Hell's Kitchen. Sometime in the 1970s, the city fathers renamed the drug and crime-ridden neighborhood Clinton in honor of a former mayor. This attempt at urban etymological rehabilitation, however, failed to win many converts in the neighborhood, and, as if to underscore this, I come upon a restaurant with the words HELL'S KITCHEN emblazoned above the door. I check out the menu but the hefty prices keep me from going inside. I pass more upscale restaurants and gastropubs, art galleries and

antique stores. I am surrounded by young urbanites happily pushing three-wheeled baby strollers down the street, even though the city and the country are suffering through the worst economic depression since the 1930s. All the same, the sun is shining, businesses are open, and nobody has blown up a city building in the last eight years. Life goes on.

I eventually arrive at the McManus-Ahren funeral home at 445 W. 43rd Street. The proprietor, seventy-four-year-old Jimmy McManus, inherited the business from his father. And like his father, Jimmy is a district leader for the Democratic Party, one of the last genuine Tammany Hall bosses—the man to go to for a judgeship, to get your kid out of jail, or sort out your union troubles. Jimmy is an unapologetic it's-not-*what*-you-know-but-*who*-you-know kind of guy.

"I'll tell you a story about how reputations go," he begins in a voice cured by decades of tobacco smoke. "We had these boat rides from the schools. I went to Powell Memorial High School, an Irish Christian Brothers school, and we'd go on a boat ride up to Indian Point each year. One time, my friend Donald and I met these two girls on the boat. They were our age, seventeen, eighteen, and we're coming off the boat with them and they said, 'Where do you live?' And we said—Donald came from the same block as me—'49th Street and Tenth Avenue.' And they looked at us and cried, 'Hell's Kitchen' and they *ran*!"

Jimmy laughs. "They actually ran away from us. That's the kind of reputation Hell's Kitchen had."

We talk about the Irish gangs of Hell's Kitchen, and Jimmy mentions the Westies—the most notorious and latest reincarnation in a long line of street thugs. In Poppy's day, the Gorillas, Parlor Mob, Fashion Plates, Pearl Buttons, and Gophers prowled Hell's Kitchen making life miserable for the cops and one another. Individual gang members sported colorful monikers as well, handles like Stumpy Malarkey, Goo Goo Knox, Happy Jack Mulraney, and One-Lung Curran.

Burglary, murder, and extortion were so commonplace that one newspaper labeled Hell's Kitchen, "the most lawless area on the North American continent." The police considered some blocks, such as the infamous Battle Row—West 39th Street between 10th and 11th Avenues—so dangerous that they refused to patrol them alone.

For the first time the thought comes to me that Poppy might have been a member of a gang when he was young; there were numerous stories of Poppy clearing out crowds of rowdy toughs from Aunt Kate's using his fists or a baseball bat, so he knew how to handle himself. But he never mentioned any of the Hell's Kitchen gangs. He also adored the police. One reason for this, I suspect, was that his father had a twin brother who served as one of New York's finest. We have a portrait of the man hanging in our house, a beefy Irishman sporting an impressive mustache and dressed in a double-breasted, brass-buttoned uniform with a string of medals across his chest. He looks like he would enjoy nothing better than cracking a drunken hooligan over the head with his nightstick.

Poppy's own father, John Quinn, was a mild-mannered fellow, a reassuring trait for an undertaker, and the polar opposite of his law-and-order twin. He loved reading, and once arranged a funeral in exchange for a set of leather-bound books published in 1754 that my mother inherited when she was in her teens. He never raised his voice in anger or disciplined any of the children. And there were many children: four girls and two boys of his own, and another two belonging to his sister-in-law. The Quinns took in an additional five when a couple in the neighboring apartment died, making a total of thirteen children.

"When the nuns told my father I was playing hooky from school," Poppy once told me, "my father sat me down and said very calmly, 'Now you know, Albert, you're only hurting yourself.' Of course I was hurting myself but I was a kid, how

would I know that? What he should have done was taken his belt to me; that would have straightened me out."

The result of this well-meaning, albeit ineffective, parenting was that Poppy dropped out of school after third grade, and for the rest of his life he went to great lengths to conceal the fact that he could barely read or write.

John Quinn was also an alcoholic waiting to happen. He dealt with this destructive proclivity—what the Irish call the Curse—by taking the pledge to the Sacred Heart, a solemn promise not to taste a drop of the "creature" for a period of seven years. The family claims John was true to his word. But as the months, then weeks, and finally days, wound down to the end of the term, his wife, Molly, began to fret and she instructed her children to keep a close eye on their father.

Alas, fourteen pairs of eyes were simply not enough, and John always found his chance to steal away undetected and go on a bender. Three days later he reappeared: clothes disheveled, money spent, and memory scoured clean of where he had been or what he had done. Then John Quinn would march straight down to the church and take the pledge again for another seven years. He went on like this until the day he died in his mid-eighties.

Molly, meanwhile, was not without her own idiosyncrasies. One was her compulsion to change all the furniture in the apartment every five years. It worked like this; at breakfast one morning she would announce to the family that she was going shopping. She donned her best hat, gathered up her purse, and strode off through the bustling streets of Hell's Kitchen with the pertinacity of a bull terrier. Later that afternoon a horse-drawn van would pull up in front of their building and a pair of stocky workmen would begin the arduous task of lugging every stick of the Quinns' "dated" furniture down the narrow stairs and out onto the sidewalk. They would then carry up the new replacement furniture. It was an expensive bit of

fancy, but John never protested—the wise know that marital harmony has its price—and life in the Quinn household went on the same as before, only now the furnishings were ever so new.

"People romanticize the cold water flat today," Jimmy tells me, "but back then it was rough living. When my father was young, there wasn't any indoor plumbing. Instead, there was an outhouse in the yard behind the tenement, along with a water tap. A washtub hung on the wall in the kitchen. That's what you took a bath in, and you heated the water on a potbelly stove, which meant you had to carry a large barrel of coal up four or five flights of stairs. When I was a kid, twenty cents worth of coal filled the barrel, and it was a real job carrying the barrel up that many stairs, I can tell you."

The photographer Jacob Riis comes to mind and the pictures he took of the tenements from that period. I try to imagine how difficult life must have been for the people of Hell's Kitchen: the crowding, disease, drunken brawls, prostitution, and political cronyism. But I never heard these stories growing up. Not even the "You-kids-today-have-it-so-easy, why-when-I-was-growing-up…" bromide. Instead, Poppy regaled us with funny stories, as if his childhood were one grand adventure, which perhaps in his memory it was. The Irish, by necessity, have learned how to conceal the soiled rags of hardship underneath the bright fabric of humor, and Poppy was no exception.

However, there was one story Poppy told whenever his sisters came to visit that gave us a flavor of the conditions he knew as a child. I met my great aunts only a couple of times and remember them as very proper Irish ladies in dark, old-fashioned dresses above black shoes with thick heels. They held their teacups in their laps and stiffened whenever Poppy reminisced about their lives growing up in Hell's Kitchen. Each was understandably proud of having escaped the squalor and indignities of the Old Neighborhood, as they called it, for nice,

respectable homes in New Jersey and the Bronx. Therefore, they did not appreciate it when Poppy brought up the Ten O'Clock Dunnigan, which I suspect he did just to nettle them.

"Oh, Al, you know that's not true." Great-aunt Agnes would protest.

"There was no such thing as the Ten O'Clock Dunnigan," Great-aunt Nellie would exclaim, vexation knitting her brows. "You just want to shock everyone."

But Poppy was seldom hushed, and with blue eyes sparkling, he would launch into the tale.

"When I was a kid, there were no indoor toilets, so everybody used chamber pots."

At this Great-aunt Agnes would retreat to the kitchen to wash out her cup, while Great-aunt Nellie rummaged in her purse looking for a handkerchief, now seemingly deaf to anything Poppy might say.

"We were supposed to carry the pots downstairs and dump them in the outhouse in the yard. Well, every night, at exactly ten o'clock, the streets of Hell's Kitchen would empty. There'd be nobody on the stoops or strolling down the sidewalks. Then people in the buildings up and down the street would push open their windows and fling out the contents of their chamber pots. In the neighborhood we called it the Ten O'Clock Dunnigan."

As a youngster, I was fascinated by this earthy intelligence and my mind's eye beheld cascading yellow streams splashing into gutters filled with horse manure and tobacco spittle. How different Poppy's world was from the one I knew in 1960, where sparkling porcelain toilets flushed every time I pushed the chrome handle, and mermaids and sea horses cavorted across the bottom of the plastic shower curtain.

"Funeral directors were respected," Jimmy says by way of helping me place the Quinns in the pecking order of Hell's Kitchen. "They were a level above the workers, the people who

worked the docks, dug ditches, took in laundry, or worked in the slaughterhouses. They were businessmen and always walked around in shirts and ties. Back then, undertakers usually buried the people from their houses. Most had a little store but they'd lay out in the homes. They'd have to drag up all the chairs, the whole bit, and set up a funeral parlor in the living room. Then, of course, the wake went on for three nights and nobody slept. A big bouquet of flowers would be put on the front stoop of the apartment building to tell people in the neighborhood that somebody there had passed away, and that a wake was going on. The whole neighborhood would come. As I said, it was twenty-four hours a day for three days. Funeral homes like we have today in the city are really only fifty to sixty years old. Before that the undertaker did the embalming right in the bed, in the apartment."

Nearing the end of our conversation, I return to the subject of criminality in Hell's Kitchen and ask Jimmy how the community protected itself from the predatory impulses of some of its residents.

"The criminals were mostly in bookmaking—they weren't hit men or anything like that, although we had hit men—but they were the best ones with the senior citizens. They'd go to the stores for them, you know, and bring their food up to their apartments."

"But what did you do when someone was just mean, if he had his wires crossed, and didn't care about anybody?"

Jimmy lights a cigarette, and, after a couple of puffs, he replies, "I'll give you a good example. He's still alive. A guy named Lenny. Lenny was a terrible drunk. I remember his poor mother. Beautiful skin, I'll never forget it. A little chubby woman, but her skin was as white and pure, and she would say, 'My poor Lenny.'

"Well, poor Lenny, he started fights with everybody, robbed cars, did everything. And so they told him he couldn't do it in

the neighborhood.

"'We don't care what you do outside the neighborhood,' they told him, 'but you don't do it here.'

"But you couldn't tell Lenny anything. Never won a fight in his life, but he never laid down. He always got up. So they took him up to the roof and threw him off."

Jimmy shakes his head and then takes another drag on his cigarette.

"What happened is, they threw him in the back and he hit the clothes lines going down, so it didn't kill him, but it damaged his brain and his movements. And he's very crippled today. But that's what they did. They gave him warnings, you know, plenty of warnings, but eventually they got fed up. He was a nasty son-of-a-bitch, and they just threw him off the roof."

Packing up my recording gear and bidding Jimmy goodbye, I continue my circuit of the neighborhood. I walk past a number of theaters and restaurants until I come upon the Actor's Studio where Marlon Brando, Marilyn Monroe, and Robert De Niro cut their thespian teeth. I begin to see a connection between Hell's Kitchen and the theatrical world in Poppy's early life, and, by extension, perhaps my own. Poppy was gifted with a fine tenor voice and he always found an opportunity at family get-togethers to launch into a song. He never sang traditional Irish ballads—there was no "Mother Machree" or "Danny Boy," not even the Americanized "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling." Instead, he preferred the Tin-Pan Alley songs of his youth, songs such as "What Goes Up, Must Come Down" and "Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries."

My mother's favorite story about Poppy took place when he was fifteen years old. He had no interest in his father's undertaking business, so he took a job with a wigmaker who plied his trade among the leading vaudevillians of the day. One

evening Poppy was navigating his way through the crush of performers and stagehands backstage at a theater near Times Square. He was balancing several wig boxes, one on top of the other, and singing a popular ditty of the day.

At that moment, the actress Elsie Janis stepped out of her dressing room into the passageway. Miss Janis was a headliner on the vaudeville circuit who regularly performed on the Broadway and London stage. She would go on to entertain troops on the front lines during World War I and be immortalized as "the sweetheart of AEF" (American Expeditionary Force) and end her career as a film actress and screenwriter in Hollywood.

"Come in here, young man," she said to my grandfather. "I want to talk to you."

Poppy recognized the vaudeville star from the posters and dutifully obeyed the royal summons. He was a vigorous young man, straight of limb, with thick dark wavy hair, and fine Celtic features—the spitting image of James Cagney if early photographs are to be trusted. But Miss Janis was concerned only with his voice.

"Sing another song for me," she said.

"What kind of song?"

"Anything. I just want to hear you sing. Don't be shy."

So Poppy began a song, one I heard him sing many times over the years:

*"Paddle your own canoe,*
*After tonight we're through,*
*If you think you're going to two-time me,*
*This is one time I'm going to disagree.*
*I've overlooked a lot.*
*Loving you oh so what,*
*So just forget, forget we ever met,*
*And paddle your own canoe."*

He finished the verse and was pleased to see Miss Janis smiling.

"Young man, if you are interested, I want to offer you a job," she said.

A week later the new act premiered. After the jugglers and slapstick comedians had done their best and exited the stage, the headliner, Miss Elsie Janis, made her grand entrance. She moved like an angel in a bone-white satin evening gown adorned with rhinestones that sparkled in the glow of the footlights. The audience, most of them newly-arrived immigrants from Europe with hearts bruised by the sadness of separation, grew quiet with anticipation. They longed for the release of tears, and Elsie Janis, master of the sentimental song, knew how to coax them to the surface. Her signature piece was about a young lover who had gone away, never to return. Like Orpheus of old, he had won her heart with songs of love. But alas, an unkind fate intervened, dashing their hopes of wedded bliss. And her crowning despair was that she would never again thrill to hear his pure, sweet voice.

Suddenly, from high up in the third balcony, a second voice sang out, the voice of the lover singing to his sweetheart. The audience gasped in surprise as they swung about in their seats, craning their necks to see who was there. Then they smiled, some would laugh, and thunderous applause erupted as the rapturous duet came to an end.

The voice of the absent lover, as you might have guessed, belonged to my grandfather. In fact, the novelty piece proved so popular that Miss Janis offered to take her fifteen-year-old protégé on tour with her and give him his own start in show business.

"But Daddy turned her down," my mother sighed whenever she told this particular tale. "His mother thought theater people were disreputable, and besides, Daddy was in love with automobiles. He built and raced them. So that was that."

I step into Smith's Bar on the corner of 8th Avenue and 44th Street for a sandwich and a beer. Many of the older Irish bars are gone now, but in Poppy's day they were the heart of the neighborhood. Like funeral directors, bar owners were respected members of the community. They were independent of the working class hierarchy, answering to no boss, and they exercised complete authority over what happened inside their establishments. Even the cops respected them.

"You had to be a tough character to run a saloon," I recall Jimmy McManus's comment as I sip my beer, "because when they drink, five-foot-six people become six-foot-six people."

So maybe it is not that surprising that Poppy, ill-fitted by temperament for the role of undertaker, would, in the course of time, choose to own a bar.

I make my last stop of the day on 40th Street between the Croatian Church of St. Cyril and a Mercedes-Benz dealership. This is as close as I can get to the corner of 39th Street and 11th Avenue where the tenement in which Poppy was born and raised once stood. A victim to progress, it was torn down during the 1930s to make way for the entrance to the Lincoln Tunnel. Commuter buses from the Port Authority line up at the stop light, belching diesel fumes—the work-weary passengers lost in their newspapers or talking on their cell phones—each waiting its turn to pass underneath the Hudson River, alongside stretch limos, SUVs, and taxi cabs. A giant woman caressing a designer handbag smiles down at me from a billboard. Next to her is a second billboard, a suntanned giant lounging about in Calvin Kline underwear.

My imagination shakes off these wet dreams of Madison Avenue and the trance of burning petroleum to savor the impressions of an earlier time in the life of this great city: the rumble of iron-shod wheels over rough cobblestones, the cries of vegetable peddlers and fish mongers, the stench of manure

and coal smoke, the pealing of church bells, and the cry of an infant issuing forth from some upper window.

According to my mother, Irish-Americans of her parents' generation came in two basic models—shanty Irish and lace-curtain Irish. Hell's Kitchen was decidedly shanty Irish: working class, tough as nails, and unpretentious. Another story my mother liked to tell that illustrated these differences was about her Aunt Emma, Poppy's sister, "the most lace curtain of the whole bunch."

When Molly Quinn, my mother's grandmother, died at age eighty-three, my mother was in college, and she took the bus to New York to attend the funeral, which was held at the Church of the Holy Cross on West 42nd Street in the old neighborhood. Poppy's sisters were all living in the suburbs of New York by this time, and they arrived at the funeral with their children and grandchildren. After the service, the family was sorted into several limousines for the trip to a cemetery in Brooklyn. As it happened, my mother rode in the limousine that was positioned behind the hearse. Aunt Emma, Uncle Jack, and their daughters Mildred and Edna Mae were also riding in the limousine. When Aunt Emma was young, everyone called her Emmie. When she reached adulthood, she became determined to rise above her humble immigrant roots, and so reverted to her real name—Emma—and all the children in the family knew better than to address her as Aunt Emmie.

So there was my mother on the jump seat, facing her very proper Aunt Emma in black dress and hat, as the procession inched away from the curb in front of the church. It was a sweltering day, but the windows of the limousine remained up to protect the mourners from the glances of the passersby. They had only gone a couple of blocks when the procession stopped at a red light at the corner of 44th Street and 11th Avenue. While waiting for the light to change, my mother noticed a garbage truck parked next to the curb, surrounded by a cloud of flies.

Suddenly, one of the garbage men flung open the passenger door of the limousine and stuck his head inside.

"Emmie Quinn!" he boomed. "My God, I thought it was you. Don't you remember me? I'm Tommy. Tommy Shea! We used to walk to school together when we were kids. Remember?"

The stench, my mother said, was overpowering and flies began buzzing around inside the car as Aunt Emma, nearly apoplectic with embarrassment, managed to force a smile.

"Oh yes, Tommy. That was a long time ago."

The man's features became sober.

"I heard about your mom, Emmie. I'm real sorry. She was a wonderful woman."

Then he brightened.

"Remember how we used to steal apples from Mr. Brown's cart when he wasn't looking? I'm telling you, Emmie, those were the days."

All Aunt Emma could muster was a nod. Meanwhile, my mother and her cousins were fit to burst, they wanted to laugh so much, but they had enough sense to know that Aunt Emma would kill them if they did. The older woman's mortification was complete as she made a feeble attempt to brush away a fly that had landed on her hat.

Then, thank God, the light changed and the procession began to move forward.

Tommy jumped back from the car and shut the door and yelled,

"I hope to see you again, Emmie."

They turned onto 11th Avenue, the hearse in front, a long line of cars behind, while inside the limousine my mother said you could have cut the air with a knife, the younger women in agony to keep from laughing, while Aunt Emma stared out the window, her face a mask of wounded respectability.