

SOL

In the old days, I took pride, subconsciously, for the most part, in being good-looking. At least good-looking gave me an option, gave me a chance, even though I was small, and definitely "inferior," psychologically. My father, on the other hand – was one of the handsomest motherfuckers probably in all of Brooklyn. He was movie-star good-looking and my Grandmother's darling.

Sol, my father, quit going to school in Brooklyn at a very early age. The question that arises then, is whether he quit before or after he took a fall and broke his head. I think he was about nine when he fell off a scaffold in East New York, so he must have stopped going to school around then. He wandered around and did all those things wild kids did in those days in New York City – I can see him getting into scrapes and fighting all the time – and riding the subway and the ferry and climbing over buildings and exploring alleys and stealing what he could.

Luckily for him, he loved the movies, and started hanging around downtown at the Brooklyn Paramount, offering to run errands and clean up, and they took a liking to him. The projectionists used him for coffee and doughnuts and he learned from them how to "work the machines." Running those projectors turned out to be Sol's Way through the often baffling, to him, demands of adult life.

Once he hit his head as severely as he did, Sol's fate was sealed. And so was mine. Or maybe it was sealed by my Grandfather avoiding the Russian Army in 1905. The trail of genes trickling down the mountain of Time like grainy water. So he ends up falling off a building and I end up where I am now, thinking about women without doing anything about it. The family gene stops here, with me. Sol was "immature" from that moment on, the moment when he hit his head on the concrete sidewalk. Perhaps I should put it in another way – he was soft-headed and soft-hearted, but he still had his looks when he was young.

He lived across the hall from my confused mother and married her when he was nineteen or twenty. I was born about a year later. Beth Moses hospital, on DeKalb, at six o'clock in the morning. My father, Sol, worked delivering cans of "fillum" for RKO until, three more kids later, he broke down and had to be near his mother, which ruined her (my mother's) life forever.

The main thing I'm getting at here is the weirdness of his dying.

"Your father is dying, ya know, he's got cancer of the colon."

I don't know who I heard that from. Could be a cousin, the one cousin in the family who accepted me as a cousin, J., it sounds like her raspy voice. Speaking of voices, me and my father and my brothers all had the same voice. Us, and a couple of uncles. You'd know us anywhere. There's bravado in it, and readiness for

intercourse. Add a Brooklyn accent and it's there. Plus a certain class resentment. Plus a hipster walk.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"He's up in the mountains."

"In the Catskills?"

"You bet. He don't have much further to live," continued J. "and he's got a wife with him."

"A wife?"

"Yeah, a woman he met in the nuthouse."

"What nuthouse?"

"The one they put him in after he got out of jail."

"I didn't know."

"Yeah, they did. And he met a woman in there and he married her."

"Holy shit."

"Yeah. I don't know her name, but I think it's Mary."

"Mary?" A Gentile.

"Yeah."

"What town is he in?"

"Woodbourne. The town with the prison in it."

"I know the town. I had a friend who lived there. In High School."

"You gonna see him?"

"Who?"

"Your father."

"I don't know."

“You gonna go up there?”

“I don’t know.”

“Who wants to go there?”

“Not me.”

“There’s nothing there.”

There’s a minimum security prison there, a farm operation, in a dismal town on the Neversink river, a few miles from where I lived for awhile, as a kid, and I have no interest in going there again. Once, the town had been part of the old Borsht Belt Era, a swinging, busy time, but those days were gone for a while.

“Thanks, J.”

“You’re welcome. Let me know what happens.”

“He’ll die, that’s what happens. I live in California now.”

“Sure.”

“So I don’t know.”

“If you go.”

But I probably won’t. I don’t know what I’m going to do. I feel like I should see the old man. I feel like it’s my duty. Colon cancer, and the man had diabetes his whole life, insulin shots and all. Mary must give him his shots now. Mary from the nuthouse. I haven’t seen him in years, many years. He might not even know who I am. No, he’ll know. He’ll know immediately. The walk, the voice. The intellectual. The Accuser.

Once, when he was still in jail, in Mahwah, New Jersey, I went to see him. I was living in the city at the time and drove up there in my Studebaker. I don’t remember much of what happened, except for some dialogue: “I didn’t do nothin’” and “They were out to get me.” Who could be out to get him? People thought he was harmless and retarded and looked down on him. His nickname was “Ducky.” I must have picked that up. For most of my life, I’ve expected people to “look down on me.” Now, not so much. I see shmucks as they are. And I’m trying to see myself as I am (which seems at the moment, like a virtual impossibility).

Of myself, at the time in Mahwah, I remember almost nothing. Just this impression of Sol, an ordinary proletariat type person behind the glass who had been handsome in his youth but who had lost his trim and his teeth to diabetes and

his pride to imprisonment, but he still spoke with the old bravado. And he had gotten the assigned duty of showing the 16mm shows in the joint, which made him almost happy. He did the same thing at the CC camp during the big war, the one that counted, for which he couldn't enlist because of the diabetes, and bragged about it. He took so much pride in being able to "work the machines."

And he had his heroes: Douglas Fairbanks, John Garfield, on the men's side, and Barbara Stanwyk and Judy Holiday, on the women's. His favorite character was Zorro (as I've mentioned too many times already).

In the good old days of Catskills Vacationland for New York Jews, in the Summer, my father, Sol, was the movie projectionist. Yhe Lyceum Theater. People would line up to go to the movies and then they would go out for "frappes" and ice cream sundaes, and all kinds of extravagant deserts. I was maybe 13 or 14 years old, working my ass off serving the rewards of prosperity and post-war gluttony to the moviegoers.

This was in the fifties. I would get into the movies free and then wave proudly up to the booth and Sol would wave back. I saw a lot of movies. At the end of matinees the people would leave and I'd clean up the seats, looking for loose change. Nights I worked in various luncheonettes, serving the banana splits and sundaes and ice-cream sodas, rushing around like a lunatic. I had to be nimble on my feet. In one luncheonette, we had an amazing counterman at the time - Ruby, because his last name was Rubinstein - who was so fast with the ice cream and the sodas, and the hot chocalates, and the coffees, and the sandwiches -- people would come around just to watch him work. I had to move quickly and be on time, or he'd get all frustrated and start yelling. Orders would back up, the ice cream would melt, etc. He was the best I've ever seen.

I digresss for a moment to tell you more about Ruby, because he had an interesting story. He had real tattoos and had done time and had other marks on his arms. This was very unusual in this one-horse Jewish tourist town which was bulging in Summer and virtually empty in Winter. Ruby was cleaning up and making a new life for himself. I was too young, of course, to understand what was going on, with Ruby and all the other disreputable things the Catskills were famous for: the Factors, the gamblers, the Cuban musicians, the small-time Jewish hoods, the breaking of taboos, the *mambo/cha cha cha* craze, the dirty-joke comedians, the wiseguy college students working as busboys - but I didn't know from junkies in those days, and Ruby was a junkie. He stayed clean for a year or two, sticking it out for the cold Winters, getting married to a nice Gentile girl, and then one day he got arrested for breaking into Dr. Zimmerman's office and stealing drugs. And then he was gone. No doubt he 's dead by now, and still I wish him well. I wish him well. No bullshit with Ruby. He could throw a scoop of ice cream in the air and catch it in his other hand and be processsing a milk shake and an egg-cream at the same time. You had to be there for him.

When I was fourteen, I started working as a busboy. You could write a book about what went on in those Catskill hotel kitchens and dining rooms. I won't even try. Lots of hard work and competition. Sleeping in bunks with three other busboys. The stench. The lack of sleep. The constant badgering and complaining. I got caught stealing one time at the Nevele Country Club. I had been in the habit of bringing home boxes of sugar and tea to my mother – in the hopes that she'd let up on the tithing of my earnings – the Steward, whose name I forget, was walking in one time as I was walking out of the pantry with the goods. Teabags and sugar. He was a nice guy, in retrospect, and instead of calling the cops, he walked me up to the Owner's office, whose name I also forget. He was one of two famous brothers who owned the Nevele Country Club and the Fallsview Hotel. One brother was there. He looked down on me benignly.

"Nu?"

The Steward explains: Poor kid, he's a regular here, from a poor family, he's walking out with boxes.

"What boxes?"

"Tea and sugar."

"You do this every week?"

"No."

"You do it sometimes?"

"Yes."

"You know you could go to jail for this?"

"Yes."

"Are you sorry?"

"Yes."

"Say you're sorry and we'll forget about it."

"I'm sorry."

"Forget about it."

"He still works here?," says the Steward, whose name continues to escape me.

“Sure. But he can’t steal.”

Something like that. A very lucky break. A nice owner. I kept working at the Nevele, weekends and holidays, through high school, so I didn’t get great marks, but I didn’t have to borrow – hustle, really – beg money for lunch anymore. Where was Sol in those days? I draw a blank. Somehow there is no Sol present through high school – not in my memory. The one thing I do remember was being up in the projection booth with him – this must have been when I was in Junior High School (when I was still hustling lunches) – and him trying to teach me how to “work the machines.” In those days, there was these two huge machines which made the light projected onto the screen, and attached to them was the mechanism through which you threaded the film. The basic jobs were getting the light right, threading the machine, splicing, and catching the little spot on a corner of the picture which told you when to switch machines. This was a big deal for my father, who stood at alert, hand on the lever, on guard for the spot, so as to seamlessly switch reels from one projector to another. That much I could do, but when it came to threading the film and getting the arc light right, and splicing (movies got shorter and shorter as they made their theater rounds), I was at a loss. I just couldn’t do it, I was all thumbs, which confounded him.

The real issue was communication. He couldn’t talk to me. It was like we spoke different languages. He spoke in monosyllabic early Brooklyn-accented bursts, it seemed to me, while I was speaking “modern American.” Instinctively, he knew I was sensitive and bright, but he lacked the equipment to handle it, one on one. At home, he could yell loudly and feel like he was being heard. When we were alone, he was hesitant and easily irritated, as though I was putting something over on him. I was, in a way, because I was embarrassed and couldn’t say so. He gave up on me after a while, as a possible projectionist, and he also gave up on the possible father/son relationship. He didn’t feel up to it, and he wasn’t. There was an unbridgable gulf between us, mentally, intellectually. Emotionally, however, he was always instinctively good-natured. I would bring him pepsis and pretzels up to the booth, an occasional cigar, and he’d give me a quarter. That little errand, and the exchanges it entailed, was the essence of our relationship.

So, when I got the call that he was dying, my response was complex and I wasn’t in that great shape emotionally, myself. I felt sad about the situation, but I didn’t want to do anything about it, like traveling East to see him before he died.

My sister wasn’t interested, either.

“No, I’m not going,” she said. “The man was an idiot. You can go, if you want to.”

“I don’t know if I do,” I said.

“No way I’m going up to that hell hole.”

“I hear you.”

“Fucking sonofabitch.”

“Okay, okay.”

“You do what you want.”

“I don’t know.”

“You figure it out, but I ain’t gonna be there.”

That was that. Blanche, my sister, was out. It wasn’t about the funeral, it was about seeing him before he died. I don’t know if anyone went to the funeral at all. Maybe one or two of his sisters, my aunts (who I never saw), and Mary, his wife. I do know where he’s buried, in the Glen Wild Jewish cemetery, off Route 17, in the Catskills, where a lot of the family lies – my Grandfather and Grandmother and one of my brothers and my mother, and a sister, and Sol – it’s all overgrown now with woods and thorns and shrubbery. Nobody is taking care of the place.

The hard part is explaining what he was in jail for and why my sister was so pissed off. I don’t know if I understand the whole story – I was long gone when the whole incident happened – but apparently he went on trial for child molestation. Go figure. He didn’t think there was anything wrong with it. It was all about falling on his head. Or maybe it started centuries before that, in a particularly vicious pogrom, somewhere in the Russian Pale. But as far as Sol was concerned, he was Innocent. An encounter with a girl, whatever her age, meant affection, after all. It was attention of some kind, and an arousal. Seemed perfectly natural to him.

I think of the endless torture and rape and slaughter that goes on permanently in the continually dreadful human condition and this gives a bit of context, but no comfort, no relief. “One day I shit out my bowels,” said my Dad, “stool covered with blood.” He told me this on the phone, when I called to tell him I was coming up to Woodbourne. Somehow he didn’t associate this event with his immanent death. It was only another fact told to him by an Authority. He could take it or leave it.

I drove up there on a depressing, overcast day. Route 17. The same barns and hillsides and lush woodlands and bungalow colonies and billboards that I knew so well as a boy. In the old days, I’d take the Shortline bus company to the City. Back then, July 4th and Labor Day, there’d be a line of cars from the Washington Bridge to Monticello, going about five miles an hour. I never liked that trip, when I went to the city, as a teen-ager, landing in Port Authority and figuring out what to do, where to go. And I never liked going back up to Borsht Belt country. It was one of those times, traveling up and back to the Catskills, staring out the window, when I

wondered deeply if this was real life, really happening, or some kind of nightmare that I could alter somehow with the appropriately intense imagining. Needless to say, it was the usual lousy trip, in a drizzle, though I was old enough now to be living and working in California and driving my own rental car.

It was still drizzling when I got to Woodbourne. The address was on a hillside. I parked on the road below. My father had rented one of those Summer houses that had no heat and that was already fraying and chipping and run down. Strangely, Sol was outside when I got there. I forget what he was doing, or pretending to be doing. But he didn't invite me in, which was alright with me. I didn't want to see what was going on in there, the poverty and the squalor. Once in a while, I could see a woman go by a window. He kept turning to look back at her as I approached. I came within ten feet of him or so and he turned at an angle so he could see me in the corner of an eye and watch out for her, as well.

"Hi, Dad." I had never called him "Dad" before and I don't know what came over me then – a kind of sympathy, I suppose, for a dying man.

"Rent-a-car," he responded, eyeing my car. "They run good."

"Yeah, good car. I like it."

"Ford?"

"Yeah, I think it's a Ford."

"Nice," he said. "I got an old Ford. Keeps right on running." He points to a black '47 or '48 Ford parked in the yard. Everything 's so green, I notice, lush and overgrown.

"What are you doing up here?"

I was startled by the question. "I came to see you," I answered. He still hadn't looked me in the eye.

"Everything all right?"

"Yeah." I was stumped by the question. Everything wasn't all right with me.

"That's good," he said. An awkward silence. Suddenly, Mary comes running out the back door. She's wearing a bathrobe and slippers and runs with quick little steps and then asks, a little too loudly:

"Everything all right, Solly?"

"Sure, Mary. Everything 's fine. This here is my son." He doesn't say my name and she doesn't look at me.

"Good," she says, and does her quick little-step run back into the house.

"That's my wife, Mary," says Sol, proudly, "She 's a terrific woman. Terrific."

"Glad to meet her." I didn't know what else to say. We have yet to make eye contact.

"I heard you're teaching in the city of Los Angeles," he says, after a long, uncomfortable pause.

"I am," say I.

"That's good."

Another wretched pause. "Blanche sends her regards," I say, finally.

"Blanche?" It's as though he can't remember who she is.

"Blanche."

"Is she there, too?"

"No, she's in the city."

"Okay. Good. Thanks."

"I came to see you because of the cancer, Sol." The word, "Dad," doesn't seem appropriate anymore. The word, "cancer," appears to wake him up a bit.

"Yeah." He seems to be thinking something over, but I know he's casting around in his head for words to say about all the grievances in his life. "They don't know what they're talking about," he says.

"Who 's that?"

Suddenly Mary bursts out of the house again and rushes over to Sol. She's maybe heard something aggravated in his voice.

"Everything okay, Solly?"

"Sure. Go back in the house, Mary." Mary runs back in with those quick little steps. We can see her watching us from the kitchen window. Sol still hasn't looked

me in the eye, but he turns to face in my direction – I can see he’s got dentures -- and says, “The doctors and the nurses and the social workers. None of ‘em.”

“None of them?”

“None of ‘em.”

“Holy shit, Man.” Now, It’s “Man,” I’m saying. I’m back on the Brooklyn streets.

“What?”

“Maybe they know what they’re talking about.”

“They don’t. And Mary agrees with me. She doesn’t think so, either. She’s terrific.”

“They say you’re going to die. In a few weeks. I came to say good-bye.” There’s another pause. I look around at the dilapidated housing, the failing gas station next door -- whose owner had twin sons I used to play ball with years ago -- the light drizzle, the trees.

“I’m working,” says Sol, “over in Port Jervis. I’m running the show.” He means he’s working as a substitute projectionist in Port Jervis, a town on the Neversink near the Pennsylvania border. Maybe once a week. Not enough to live on. But enough for him to think he will go on living.

“Good-bye,” I say, “I’m glad I got to see you.”

“Same here, say good-bye to Mary.”

“Say good-bye for me, okay? I gotta go.” And I headed a little too fast down the hill for my rent-a-car. Sol died a few weeks later.

Murray Mednick 2/3/17