

The Poorest Boy in Chicago

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I was allowed, until I was much too old, to punch my maternal grandfather as hard as I wanted, provided I didn't hit him in the stomach. I used to climb him like a mountain, pummeling as he laughed. His head was enormous, its leading feature the family nose, broad and bulbous and quite equal to the task of holding dominion over a wide, powerful face. His hair, though thin, never went completely gray; he Brylcreemed it straight back, the comb tracks visible, in the way of men of his generation. He bore a striking resemblance to Babe Ruth.

Grandpa drove a succession of new white Cadillacs with white leather upholstery. Parked in one of those Cadillacs in front of our tract home in the Los Angeles suburb of Buena Park, Grandpa opened his wallet to show me twelve hundred-dollar bills. He was my idea of a high roller.

When I was seven, Grandpa outfitted me with my first blazer—bright red with embossed brass buttons—and drove to Las Vegas so fast the wind from the window hurt my face.

A highway cop pulled us over near the Nevada border. Somehow Grandpa got him talking about the Dodgers, and was on the verge of charming his way out of a ticket, when I piped up shrilly from the back seat: "I told you you were driving too fast, Grandpa!"

Grandpa put the inevitable ticket next to the millions of dollars in his wallet and pulled back onto Interstate 15, grumbling, "I'll give you a slap."

At the Golden Nugget Casino, Grandpa and I had Shirley Temples while Grandma drank something that made her expansive enough to laugh at everything Jimmy Durante said and invite me on their upcoming trip to Hawaii. Grandpa raised the back of his hand to his mouth and told me confidentially, "Your Grandma's soused."

When Grandma said he had been elected president, I took for granted she meant of the United States. Actually, Grandpa had been elected president of the Sanitary Suppliers' Association of Southern California. He was a founding father of that

organization, having started his factory, Captain Kleenzit, Inc., in 1936. Our home was full of Captain Kleenzit paraphernalia: not just the all-purpose household cleaner, pink and perfumy, but playing cards, pens and pads, and the calendar, all bearing the art-deco Kleenzit logo Grandpa had never changed. One of his company's two annual calendars depicted a different vintage car each month, the other the semi-nude frolickings of a plump and rather overaged nymph named Hilda. The family always got the version with the cars.

There were two Grandpas as well. Mine never swore and rebuked me for doing so ("You've got a filthy mouth, like your father"); the Other Grandpa, I learned after his death, when it fell to Grandma to run the factory, had been the source of innumerable off-color jokes that a Kleenzit trucker would repeat only after issuing warnings to the ladies. I was astonished to discover a massive collage of soft-core pornography splayed out across the wall above the urinals where my Grandpa had peed every weekday of his adult life.

In his last years Grandpa had developed a mysterious blood disease that doctors called a precursor to leukemia. Though he required increasingly frequent transfusions, his life went on more or less as usual, except that he was forced to relinquish his vice presidency of the liberal California Democratic Committee.

On a visit from college, I drove up to my grandparents' home in Laurel Canyon as Grandpa and Beau-beau, the miniature poodle he spoiled rotten, jogged across the

road. I embraced Grandpa while he put up a mild struggle and his customary protest:

"C'mon c'mon c'mon c'mon."

Physical contact made him uncomfortable now that I had grown up, a fact in which I took a perverse delight. I kissed his fat cheeks until he said, as always, "I'll give you a slap."

Only then did I release him. "You look like you're in good shape, Grandpa."

"What do you mean?"

I had pressed a nerve. "Well," I fumbled, "running across the street and everything."

"Big deal!" he snapped. "I'm only seventy-one-and-a-half."

And a half. He had begun again to count his years in fractions, as a child does.

Long, long before, when the notion of achieving such an age would have seemed preposterous, the *Chicago Mirror* had announced a search for "The Poorest Boy in Chicago," upon whose waifish head would descend "Eight Dollars and Forty Cents, in Silver." My grandfather, then six years of age—six-and-a-half, he would have said—was the fruit of that search. "Little Joseph," as the *Mirror* dubbed him, "supports his mother and two infant sisters on his odd-job pittance of seventeen cents per day." In a sepia-toned photograph on the front page of the December 19, 1915 *Mirror*, Grandpa was wearing clean knickerbockers and a saucy, pugnacious expression, as if inviting the reader to repeat an unkind remark about a female member of his family.

Grandpa never spoke about his origins, perhaps because he did not like their memory, or perhaps because he scoffed at the notion that anything could have held him back. He was fond, however, of telling the story of how he had quit his four-pack-a-day smoking habit. It was a remarkably short story. "One day I said, 'Who's the boss? Me or these cigarettes?' I never smoked another. Never missed it." He would give a quick sharp stare to each of his listeners, daring someone to deny it, to deny the lesson in it.

The lesson was that Grandpa had, through clean living and indomitable force of will, rendered himself invulnerable to the weaknesses of ordinary men. And so it dumbfounded us all when a minor piece of oral surgery went sour, Grandpa's red-blood-cell count plunged, and he was taken by ambulance to Cedars-Sinai Hospital.

I flew in from New York, and spent the next month with Grandma. Every morning she stuffed me full of eggs—scrambled with green peppers, with fried salami, easy over, in omelettes—and then we were off to Cedars-Sinai, where I listened to my grandparents debate about finances and the factory. "You shut up!" he'd tell her, when things had reached a certain point.

"No, *you* shut up!" she'd tell him.

Maggie, my youngest aunt, came daily to the hospital, and together we giggled as her parents carped. When we became too much for Grandpa, we found ourselves—politely but firmly, Grandma being his ambassador in matters requiring tact—expelled from his room. We would wander to Beverly Center, the six-floor shopping mall newly

opened on the grounds where, as a child, my grandparents had taken me for pony rides in the middle of Los Angeles. Maggie and I would anesthetize ourselves for hours by popping chocolate-coated coffee beans and touching things we could not afford. Finally we would sink into the Star Trek lobby furniture and look at each other's haggard faces.

After visiting hours, Grandma would take me for a run on Fairfax Avenue, it being imperative that her only grandson be constantly supplied with his favorite foods—strawberries, T-bone steaks, Canter Delicatessen's onion bagels and lox—all the foods she called my favorites turning out to be her own. I stalked her with my new Minolta in the open-air produce markets; "Oh no, I look awful," she would say, patting her hair like a forties film queen.

We returned to watch old movies on TV as she crocheted throw rugs to cover up the spots on the white wool carpet that were Beau-beau's legacy. "Beau-beau," she would murmur, "was a *pisher*." Grandma loved Paul Muni and Charles Laughton, hated sex scenes and subtitles. One night we made Droste's cocoa with fresh whipped cream and watched Pygmalion. It was her opinion that Leslie Howard had beautiful eyes.

Specialists were swirling around Grandpa at Cedars-Sinai, but I considered myself the only doctor assigned to Grandma. I blanketed her with good intentions, insisting that she eat when she wasn't hungry, setting her alarm an hour forward while

she slept. She puttered endlessly in the kitchen and bore my ministrations with a girlish resistance that she usually allowed me to beat down.

There were many reasons why Grandma's yellow-tiled kitchen had always been my favorite room in their home—the laughter of my aunts, the smells of chicken soup and kasha varnishkes—but perhaps the best was that it was not the living room, where Grandpa sat at his card table doing jigsaw puzzles under a goosenecked lamp and occasionally peering over his half-framed glasses and giving the TV's remote control a dour pump. Only Beau-beau could violate this sanctuary with impunity; Grandpa would buffet the dog with big blunt hands until he elicited his phony snarl, pluck out any ribbons his daughters had tied into Beau's black curls, and dispense Chips Ahoy cookies from a glass jar kept close by for that purpose.

I once calculated that the number of Chips Ahoys the tiny poodle devoured would be equivalent, for an adult human, to fifty-four chocolate-chip cookies per day. Grandma laughed at me: "Try telling that to Grandpa!"

I never did, and Beau-beau lived to be seventeen. When Maggie came home for family dinners, Beau-beau jumped all over her; Grandpa could say only, "The dog's happy to see you, Margaret."

My grandparents had put five years between each of their three daughters. Though Maggie was thirteen years older than me, she had always seemed of my own generation. She had introduced me, in my teens, to rock music and marijuana, taken me

to Fellini films with her friends. Now, until such time as Grandpa got better, both our lives were on hold.

Grandpa would get better; that was our common coin. Maggie clung to a form of hope that I couldn't abide: not only would her father live, but the hospital was the best in the world, and the nurses were nice, and in fact everyone was very nice, and no one was ugly. I rubbed her raw with constant arguments that the only realistic thing to believe was that Grandpa would recover: though the doctors now said that Grandpa had crossed the border into leukemia, and the odds were ten to one against him, the odds did not take into account Grandpa's extraordinary constitution, his iron will; the odds, when viewed rightly, were all in his favor. In one picture snapped by a stranger in Beverly Center, Maggie and I were leaning against each other like adjacent buildings slowly collapsing together.

It was as if the entire family had smoked marijuana and the high was lasting a month: if something was good, it was very very good, if bad, it was unbearable; and in either event we immediately forgot it. Grandpa had reached the point where he had good days and bad days, and we had all become Grandpas.

Grandpa had taken his chemotherapy with no vomiting or hair loss, seeming to prove my childish theory that he was more than human. The initial blood and bone-marrow tests were clean, but soon a few cancer cells were discovered.

The second round of chemo was as hard as the first had been easy. Grandpa's hair fell out in bunches, and solid food became an impossibility. A second intravenous

unit appeared beside his bed, dispensing clear foodstuff while the other dripped noxious chemicals into his bloodstream. The doctors told us he was vulnerable to infection and asked us to wear surgical masks in his room. Grandpa insisted on his daily shower more adamantly now that strangers were regularly inspecting his body, and the intravenous units had to be disconnected every morning, reconnected when he finished.

He had always been something of a dandy. My mother had recalled to me her amazement, long before Captain Kleenzit became successful, at seeing her father bring home silken boxer shorts. All his socks were Egyptian cotton, their colors fastidiously coordinated with the loud, expensive Italian slip-on shoes he favored. Now Grandpa lay naked in his bed at Cedars-Sinai, waiting to be exposed by anyone who cared to lift his sheet.

Judge Jimmy Eisenberg, an alert, narrow man in a tailored brown suit, came to reminisce with Grandpa about their lives in California politics. I listened, encouraged by Grandpa's energy. When he dozed off suddenly, the judge, waiting for him to awaken, talked with me for a while about New York, rents, and crime. He said he'd heard I was a writer.

Before I could answer, Grandpa awoke and roared, and not only awoke and roared but actually sat up to do it, "Ask him how much *money* he's made on his writing!"

He had always had a knack for the killing interpolation. When I called from college to talk to Grandma, chattering for half an hour about her daughters, my professors, her latest short story and the letter she'd had in Tuesday's *Times*, Grandpa would seize the phone and say, "Listen to me: Don't ever forget you're Jewish!"

Not forgetting we were Jewish did not, however, mean forgetting Christmas, but we displayed no holiday decoration that bore the likeness of any figure from the New Testament, and when my first grade sang "O Come All Ye Faithful" at the year-end assembly, I silently mouthed the words "Christ the Lord," feeling it inappropriate to give an enemy deity my personal endorsement. We had to neuter the holiday in order to claim it.

On Christmas Eve, my grandparents' living room—and the baby grand piano, with gifts piled high, spilling off, stacked on the floor—became the center of the family. And at the center of the center sat Grandpa, playing the piano both well and badly. More particularly, his right hand played well while his left played badly; he could read the treble clef but not the bass, and as he unerringly picked out the melody of "Tea for Two" or "Begin the Beguine," his left hand crashed and bumbled randomly among the deep notes. We saved Grandpa's gifts, always the most lavish, for last; his card always insisted, *Happy Hanukkah*.

As Grandpa grew more prosperous and more irascible, it became increasingly hard to find presents that pleased him. Finally we began giving him intentionally foolish objects, like a horribly large plastic leprechaun with a grinning head mounted

on a spring. You hit the leprechaun's head, and, after a preliminary *werrrrrrrrrr*, it began to laugh—"HahahahahaHEEHEHEEHEHEEHAHAHEEEEEHAAAHAHAHAAA"—and just when it was winding down, could not possibly have another breath in it, would start all over again with renewed vigor. There was no way to stop it short of the great violence that it inspired.

We had little reason to believe Grandpa liked these things any better than the chromatic harmonica that was instantly recycled back into my own family, or the neckties that never made it to his electrical tie rack (two people had, in desperation, given him electrical tie racks); but Grandma swore he loved them, which only meant that she did.

The room at Cedars-Sinai contained nothing to hint at how difficult it had become to get anything, do anything for this man. Suspended between beige walls and beige linoleum, between the odors of human illness and the false denials of sweet antiseptic, between intervals of darkness and fluorescent light, between intervals of silence and soft trebly Muzak, between artificial night and artificial day, lay a fully insured elderly white male patient, waiting for blood tests and medications, waiting for puncture and palpation, waiting for change, simply waiting, waiting and wearing the plastic ID bracelet that hospitals affix impartially to old men, babies, teenagers, and corpses.

In an ongoing attempt to infect that no-man's-land with a few germs of personality, we were exporting Grandpa's household effects to the hospital. Like gift-

giving, it was a hit-and-miss proposition, with the misses coming considerably more often than the hits. One morning we put the mechanical leprechaun in a brown Ralph's supermarket bag and smuggled it in.

The large elevator car was already crowded with nurses and interns when several patients' families got on with us in the lobby. Everybody in this elevator was headed toward a cancer case—lung and lymph on the third floor, leukemia on the fourth—and no one spoke above a whisper. In the quiet, the hospital's Muzak became foreground. It always seemed to be playing something from *Fiddler on the Roof*.

A platoon of nurses and orderlies boarded on the second floor. I moved toward the rear, slid sideways, hunched my shoulders, flattening myself to the wall, compressing myself, when somebody elbowed the package in my hands. There was an ominous *werrrrrrrrrrrr*. Grandma and I exchanged a look of horror.

"*Hahahaha!*" began the paper bag. Conversation stopped as every eye stared at me. Like all hospital elevators, this one was torturously slow, and while we inched upward to the leukemia ward the paper bag howled and screamed in irrepressible hilarity.

"Get that goddamn thing out of here!" Grandpa barked as soon as he saw it. We took the leprechaun back that night in the trunk of the car, and when we bumped over the old trolley tracks on La Cienega we could hear the muffled hooting of its interminable laughter.

Unless I am forgetting a perfunctory goodbye that evening, "Get that goddamn thing out of here!" was the last thing Grandpa ever said to me. A little after midnight the hospital called to tell us that Grandpa had taken a turn for the worse. He'd been moved to the Intensive Care Unit.

Our family reunited from its diaspora that morning at Cedars-Sinai: Grandma and me, my mother and her sisters Maggie and Evelyn, Grandpa's younger brother Charlie and his wife; from Laurel Canyon and New York, from Seattle and Venice and Marina Del Ray and the San Fernando Valley, all of us embracing and reassembling the lobby furniture until, armchairs and sofas and love seats and end-tables, we were in a circle like an embattled wagon train.

Uncle Charlie was the first to go in. When my grandparents had been courting, Charlie had introduced himself to Grandma by riding a horse into her mother's Brooklyn candy shop to deliver a love letter from his big brother. Over the years Charlie had developed the embarrassing habit of falling asleep after dinner when company was present. Because I had always visited with my grandparents, I had never seen him do it; Charlie could listen to Grandpa for hours.

Charlie spent only a few minutes in Intensive Care. When he emerged, his arms rigid at his sides, his face utterly composed, we converged on him. Charlie gave a hoarse bark and collapsed into a chair. Looking around at us, as if our hopeful faces would contradict what he had seen in there, he cried, gasping and choking like a man who had not cried since childhood and thought he had forgotten how. With his bulk

and his thick nervous fingers, now drumming on his knees, now barring his broad face, he seemed more than ever before a slightly smaller, slightly younger version of Grandpa.

"Joe!" Grandma was up and hallway across the lobby, striding to Intensive Care and throwing the door open and demanding to see her husband. Maggie and my mother and I followed. Evelyn remained, paralyzed, in her chair, watching us and shaking her head slightly.

Grandpa writhed. He was naked to the waist, very white and still fat, although he'd lost thirty pounds. Under the respirator, strapped into restraints, completely unconscious, he tossed his great wild bald head from side to side as an electronic monitor implacably flashed readings of heartbeat and blood pressure. We asked questions, as if the readouts proved that this heaving figure was still Grandpa, using loud voices as if he was merely hard of hearing: "Are you warm enough? Can you hear us? Squeeze my hand once for 'yes.'" The nurses assured us he was very comfortable. His yellow nails protruded half an inch beyond his toes.

Grandma knelt beside the bed and buried her face in the huge white hand that lolled, upturned and passive, over the metal railing. "Don't leave me!" she sobbed. "Don't leave me, Joe!"

For fifty-two years Grandma had not only remained married to this man, but had remained happy with him. Now, at her signal, the rest of us lost control at once: me telling Grandma in a sober, masterly voice not to upset Grandpa; Maggie telling me to

leave Grandma alone; and my mother imploring generally for peace: all of us bawling and shouting advice at one another as Grandpa began to die.

After a while we retreated to the lobby, where we stayed for hours, waiting for news and trying to sleep on furniture that seemed continually to change form, usually for the worse, beneath us. I kept seeing the whiteness of his body, under the respirator, the harsh lights, under restraint: I knew I'd never easily dislodge that image and hang any other picture of Grandpa in its place.

A week later, on the flight back to New York, I sat in the shaft of the overhead light, flipping through the photographs I'd taken in Los Angeles, while a movie caused the other passengers, under their headphones, to laugh in response to stimuli I did not hear. The family had dispersed: my mother to Seattle, Uncle Charlie to the Valley, my aunts to Venice and Marina Del Rey. I always returned to one photograph, the way you will, if you turn over each card in a deck, keep coming back to the ace of spades. I had taken it two nights after Grandpa died, following Grandma out into her garden as she went to cut a rose for the kitchen table. I'd used a flash and it had illuminated Grandma while failing to penetrate the blackness of the night around her.