My Lost Stories [1]

June 2, 2014 Family Stories [2]
Yawping Wild [3]

TW Column by Steven Lewis

Strangers Who Share the Same Last Name

January 2004. My ninety-two-year-old mother waves a misshapen finger toward a cluttered end table. She says with a shrug, “That’s about my mother.”

My eyebrows rise involuntarily as I reach for two carelessly folded sheets of paper next to a ripped envelope. One is a dark photocopy of a story from the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* dated June 24, 1906; behind it is another with the same date from "Saloon News" of the *Brooklyn Standard Union*.

Both articles describe an incident involving a seventeen-year-old girl named Jennie Sakol, robbed of $1,500 by two “well-dressed thugs” in East New York who got away in a covered wagon. According to the reports in both papers, the girl had gone to the bank for her father, who owned a saloon on Stone Avenue and cashed checks for customers on

the weekend.

Because my eternally tight-lipped mother has never spoken of Jennie Sakol, I don't immediately connect the name to my maternal grandmother. "Your mother?" I say, though she has already told me it is. She nods. Just like my taciturn mother, I think, to give no more than asked. Lily was never a doting mom, a hugging mom, a *tell me everything you did at school* mom. To this day, I know almost nothing about how and where she grew up.

I do know, although I'm pretty sure I did not hear it from my mother, that when the girl in the articles, Jennie Sakol, grew ill and was hospitalized in 1925, her thirteen-year-old daughter Lillian, my mother, was sent off to summer camp in the Catskills—and the two never saw each other again.

Since my mother never spoke of that harrowing, lonely time in her life, I can only guess that when she returned from camp, bewildered and forlorn, she was told that children were not allowed in the hospital. Two weeks later, the story goes, a neighbor came by after school one day to tell her that her mother had died.

Which was pretty much all I knew of my grandmother before reading the story of the robbery on Stone Avenue. And frankly, because I had so little connection to the young victim of the robbery or to the young mother she was to become, the articles provided only an interesting source of conversation at the next family dinner—everyone laughing at the vision of bandits escaping in a covered wagon—and later, I used the story as a "trigger" for one of my creative writing workshops at the Sarah Lawrence Writing Institute. At the time, though, it meant little more to me than finding an intriguing daguerreotype of an unknown subject in the 75-cent bins of local antique stores.

So?

So now it's 2014, and my mother is several years silenced beyond this life. I am 67, happy and loved, but chastened

these past ten years into a lonely awareness of the fragile connections we have on this planet; humbled by a son's cancer, friends lost, friends dying, dreams withering, a ghostly mother vanishing into the earth…and I know nothing more about my grandmother than I did the afternoon I read the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* and the *Brooklyn Standard Union.*

And so I'm haunted by the shadow of that teenager robbed by the two well-dressed thugs in 1906. Troubled by thoughts of the girl who would die nineteen years later when she was 35, leaving behind a daughter who was robbed of her tongue by the triple betrayals of a helpless mother, a hapless grieving father, and a Brooklyn neighborhood of misguided or cowardly adults who kept mother and child away from each other for several months—and then eternity.

And so, in the breathless spaces in a breathtaking life rising out of the beautiful chaos of seven children and sixteen grandchildren, I sometimes find myself chilled, staring off into space like my mother often did, wishing that I knew just a few more stories about this elusive Jennie. Something. Anything. A few words strung together here or there about what she looked like or what dishes she cooked or which lullabies, if any, she sang her baby girl to sleep.

It is only now that I have begun to understand just how bereft little Lillian must have felt at thirteen, a motherless child. How she grew up to become a compliant wife, a dutiful mother, *my* dutiful mother, an inscrutable presence who lived and died leaving almost all her stories behind.

A few months ago, I drove alone to the 1950s gray rancher on Long Island where I grew up. As I neared the house, I could feel my mother's bereaved soul all around the small manicured property, in the grassy plot where a maple tree once shaded the front yard, in the chiseled bushes like a fence in front of her bedroom window. I recalled her silences at supper, the sighing shoulders doing dishes, my older brother and sister disappearing behind their bedroom doors, the quiet clicking of knitting needles in front of the Sylvania TV at night, my father buried in paperwork, the empty pages of a painful past beyond words.

There was no point in stopping in front of the house. It was just a shell to me. An "x" marking the spot from which I bolted after high school, racing a thousand miles west to begin a raucous life teeming with children and words—no doubt trying to fill in some of the blanks my mother left behind. All I wanted to do was to get home.

I exited the faceless subdivision, merged into bumper-to-bumper traffic on the Long Island Expressway, the flat cookie-cutter developments of my youth disappearing in the rearview mirror. And as I drove up the lush Hudson River Valley toward my home in the Shawangunk Mountains, my mood changing with the landscape, I realized I was no longer thinking of my enigmatic mother or my unknown grandmother, but, oddly enough, of the thousands of writers who have come through my workshops over the past forty years to tell their stories.

In soulful contrast to my unreadable mother who kept her tongue, those good writers spend considerable money and time to urge themselves away from weary work and household chores and the inherent pleasures and tensions of family life to write their stories. They put into words the unspoken narratives that, after all is said and rewritten, remind us that we're not alone on this half-dark and ever-spinning planet. This planet that is awe inspiring in its gifts, breathtaking in its fearful reprisals. This planet that makes some stories too painful to tell.

How simple it would be for them to scoop up some ice cream or drink some beer and turn on the television and let nameless teams of scriptwriters fill the emptied hours with words that evaporate before morning. But these remarkable tellers, most who labor on without paycheck or byline, who inform my world in ways beyond words, resist such easy comfort. In the days between classes, they write their hearts out. That is not a metaphor.

So JG writes about how he spent his twenties managing a Third Street flophouse in Manhattan, reading Proust, desperately seeking divine love. CA reveals the sacred in the profane, creating a map from the gritty Pittsburgh skyline to the sandy Connecticut shoreline. KD tells an unforgettable drama of lost love—and lost bearings—on the Cape.

As I walked up the front steps of my home in the deep woods, lights on, dog barking, children's voices all around, I was thinking again of the robberies of those two teenage girls in Brooklyn so long ago and how different things might be if only I could have welcomed Jennie Sakol's voiceless daughter into my class.

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She wanted to ask him why they were all strangers who shared the same last name.

— from *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Art Information

- "Brooklyn 'Rapid Transit'" published by Bain News Service (no date on caption card; circa 1900); courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.
- "Brooklyn, N.Y., Sunday School Parade" (circa 1908) from George Grantham Bain Collection; courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.
- "3 Prize-winning babies—Henry Beekman (3d), Ada Cohen (2d), Marie Danaher (1st)" published by Bain News Service (1914); courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

(function(i,s,o,g,r,a,m){i['GoogleAnalyticsObject']=r;i[r]=i[r]||function(){ (i[r].q=i[r].q||[]).push(arguments)},i[r].l=1*new Date();a=s.createElement(o), m=s.getElementsByTagName(o)[0];a.async=1;a.src=g;m.parentNode.insertBefore(a,m) })(window,document,'script','https://www.google-analytics.com/analytics.js','ga'); ga('create', 'UA-18260536-1', 'auto'); ga('send', 'pageview');

 Steven Lewis is a contributing writer and columnist at *Talking Writing*. A longtime freelancer and current member of the Sarah Lawrence College Writing Institute faculty, his work has been published widely, from the notable to the beyond obscure.

Steve writes, “During much of the sixties, I was writing self-indulgent poetry in Madison, Wisconsin—mostly to meet girls—but somewhere along the way the poet James Hazard gave me a flashlight to navigate my way through the self-reflective shadows and into what I now understand is the illuminating voice.”

For more information, see his website Steven Lewis, Writer [4].

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