Flickering Light

ALTHOUGH WE WERE RECENT ARRIVALS to this land of hills and trees and lakes—only a generation since our grandparents sailed across from the Pale to the New York Harbor—evidence of its ancient history was all around us. Thousands upon thousands of years ago, glaciers arrived from the north. They left in their retreat the sedimentary sheepbacks that burst through our wooded hillsides. They colluded

with the water to pulverize into gloriously silky sand the deposits that are now our beaches. They left billions of stones strewn through the earth that we dig into when we bury our dead, the awful thud as the rocky soil slips from our shovels and lands on the pine casket below. That thud, its permanence, its finality, is the last sound we hear emanating, however indirectly, from our loved ones. We buried my dad in the bitter January of 1996, a sudden death. A blizzard had hit that morning, and snow and ice were everywhere, but people came. They came to the shul and they came to the graveside, and they came up to the house for the start of the shiva, the seven-day candle on the dining room sideboard already having begun its burn. I'd arrived the night before on a flight from the west coast, my mom silently hugging me as I came in the door, my brother and aunt and uncle sitting at the kitchen table, stricken. My mom heated up a slice of leftover meat loaf for me, and soon after, we said goodnight, and I went into my old bedroom for sleep. And I thought back, and I thought back...

...Even before we'd get to the shore, you could feel it. The land was flatter, the trees were scrubbier, the sand—by the curb, and even in people's front yards—lay in wispy patches; the air suffused with a redolence of salt and fish. We'd usually arrive at my grandparents' by mid-morning, just as the sun was approaching its fiercest, and within minutes of our hugs and kisses, I'd have changed into my bathing suit and be noodging my mom to cross Ocean Avenue for the beach and the waves.

My grandparents were sometimes ready to slip on their swimsuits and join us on the sand, but other times, they'd stay back at the apartment, their spacious two-bedroom on the third floor of a tan brick building with its pair of majestic concrete lions flanking the entrance. Grandma might be in the kitchen preparing a lunch of tuna salad or egg noodles with cottage cheese in her thin summer housecoat, Grandpa maybe watching the game in the den. With its hot and sunny views of the surf, their apartment only had window fans, except in the kitchen where they had a big floor model that both intrigued me and scared me with its impossibly fast moving blade and its loud low rumble, and so temperatures—and tempers—would soar. Since his stroke—we'd been there when he came home from the hospital, crying as he walked in the door—my grandfather, a slight and quiet man with wavy white hair and horn rims, had become even more subdued, and even more put-upon by my grandmother.

And there'd be fights: my grandmother nagging and ridiculing, my grandfather acquiescing, though with the occasional justified outburst that sadly lacked intensity, lacked conviction. He was old and tired and she was vivacious and demanding, but I didn't understand the dynamic at all back then; I just hated the anger, and it flared every single time. Yes, Bradley Beach was a crazy mix of magical summer fun and scary yelling and screaming, and the biggest yeller and screamer of all was my dad, fuming, outraged, seething at my grandmother's selfishness, her bullying his dad. His anger brewed not only while

we were there for our visits, but even a few days before, like a burning aura, simmering, welling, and seizing hold of him. That floor fan, its roar and its rumble, its deadly blade splicing the summer heat into pulsing bits: that was my father down at the shore.

But oh, the Second Avenue beach! I'd ride the waves the bigger and more violent the better, or I'd sit at the water's edge lost in a fugue as the silt sluiced and eddied over my outstretched legs, or I'd bravely hazard across the burning beach to "The San-Bar" for an ice cream, or venture over to the fearsome black jetty with its menacing boulders, its seaweed, its clinging mussels, its fishy salty stink. My big brother and I would inevitably head up the boards to the main penny arcade for some pinball, a dime a game (the older machines a nickel)—Seven Up, Jive Time, Mibs, Miss-O—or Skee-Ball, whose wonderful wooden balls, mottled and worn from their years of use, I always dreamed of stealing but never figured out how to. In his last years, my grandfather worked at the other boardwalk arcade—the "little arcade" we called it, a bit north, towards Ocean Grove—and would sometimes use his slender metal passkey to give me a free game or two, and he'd cackle in his dry and wheezy way.

Come dusk, we'd all walk the boards through Methodist Ocean Grove with its immense wooden church dominating the streets of unspoiled Victorian splendor; my father would bitterly grouse about its flouting the constitution because it closed its streets to traffic on Sundays. We had so little money; we might eat at one of the

town's hotel cafeterias, broiled fish, macaroni and cheese, boiled vegetables, chocolate pudding, and then we'd pass through the gates of heaven at the whitewashed North End Hotel, and into Asbury Park. For me, this was not a casual stroll, not by a long shot. Even the *name* "Asbury" filled me with wonder and excitement; it even *sounded* like a magical land of sugar and flashing lights, of Kohr's Custard surfing down my gullet, Criterion salt water taffy sticking in my teeth, the bizarre and jagged splendor of the circular Howard Johnson's building, the little kiosk housing "Portraits by Zad" (whoever Zad was). And the rides, the rides! We'd enter Palace Amusements with its too-scary-to-contemplate fun house with a rotating walk-through barrel, its merry-go-round that had brass rings to catch (these I stole), and its Ferris wheel that started indoors and then rose through an opening in the roof to the night sky, each car bearing the name of a Jersey town (Edison, Elizabeth, Tom's River...). And above it all, the giant face of Tillie—Asbury's Howdy Doody-meets-Alfred E. Neuman unofficial mascot—loomed like a creepily beatific cartoon Buddha. We'd walk the incredibly wide zig-zag-slatted boardwalk, passing through wafts of fried fish, of cotton candy, of roasted nuts. I'd gaze upward as the boardwalk entered the echoic and ever-damp interior of The Casino and its bumper cars and its amusements and its sea of glistening, glass-enclosed kiosks with fluorescent-lit mirrored turntables that displayed what I imagined were priceless jewels, but were only trinkets one fished for after passing a coin into a slot. We'd walk on,

and then through the Convention Hall where big kids like maybe even my brother would go to concerts in the evenings (Jefferson Airplane, Grand Funk). Especially, my brother and I loved to ride the Toboggan, our car ascending its perfectly vertical ascent through the interior of a yellow-painted metal tube, down the red track's swirl and swirl and around its exterior.

Yes, this was the shore I remember. And these were my grandma and grandpa who moved from Newark to their summer getaway in Bradley in the early sixties, even before the riots. They'd raised their sons—my dad and his baby brother ten years his junior—in Weequahic, the row-house Jewish neighborhood Roth described to perfection so many times. My dad's cousin and uncle are featured in "Portnoy": my first cousin once-removed, a friend of Philip's brother Sandy, was the one who created quite the neighborhood shanda when he briefly dated a shiksa in high school, and his father, my great uncle, was the hobbyist who in his basement crafted the most delicious flavored syrups for miles around.

Both good socialists, my grandparents nonetheless always voted Democrat, as they knew that a vote for the Socialist candidate would be a gift to the Republicans, and I remember as a kid thinking how wise of them that was, at least after my dad explained its rationale to me. My grandfather was a union baker who worked all night and slept all day and so neither my father nor his little brother had any real sense of closeness with him, if, indeed, closeness was even possible: he was a simple and

limited man with a ninth-grade education, and possessed of a passive nature, a personality readily dominated by his self-indulgent and fun-loving wife. I loved the way she laughed so easily, even at things I quickly came to know were just silly and immature; the mere mention of "spotted dick" sent her into hysterics, her flabby arms jiggling as I sat on her lap, losing myself in the folds of her fat as she petted my hair. Alas, it was she who pressured my grandfather into leaving Silver's Bakery in Newark with its famed seeded rye, and to strike out on his own, only to lose his already threadbare shirt when their own bakery failed. Oh the fights, so I was told.

It's a mystery how, out of this volatile and hardscrabble household—poor even by Weequahic standards—my dad so readily and so quickly evolved into a genuinely intellectual teenager who read Thomas Wolfe and John Steinbeck with such relish, who swooned at the music of Prokofiev and Debussy, who became a veritable encyclopedia of the movies, who loved drama and took to the stage when he went off to Rutgers. Presumably influenced by his more affluent Weequahic High buddies, it turned out, no, that despite their ascent into the professions as my dad was left behind, it was he who possessed the intellectual and cultural heft, not they. They told me so. At his funeral.

And it was he, dealing with the yelling and the screaming of the selfish mother who insisted on moving house every few years (Mapes Avenue, Renner Avenue...) and the often-invisible father who was so under-realized,

yes, he, who raised his little brother with such care, who passionately acquainted him with the arts, with the politics of human decency, and who guided him into the professions, again, even as he himself was left behind. And it was also he, upon their meeting at Rutgers' Hillel, who casually and without design charmed and delighted a comfortably middle class girl from Paterson—whose father was a rabbi and a cantor and a lawyer and far higher up the social ladder than his—to the degree that she pursued him until he fell in love with her, and they got married.

Then, something changed. Something went quiet in him, slowed down in him, shortly after his college years. It wasn't the war. Though drafted fresh out of high school, he'd never seen battle; he was only in Japan at the start of the occupation, as an office clerk ("Where other soldiers retreated, we backspaced," he would joke with us). But still, there was a change, a loss of vitality, of ambition, and he began to put on the weight that plagued him for the remainder of his life. It could have been the slow-building trauma of his troubled childhood home, but we don't know. Who knew back then? Those critical years of late adolescence—that dangerous period when mental and emotional life begins to ossify, perhaps lurching one into a heretofore alien state of sloth, of depression, and in the most tragic cases, of mental derangement, as loved ones watch helpless—they take their unrelenting toll on so many young innocents. My dad just slowed down, and whether it was depression or something else, we never

knew, because, as a very consequence of his change, he came to live an increasingly unexamined life: although his little brother became a psychologist, my father never pursued the psychotherapy he so needed.

After the birth of their first son, my parents moved up to the town where I was born eight years later. I attended the local nursery school, down the hill and at the northern edge of our little hamlet, a stately house with a surrounding porch and three rooms converted into classrooms on its first floor, the spinster school mistress living upstairs. A French woman would come during the morning period and play with us in the small garden, sitting on the edge of the disused circular concrete planter, knitting woolens while teaching us "Frère Jacques" and "I Got a Girl in Baltimore," and we'd chase chestnuts fallen to the ground. After lunch, we'd all be put down on cots for our nap, but I wouldn't sleep, and instead would bother the other kids, until the day I was unceremoniously dispatched to the corner office, and still, all alone, I wouldn't sleep.

One of the closets off the back classroom was filled with dress-up clothes. We all loved poring through the mass of fabric in piles on its floor, extracting a cowboy outfit or a tuxedo jacket to prance around in. I begged my dad to let me bring in his smoking jacket so that I could wear it during dress-up. It was a gift from a boy he had befriended in Japan. He told me about how the occupation army mistreated the civilian population so. Dumb soldiers would drive their jeeps up and down To-

kyo's narrow alleys forcing people to squeeze against the buildings as they passed, and they'd take wooden batons, reach out from the jeep, and run them across the buildings' walls in a clatter, laughing while hitting any innocent along the way. But my dad, he made friends. The jacket was a satin of deep maroon, embroidered with flowers, and he let me take it to my nursery school, and it never made it back into our house.

In those early days, as the leaves were bursting in reds and yellows, we'd take rides to the mountains not twenty minutes north of home, and my dad would shoot stills and super-8s of the hills and the lakes and the rushing streams. On the way home he'd drive us past the "mothball fleet," the old ships from the war, still, after all that time, floating in a row along the river. The fleet is now long gone, but still, to this day, come fall, I go up to the mountains, I take pictures, and I remember those chilly autumn times, the anticipation of cider and pumpkin pie come late November.

Or he'd drive us down into Jersey, touring old Jewish Newark decimated by the riots, the Weequahic Diner and its renowned cheesecake, the high school that graduated so many towering intellectuals and cultural figures, poor Jews who made their indelible marks on the American scene, and his grandparents' old house on Irving Avenue where the whole clan would gather for festivities, for laughing and dancing and putting on comedy skits, but also for pooling their meager resources to deliver our straggled family from Europe's genocidal clutches.