

# Nonfiction from Caitlin McGill: "Paved in Gold"

*"Even if one does not know the history, one feels the presence of the past."*

*~Peter Balakian*

"You have to beat the egg," my grandmother said while cracking shells over a mixing bowl.

"Beat the egg?" my sister asked, her little brows nearly colliding. "But I don't want to hurt it!"

My grandmother laughed. Covered her gaping mouth with a flour-dusted hand and wiped playful tears from her cheeks with the other. I looked up from my fourth-grade vocabulary book and watched them push a roller over the opaque ball of dough until it unfurled like a tongue across our countertop, brushing melted butter atop the beige concoction and patching holes as they emerged. When my sister pulled the tray out of the oven, my grandmother's childhood bruises oozed out of the blooming chocolate and cinnamon nut pastries that her own gentle grandmother, Ester, had taught her to make.

My grandmother spent decades suppressing her past, but in moments like these she occasionally, unintentionally broke her silence. When she and my sister baked rugelach for a class project, or when she took us for ice cream on Wednesdays after elementary school, or when she arrived at our parents' Miami home two hours early to cook French toast made from challah before middle school, we swarmed her, gazed up at her beaded neck and slight waist, and begged for stories. Three husbands, a nose job, a knack for intricate baking and a sharp eye for discounted designer clothes? We were desperate to learn more about her fascinating and often scandalous life, about our

family, about our cryptic past. Once we got her started, it seemed she couldn't stop.

I don't recall precisely when I learned that Ester's husband-my great-great grandfather Charles-beat each of his six children, including my great-grandmother, Lillian. But at some point over the years, I gathered that Charles and Ester raised Lillian in a poverty-stricken Orthodox Jewish home, and that Lillian ran away to New York City at seventeen-ran away, I assumed, from Charles's abuse and strict religious rules. Charles was eventually sent to a mental institution and one of his sons was admitted to The Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital in New York City. Paranoid schizophrenia. Although I understand this mental illness might have been genetic, entirely independent of environment or trauma, I still wonder if some other part of Charles's history might have led to his abuse. After all, Lillian abused her daughter Claire after Lillian's father abused her.

If Charles's abuse might explain why Lillian readily deserted Judaism, why she beat my grandmother and why my grandmother repressed her past, then what explains what Charles did?

Though my grandmother once told me that Charles had emigrated from Hungary and settled in Scranton, Pennsylvania near the turn of the century, and though I have read many tales about Hungary during that same time, I still know nothing of his specific life in Europe.

More than two years after running away from a traumatic life of my own, I'm more determined than ever to understand my family's repudiated history-to prove that *their* traumatic pasts somehow propelled me into mine. It's May 2015 and although I've recently begun to interrogate my past, too, I still can't see that obsessing over my family's trauma might be another symptom of my need to understand mine-that this archeological pursuit is, in some ways, a stubborn, unconscious attempt to continue repressing my personal

history.

Desperate to uncover my grandmother's past and the environments that shaped her mindset-and mine-I call her, hoping for answers to these persistent questions: Who was Charles Horowitz? What drove his abuse?

On the phone, I do not tell my grandmother that I want to understand Charles in order to understand my great-grandmother Lillian-that I want to understand Lillian because I want to figure out why my grandmother is so deft at closing doors, why, for so many years, she's appeared perfectly capable of not speaking about her mother's abuse, her son's suicide, her first husband's abandonment and her second husband's depression and rage. I do not tell my grandmother what I have only recently begun to share with my mother: that, I, too, am dangerously adept at burying my past-the abusive, six-year relationship with Carlos that began when I was sixteen and he twenty-one, drug abuse during that same time, and, more recently, my anorexia, the bodily siren that demanded I start talking.

I focus solely on facts about our family instead. When I finally ask my grandmother about Charles she says, "Nothing. I know nothing of my maternal grandfather." Her response seems indisputable.

"So your mother never spoke about him?" I'm certain she must have heard something as a kid. Didn't she meet him? Didn't *someone* talk about him?

"No," my grandmother replies. "I know nothing."

After we hang up, I begin to wonder: Are the holes in our histories symptomatic of fallible memory and careless record keeping, or have those lost stories been purposefully forgotten? What will it take to decode my grandmother's words, to bridge the dissonance between her shifting memories and what I know to be true?

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The next morning I call my mother with questions my grandmother evaded. My mother doesn't know much more, but she reminds me about the fragile, brown chest of heirlooms in her Miami living room. A deteriorating leather strap seals it shut. I long to rummage through it but I'm 1,500 miles away, sitting in my kitchen hiding from the indecisive Boston spring. Raindrops *tap tap tap* against the window. Green leaves and amber tulips won't appear for a few more weeks. I miss color.

My mother is likely rocking in her chair beside the old chest, paintings of ships hanging around her, coconut trees swaying in the backyard behind her, South Florida sunlight blanketing the floor and her freckled legs.

As a child my eyes lingered over the chest, which my parents said came from my father's South Carolina family and housed old photos my mother inherited after Lillian's death. But the chest always seemed just another piece of the constellation of familiar and intriguing items that constituted our home. Nothing was off limits, except the knife drawer and my father's gun, which hid somewhere in the garage.

Each of my parents' belongings was a piece of treasure hiding in plain sight, waiting to be exhumed. Art hung on nearly every inch of the walls. Rugs and handcrafted bowls and my sister's third-grade pottery covered counter tops. Rusty tins. An old cobalt lantern. My mother's tiny childhood chair—originally blue but painted red for my sister when she was three. And my mother's menorahs, which we lit for years without reciting the customary Hebrew prayers we did not know. My mother buried (and I unearthed) her most cherished items—old photos of her now deceased father and brother, birthday gifts she bought months in advance, cards and old photos and every kind of button imaginable—in her top dresser drawer or the back of her closet, shoved behind layers of discounted

clothes I never saw her wear.

I inquired about every item. About each clue to my parents' pasts, to the people they had been before they became my mother and father. I didn't realize my curiosity might have been stronger than most kids'; I didn't realize that other kids, especially those who went to Hebrew or Sunday school, might have known more about their history than I did. That when their parents tucked them in at night, they heard stories about their ancestry. My mother hadn't been told much about her family's past, and my father seemed to keep his Baptist Christian life-and his service in Vietnam-behind him. My parents read me fictional tales instead.

"Will you open the chest?" I ask my mother over the phone. The Boston rain is no longer tapping at my window. Sunlight shines through the drops as they climb down glass.

"Of course," my mother says. She's always wanted to know more about our family, too, though I only learned of her curiosity when I began to pursue mine. Several years have passed since anyone even touched that deteriorating leather strap. "Let me call you back."

I imagine my mother hovering over the chest: sitting on her knees, her jean shorts stopping halfway down her thighs. Hands pressed against the floor. Perhaps one hand supporting her achy lower back. Black, curly hair spilling onto stacks of photos that smell like the old, yellowing books I used to read in the corner of the library, my little knees tucked into my chest, my long, straight hair-rare in our family of curls-spilling onto the pages. In the absence of our family's narratives, I devoured as many others as I could. Later, as a teenager, I devoured Carlos's narratives, too.

A reason has to exist, I keep thinking, for why I evaporated into Carlos's world. My family, and therefore I, possessed little sense of identity because our ancestors had denied it,

buried the past in order to hide from their trauma and then taught me to do the same. *Logical*, I tell myself. *Right?*



Konstantin Bostaevsky, "Old Tree," sometime before 1947.

As my mother digs through the heirloom and I watch robins dance outside my Boston window, the trunk is no longer just another item in the constellation; it feels enchanting, magnetic, more alluring than my father's gun or the knife drawer which, once unbearably tempting yet terrifying, now orbit the chest like planets circling the sun.

"I guess they called Lillian 'Lily,'" my mother writes when she sends me text messages of photos she found inside.

I've never heard anyone refer to Lillian by that name, and neither has my mother. I'm surprised; Lily seems too gentle a name for the woman who beat my grandmother.

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A few minutes later my mother sends a photo of Charles. As soon as I see him I think, *villain*. I want to look away.

Square face. Dark, full hair-cut short. I imagine someone yanking him away by one of his protruding ears, his head tilting sideways in pain. His mustache is thick and perfectly symmetrical, the ends curling upward as though attempting a smile. Perhaps it's fake. The rest of his face is bare. Not one hair appears out of place. He does not look directly at the camera, and yet he seems to be looking at *something*. I follow his gaze and imagine a projector in a dark room, the machine's light illuminating a cone of dust, the spinning film reel echoing through the room. *Click, click.*

I can see him running through a Hungarian village, dirt smeared across his face, no mustache above his lip yet, walls climbing up on either side of him as he plays with other eight-year-old boys-Jewish boys like the ones I have read of in historical tales.

1882. *Since Czar Alexander III ascended the throne in neighboring Russia the previous year, he's been encouraging riots and massacres, forcing Jewish families from their villages and "removing" them from their businesses. Over several months these riots have occurred in countless nearby towns. As Charles and his friends laugh maybe they hear hooves clomping along the unpaved roads in the distance. Maybe, minutes later, men with torches and axes encircle them.*

Now Charles must be running and falling and scraping his little knees, crying as he approaches his parents' small hut. I imagine other children-siblings, perhaps-are here, too. With

one arm their mother cradles a baby, with the other she rations each child's meal: one piece of chicken as long as her pinky and wide as her thumb, a scoop of potato no bigger than an eye.

"The men with fire!" Charles shouts. "They're coming!"

Perhaps the Jews have been sequestered in this village. Perhaps they've been denied work and taxed more than their Christian neighbors. Perhaps there's been a massacre before this one. Charles and his parents and that baby and those other children hide in the chicken coop and listen for hooves. *Clop. Clop.* Charles watches the torches' glow slither toward them. He watches the men set their hut on fire. He watches them slit his parents' throats. His mother's beige headscarf-worn by most married Orthodox Jewish women-has slipped off, the fabric drowning in her crimson river.

As I stare at that photo of Charles, I want to believe my imagination. This story is easier to believe, easier because if I can justify Charles's abuse with a traumatic past, then I can...what? Empathize? Believe my grandmother's abusers at least had reason? Understand why my grandmother shut the door to her past while my mother and I desperately want to open it? Understand why I, too, inherited my grandmother's denial mechanisms?

Find an excuse for staying with Carlos all those years?

I study Charles's suit, the satin tie fixed firmly at his neck, shiny buttons trailing down his vest. A chain extends across his chest and beneath his jacket. A pocket watch? Again I follow his gaze, this time to a scene I want to resist yet need to conceive: young Charles in a suit, no scuffs on his little knees, skipping to synagogue and eating cinnamon nut rugelach or apricot strudel and running home to parents who await him with open arms and boiling goulash. This scenario makes my inquiry harder. If Charles did not flee persecution

and poverty, which may have been less likely in Hungary than in neighboring Russia, can I find another way to explain why he beat his six children? Is my very attempt to understand Charles's violence problematic in itself? Am I unintentionally implying that trauma always (and worse: acceptably) leads to more trauma?

Perhaps my imagined scenes of young Carlos unintentionally imply this, too. Yet I can't help but envision the world he once described. As he shook in the corner of his childhood home, thumb pushed inside his three-year-old mouth, did his father shove his mother across the room like Venezuelan guerrillas had shoved him inside hostage holes, like Carlos would eventually shove me? Did his brothers lift their shirts to reveal guns when Carlos begged for Burger King? Or did everyone just forget that Carlos was standing there, hiding in the shadowy crevices of an un-swept room, learning how to use his hands and heart as his tears spilled into long waterfall lashes?

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The rain returns. It knocks hard against my window. As I look down at the oak trees separating the neighboring building from mine, my mother sends a photo of Charles's wife Ester. The hair atop Ester's head is cut short like a man's, but long hair is pulled together at her neck, too. I've never seen this particular hairstyle before, though it reminds me of a mullet. Maybe she's sixteen, seventeen. She looks away from the camera, her face angled to the right. Her football eyes appear big, and far apart. She isn't smiling, but she doesn't seem unhappy. She seems deep in thought. About her parents? Their farm? The old castle ruins they lived beside now more than 4,000 miles away from her? Her earrings resemble single grains of pearl couscous, and she wears what appears to be a dress-the photo stops at her waist-several layers of lace framing her chest, puffy clouds of cotton billowing from navel to neck. The bottom of the photo says: **Newman. 13 Avenue A. New**

**York.** This shot must have been taken shortly after she arrived from Europe.

Another: Ester and Charles on their wedding day. Linked arms. A smirk-Ester's. Charles's tilted head and watchful eyes. My grandmother Claire's handwriting curls across the top like vines strangling a fence: **Grandmother and Grandfather. Their Wedding. October 18, 1898.**

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A few days later, I call my grandmother again.

"All I know is that Charles and his wife, my grandmother Ester, were from Hungary – Austria-Hungary – and that Ester was very educated," she says.

I'm determined to know why they left. Why they came to the United States over thirty years before the Holocaust. What were they fleeing?

"Ester wasn't fleeing," Claire says. "She was thirteen when she came to America near the turn of the century. Her family didn't want her to go. Her father was a German educator-they all spoke German when I was a kid-and she knew how to bake and embroider. That's what she did. She was a baker in the Catskills for some time. Their family was well-to-do in Europe! Ester was so adamant about coming to America that she went on a hunger strike until her parents let her go. Now *that's* a story."

I sense she's leading me to a story she wants me to tell. A story that is not about her. But I still can't see that my desire to uncover *her* story-to blame *her* denial of the past for my lack of connection to our history and my identity-feeds my reflex to conceal my past from my family. Despite how much I've revealed in therapy, I'm still employing the very technique I depended on during those six years with Carlos, the very technique for which I've been condemning my Jewish

family-even my father's Gentile family: numbing to survive.

"But what was so appealing about America?" I ask. "Ester must have wanted to leave *something* behind..." Can my grandmother sense what I still cannot? That I, too, am searching for a story that's not about me?

"No-the story is simple. It was just like everyone always said: 'America was paved in gold...'"

I follow my grandmother's trailing voice into her living room where I picture her sitting on the taupe couch I slept on once as a child. I imagine her lifting one arm to draw that gold road with her bejeweled hand, her delicate fingers moving through the air, her chin tilting up, eyes closed. Graceful, as always. And beautiful, though whenever I study photos of her before her nose job, I always think, *even more beautiful before*. I like the long, slender, familiar nose I've only seen in photos.

"Look," she says, her hand probably dropping back down beside her waist. Maybe she props it on her hip. "That's the story they told."

Perhaps that truly is the story. America's promise beckoned Ester and Charles, who were both, according to my grandmother, from Austria-Hungary though they met in the U.S.; it beckoned all of my Jewish ancestors who immigrated in the late 1800s and early 1900s. But this narrative still doesn't answer my question. With what was the path behind them paved? Persecution? Violence? Or simply a desire to leave their homeland? Though I understand many Jews like my grandmother's paternal grandfather, Aaron, fled persecution in Russia, I don't yet understand just how many Jews emigrated from Eastern Europe between the 1880s and the 1920s; oppressive legislation and poverty and murder compelled more than two million Jews to leave during that time.

My grandmother continues discussing Ester's family and

ignoring Charles's. But I want to know about the towns they *both* left behind, even if they left solely for the alleged gold. The trauma narrative must exist there.

"It's a dead end. I have no idea where they came from exactly," my grandmother continues. "And now the maps are all different, too. What I do know is there was a clear difference between the Austrian-Hungarians like my mother's parents, Ester and Charles, and the Russians like my father's parents, Aaron and Hannah. The education was different. The ones from Russia were illiterate. My grandmother Ester was much more cultured...you could just tell--"

"How could you tell?" I interrupt. Everything seems so matter-of-fact to her. But the only parts of our history that seem matter-of-fact to me are menorahs and presents and Yartzheit candles lit on the anniversaries of my grandfather's and uncle's deaths. As a child, having a menorah seemed as ordinary as having a Christmas tree; one didn't have to go to mass or temple-or even understand what people did in those places-to hang ornaments or light candles. My father slung our tree over the hood of his truck, and my mother bought our Chanukah candles at T.J. Maxx and stuffed our stockings with chocolate coins called gelt. We ate mountains of previously frozen and toaster-oven-charred potato latkes, golden mudslides of applesauce eroding the pancakes' crunchy crags.

I never attended temple. My mother never told me there might be a reason I love rugelach and gefilte fish. Her mother had never told her either. Until my twenties, I had never even seen *Fiddler on the Roof*. When my family lit Chanukah candles, my sister and I sang "Dreidel, Dreidel" and ate gelt and then opened a pile of gifts. When I ate dinner at my best friend's house one Chanukah night when I was nine or ten, when we circled the menorah and I prepared to sing "Dreidel, Dreidel," my friend's entire family placed their hands over their eyes and started speaking some other language I'd only heard at my grandfather's and uncle's funerals. *Baruch atah, Adonai*

*Eloheinu...*

“Ester cooked more refined food, not peasant food. The kind you’d find in an Austrian restaurant. Upscale.” I can see my grandmother’s hand waving through the air again.

*How does she know what you’d find in an Austrian restaurant?* She’s never traveled to Austria. And didn’t she just say she knows nothing of where her grandparents came from? I suspect that someone told her these stories, that she’s been storing them in her mind for so long that they’ve begun to feel like her own memories-or facts.

“So what does *refined* food look like then?”

“Hungarian. More German.”

Now that she’s mentioned German two or three times and repeated that Ester and Charles spoke German in America, not Yiddish or Hebrew and certainly not Russian, I can’t help but think she’s choosing sides. The Hungarians-the German-speakers-are winning. I haven’t yet learned that this classism among German Jews is as well known to many Jews as “Twinkle Twinkle, Little Star” was to me as a child.

She continues: “The Russian side ate peasant food. And they probably lived in a ghetto. But my grandmother’s family was educated. They must have had a much better life. More refined.”

Again that word.

Despite my instinctual detection of favoritism and my reflex to resist such classism, I still don’t know what some people might have known nearly their entire lives: that many Jews of my grandmother’s generation believed Austrian or German Jews to be more educated and refined than Eastern European Jews. That even Eastern European Jews believed this, though they hated the German Jews for their arrogance. Months from now,

when I reveal my ignorance to a group of Jews, they'll say, *I hate to tell you this, but that's old news. Everyone knows that.* And I'll grow silent, embarrassed but also suddenly afraid I don't belong-or am not allowed-in their club.

As my grandmother speaks, I think of Mimi Schwartz's book, *Good Neighbors, Bad Times: Echoes of My Father's German Village*. Schwartz explains that in Benheim (her father's German town) the German Jews, unlike many Russians, had numerous non-Jewish allies. Though most of those German Jews still were not saved in the Holocaust, some non-Jews were willing to help them flee-had remained their "friends." Could this be true of my great-great grandmother Ester's family? Did they believe their education and culture shielded them-that non-Jews were more likely to protect them because of it? Could that be why my grandmother favors the Austrian-Hungarian side? Not because their refinement made them more desirable, but because their refinement might've helped them survive? Even if that is true, I don't think my grandmother could know this. She likely inherited this prejudice, wherever it originated, as a child.

"And I don't think my grandmother's family lived in a pogrom," she continues, "because she could read and write and was educated and-"

"Wait-" I say, flying past the last thing she said about education. "What's a pogrom?" My grandmother always claimed to know little of our Jewish history and traditions, never intentionally taught my mother anything about it, yet her Yiddish vocabulary appears to be growing. More clues to the past oozing out of her blooming mouth.

"A ghetto."

I nod and write this down. I don't realize that although she knows the word, she is wrong about its meaning. That same group of Jews who will tell me that classism among German Jews

is old news will also tell me that not understanding the word "pogrom" is like not understanding the word "Holocaust."

"Okay, so Ester might not have lived in *pogroms*," I say, "but some sort of anti-Semitism must've still remained. Don't you think?"

"Maybe the Jews were persecuted," she says, and pauses. "There probably were restrictions, but there was a time in Europe when the Jews were accepted into society. I don't think they mingled because Ester's family didn't intermarry, but they were able to enjoy culture at a point in time. For example, my grandmother Ester did very fine embroidery, and her superior baking and cooking...she learned it all there!"

This mention of mingling but not intermarrying, of enjoying culture despite restrictions, reminds me of Schwartz's book again, where she explains that Benheim's Jewish and Christian neighbors claimed they did not harbor negative feelings for each other, yet they accepted the conditions as matter-of-fact. Jews might have been restricted to live in certain areas, or they might have paid more taxes, or the Christian neighbors might have claimed ignorance when their Jewish friends were taken during the Holocaust, but neighbors still brought each other homemade Linzertortes and asked about the children and lingered in doorways. They didn't say goodbye because they believed there was nothing they could do, and they were ashamed.

Is this the enjoyment my grandmother is speaking of?

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When we hang up, I race to my computer and quickly learn that a pogrom is not a ghetto. Not even a place. In the 1800s and 1900s, thousands of these massacres of ethnic groups occurred in Eastern Europe, including one Schwartz discusses in her book-Kristallnacht; the 1938 "night of broken glass." These pogroms, along with the story of my grandmother's paternal

grandfather, Aaron, who served in the Czar's army as a boy in the late 1850s, might be among the reasons our Russian family fled. *Is that why Grandma knows the word? Did she hear it from Aaron?*

The severance from our history suddenly seems deeper than ever. *How can my grandmother not understand this word when it was likely among her grandparents' biggest fears before they emigrated from the old country? What does this silence say about my family?*

I keep reading. Of the nineteenth-century Austro-Hungarian Empire. Of the influence of a new wave of German Nationalists in the German-speaking parts of Austria-Hungary. The Nationalists were in alliance with many Jewish intellectuals; both were in favor of a large German republic and liberal ideas like freedom and equality. During this time, many Jews had also begun to intermarry; many stopped speaking Yiddish and Hebrew and left their religion behind. But as the nineteenth century progressed, German Nationalists began to endorse anti-Semitic ideas. Anti-assimilation thoughts festered alongside German nationalism. Seeds of Nazism were planted whilst Jews attempted to integrate.

Even in early-twentieth-century Hungary, several decades after Jews were granted equal citizenship in 1867 and after the 1895 Law of Reception recognized Judaism as a "received" religion, Jewish assimilation continued to rise. As I read on, I think of Susan Faludi's memoir, *In the Darkroom*. Faludi writes of 1920s Magyarization—the centuries-old, often forced adoption of the culture of the Magyars (Finno-Ugric people who conquered Hungary in the ninth century and constituted the country's dominant ethnic group).

*The deceiver was the Magyarized Jew, applauded for decades for "correcting" his alien nature, but now, in the popular parlance of the time, "the hidden Jew," whose disguise fooled no one... In '20s Hungary, there were to be two species—one*

*pseudo, one true- and the pseudo-Hungarians needed to be expelled for the true Hungarians to thrive... The assimilated Jews of Hungary responded to the mounting animus by trying all the harder to assimilate... The more their affections went unreciprocated, the more the Jews of Hungary tried to prove their fealty as loyal Magyars, with tormented results. That torment had been building for decades in so many of the new nation states of Central and Eastern Europe (233-5).*

While returning to these passages, I can't help but think about the psychological responses to this rejection that had been "building for decades": Aversion to the past. Self-hatred. Extreme conformity in appearances and imitation of Christian behaviors. Such responses to rejection and persecution surely existed before the 1867 equalization laws, and during the centuries my ancestors lived in Hungary. How much of this extreme conformity and aversion to the past had my great-great grandmother Ester inherited? And my grandmother, Claire, who tried to pass as Gentile her entire life? And me?

It seems possible that Ester's family was among those Jewish intellectuals who once united with Magyars and German Nationalists. This doesn't quite make sense though; I'm fairly certain my grandmother once said that Ester and Charles raised their children, including my grandmother's mother Lillian, as observant Jews whom the family would have rejected had they married a non-Jew. Unless they reconnected with their religion when they immigrated, or unless they remained observant Jews but altered their dress and speech to appear less Jewish, they must not have totally assimilated like these other German nationalist and Magyarized Jews. My grandmother must have been the first to refuse our history.

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Over the next several days, my mother sends me more photos. She also mentions that she and my grandmother have been

discussing our conversations and recalling stories of my curiosity. Of me trailing my mother and asking of my father's whereabouts. Of me crawling into a cabinet, slipping my left pointer finger into a hole. Of my playful sister closing the cabinet door, a sharp, metal hinge entering that hole and carving off the tip of my two-year-old finger-which eventually regrew. I knew that tale of my inquisitiveness well: my mother bagging the severed tip in ice; my sister wiping blood from the tile floor; nurses coating each of my fingers with some antibiotic I thought looked like brown paint.

As my mother tells me of her recent recollections with my grandmother, she adds that although Grandma was hesitant to talk about her childhood at first, now she can't seem to stop. This might be the best time to call my grandmother again. She answers after one ring.

"You know...my cousin Eddie looked up the family..." she says, quickly moving away from my questions about Ester and Charles in Hungary. "He found Charles's grave in Scranton, PA."

*Maybe Mom was wrong.* Or maybe my grandmother is more candid with my mother now but still fears what I'll do with her secrets.

"Eddie?" I've never heard of this cousin.

"One of my mother's brothers, Albert, was Eddie's father. Albert was a child abuser, too," she says.

*That's more like it,* I think. And then: *child abuser?* Though I've always heard Lillian was "rough," I've never heard anyone describe the Horowitzs with such a clinical term. The dough unfurls. Maybe my mother was right about my grandmother's new frankness after all.

"Eddie was thirteen when I was born," she says. "Later he was in the army. I always liked him even though he considered me a spoiled brat. I was the only girl of all the boy cousins-they

were all very Jewish and very poor. I guess I got all the attention.”

My grandmother’s father, who contracted pneumonia and died after a long walk in the snow and a dose of penicillin, was a wealthy jeweler. Perhaps the cousins resented her for that.

“Eddie’s a chiropractor now. Lives in Del Ray, I think. Al beat Eddie and Eddie’s brother, and just like my father didn’t interfere when my mother abused me, Eddie’s mother just let it take place.”

I want to know if she’s angry. Resentful that no one stopped it. I want details about her mother’s abuse, but I remind myself those doors are not mine to kick open.

I know what it’s like to crawl inside your shell when your secrets-your safety-are endangered. I know what it’s like to unintentionally hide long after danger disappears.

She continues. “My mother said her father Charles beat all the kids...”

I wonder if her mother was trying to explain herself then, if my grandmother is trying to explain her mother’s abuse now. Is my grandmother remembering her mother’s hands against her skin, the way I remember Carlos’s hands against mine when my therapist probes and I suddenly dream of him again? Is my grandmother closing her eyes, her arms no longer waving gracefully through the air but instead covering her mouth-a shield-just like I shield my chest and neck whenever I recall Carlos drawing near?

“Anyway, I was told Charles had clinical depression. Eddie said Charles died in a hospital and that the official word they used was ‘melancholia.’ And others said Charles was depressed because he lost a son. One of Lillian’s brothers, Clarence, died during the flu epidemic when he was nineteen,” she says. “But I don’t believe that was the reason.”

“Why not?”

“My mother said Charles had been driving a horse wagon, got knocked down, and had a head injury. She said *that* caused his illness.”

I, too, resist the story that Clarence’s death caused Charles’s depression, but the wagon narrative also seems suspect.

“Couldn’t that have been another story told to cover up the real one? Don’t you think this was all somehow related to Charles’s abuse? That the abuse, which had been going on long before this depression, was a result of some mental illness? And if his son, Herbert, was schizophrenic, couldn’t Charles have been schizophrenic, too?”

“I guess so.”

I know all of this speculation could be just that—a guessing game reliant on fallible memories—but I’m still determined to find the origin of the issue, whatever it might be. I’m still hoping to exhume a story that will somehow reason away my own past.

I require a tangible formula: Charles’s trauma in Hungary led to Charles beating his children in Scranton, which led to Lillian beating my grandmother, which led to my grandmother numbing herself to the past, evaporating into a man and raising my mother and her brother in an unstable home devoid of heritage and expressed love. And all of this might explain why my mother escaped into drinking, why her brother took his life. All of this must explain why I, too, knew little of our history, why I searched for myself in a man who himself had been abused by a political refugee, why I stayed in a destructive relationship for six years. *Voilà! Case solved. Easy math.*

As I speak to my grandmother, though, I ask only about

Charles. Did genetics cause the depression, the schizophrenia, the abuse? Or is something that happened in Hungary to blame instead? My grandmother can't say. However forthcoming she was minutes ago, she's beginning to feel less and less reliable. I need other sources.

"I know Eddie would love to get a call from you..." she says. "He was looking for a relationship from me, but I didn't care to give him that. I tried to close the doors for reasons I'd have to go to a shrink for. And now you come along and want to open them. The thing is, I didn't choose to drag these memories out. I repressed them instead of trying to figure out why my mother was the way she was."

*There's the unexpected frankness Mom mentioned.* Still, I feel like my grandmother is trying to shift the burden of my questions to someone more willing to peer into the past. I'm also beginning to feel guilty for prying. Am I wrong for trying to unearth painful memories my eighty-six-year-old grandmother wishes to keep buried? Will this excavation benefit anyone other than me?

~

I spend the next day searching the Internet for more information about the Horowitzs. My mother finds and shares some of my grandmother's first cousins' phone numbers, including Eddie's. I know I'll eventually call them, but I'm still too focused on my grandmother's slippery tales to tackle other sources yet.

When I call my grandmother to report my findings, she returns to tales about Ester.

"Did you know my grandmother Ester learned her baking and cooking and embroidering in Europe? She was very cultured. She even spoke German!"

I try once more to ask my grandmother about Charles. "So

you're certain Ester and Charles were *both* educated and well-off in Europe?"

"Absolutely. Now the Russian side-my father's parents-they couldn't read or write," my grandmother reminds me. Claire taught English to her paternal grandfather Aaron. Between lessons he said, *We don't speak Yiddish. We don't speak Hebrew. We hide to survive.*

My grandmother told me that story years ago, and I accepted the narrative as true-complete. It seems to explain why my grandmother ignored her Jewishness. Lillian did not raise Claire religiously-no Hebrew school, no menorah on Chanukah, no Passover Seders-likely because Lillian had fled an abusive, Orthodox home, but also because her father-in-law, Aaron, didn't want his granddaughter near a synagogue.

"My parents didn't observe any holidays," Claire says. "They didn't keep kosher, they didn't do anything. Except of course all of our friends were Jewish."

It's the *of course* that stops me again, just like the Yiddish words that have snuck into Claire's mouth. She claims no understanding of Jewish culture yet the evidence against this is glaring. She's been married three times. Never once to a non-Jew. But she never let anyone hang a mezuzah over her door.

*We hide to survive.*

Her impulse to conceal aligns with other narratives I've heard since childhood. About the Holocaust, first introduced to me in elementary school. About survival. I've long accepted those with ease, too. In my quest to understand why I possess little understanding of my own Jewishness, this makes sense: Aaron survived the Czar's army and then told his granddaughter to hide, too. Lillian kept Judaism out of the household. And Claire was a teenager when the Nazis were murdering Jews abroad; even though she lived in New Jersey and was seemingly

safe, she must have been afraid.

“Your mother, however, wanted to know about the holidays,” Claire continues. “When she was a teenager, she was very sheepish about me knowing she was lighting the menorah. I was shocked-I didn’t know she had been doing these things! I didn’t teach the kids a thing. But when she had you girls, she wanted to show you the rituals even if she didn’t quite understand them.”

I tell her I’m glad. I don’t tell her I’m surprised she’s so blatantly acknowledging her effort to erase Judaism from our lives. My mother told me of this erasure long ago, but has my grandmother ever spoken so openly of her disguising?

“On Jewish holidays, I sent your mother and her brother to school and they came home very mad at me. Most of their friends were Jewish; they lived in a Jewish community at the time,” she says. “All of those kids stayed home. But I sent mine.”

“Yes,” I say. “Mom told me that.”

I don’t return to my questions about Charles and Ester. I’m glad my grandmother has been willing to share all she has, but I still feel guilty for yanking at her suppressed past. I also can’t shake the fear that accepting these narratives as complete will close doors again. Yes, Aaron, a survivor, changed his name and denied his past. But if I can’t find a trauma that Charles fled in Europe, if he and Ester came here with beautiful clothes and opportunity and didn’t need to survive anything-if he abused his kids *just because* (can that ever be true?), or if our family’s history of mental illness is not dependent on trauma but instead on genetics-then I cannot explain his and Lillian’s abuse or the ultimate rejection of our Jewish identity. And I cannot, then, blame this unexplainable lack of identity for the fact that I remained in-and later repressed-my own destructive

relationship. I so desperately require an external cause that I've begun viewing family trauma as a more desirable reason than genetics or "just because." I've begun exoticizing and romanticizing my ancestors' suffering in an attempt to explain my own.

I'm trying to claim that the ultimate reason I grew up without knowing the word pogrom is the very fact and effect of those pogroms' occurrence, but without confirming that Charles's abuse was born of that persecution, I don't think I can.

And even if I can claim that his abuse caused Lillian to ignore her Judaism and my grandmother to hide from her past, I cannot continue blaming that absence for my retreat into silence. I cannot continue blaming the longing I felt as a kid-when I sensed my history tugging at me as I orbited around the items in my childhood home, when my loving parents tucked me in at night and kissed my forehead but never said what I finally know I should: *We must remember our pasts*. Charles's palm hovering above his children's heads. My grandmother's long skirt hiding her mother's marks. My pockmarked walls and cratered fenders and Carlos's bruised hands. His tears spilling into the wrinkles of my dry fingers like rivulets running atop the cracked earth. My thumbs tracing the crescents beneath his tired eyes, his anger slipping off like a mask.

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