

My Lost Stories

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OUT OF THE REFRACTED TUNNEL OF MACULAR DEGENERATION, MY ninety-two-year-old mother points a misshapen finger toward the cluttered table. Then she says with a shrug, "That's about my mother."

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

Both articles are about 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, my great-grandfather, who owned a saloon on Stone Avenue (now Mother Gaston Avenue) and, ahem, cashed checks for customers on the weekend.

Because my eternally tight-lipped mother has never spoken of Jennie Sakol, I don't connect the name to my maternal grandmother right away. I do know, although I do not think I have heard it from my mother, that when Jennie Sakol Aaronson grew ill and was hospitalized, in 1926, her thirteen-year-old daughter, my mother, was sent off to summer camp in the Catskills—and the two never saw or spoke to each other again.

That 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, 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 I later used it as a "trigger" for one of my creative writing workshops. But in the end—as in the end of another full and wearying day trying to stay upright on this spinning planet—I have to admit that it meant little more to me than finding an intriguing daguerreotype of an unknown subject in the seventy-five-cent bins of local antique stores.

So?

So now it's several years later and my mother is several years silenced beyond this life and I know nothing more about my grandmother than I did the afternoon I read the *Brooklyn Eagle* and the *Saloon News*. But I am haunted now by that shadow of a seventeen-year-old girl robbed by the two well-dressed thugs. The girl, who would die nineteen years later, when she was thirty-six years old, 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 built around seven children and fifteen grandchildren, I sometimes find myself staring off into space as my mother often did, wishing that I knew just a handful of stories about this Jennie—something, anything, a few words strung together here or there about what she looked like or what she cooked well or the punishments she meted out or which lullabies, if any, she sang her baby girl to sleep with. How bereft little Lillian must have felt at thirteen, a motherless child.

A few months ago, I drove alone to the 1950s gray rancher on Long Island where I grew up, and 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, in her silences at supper, the sighing shoulders doing dishes, the quiet clicking

of knitting needles in front of the Sylvania TV at night, the empty pages of a painful past beyond words.

There was no point in stopping in front of the house. It's a shell to me. I rolled past the Schnippers' house, where their little girl, Cheryl, died of a brain tumor when I was seven (and no one said anything to me about it); turned the corner onto Westwood Circle, past Bobby Jayson's home (whom I haven't spoken with in forty-six years); past Dr. Kent's (who would come to the house with his black bag and talk to my mother, not me); and onto the Long Island Expressway, leaving behind all those untold stories that might have become a fertile plot of ground to better grieve a mother's passing.

Perhaps because I so long ago left that deathly quiet neighborhood to live a life teeming with children and words, no doubt trying to fill in some of the blanks she left behind, I drove upstate to my home in the mountains, thinking not of my enigmatic mother or my unknown grandmother, but, oddly enough, of the thousands of writers who have come to my workshops over the past forty years to tell their stories. To put into words the medicinal 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 awesome in its gifts, breathtaking in its fearful reprisals. This planet that makes some stories too painful to tell.

In soulful contrast to my unreadable mother, who held 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, not to mention the adoptive comforts of television and intoxicants and food, to write their stories.

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 of mine, most of whom 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 LW writes about a hard father and a harder deployment in Vietnam and hardest of all, the anguished tale of coming home to an

angry, unforgiving country; and CA moves so resonantly between the sacred and profane lines of a gritty Pittsburgh skyline and the sandy Connecticut shoreline; and JG opens up the second-story window of a childhood in Westchester to see what happens after his father runs off to Mexico with a neighbor; JE tells us of a misbegotten bicycle trip from Minnesota to New York; EM, the drama of a nephew lost in Broad Channel.

And so I think, and I think, and I can't stop thinking of my grandmother, Jennie Sakol, and how different things might have been if only I could have had her daughter in my class. ◇