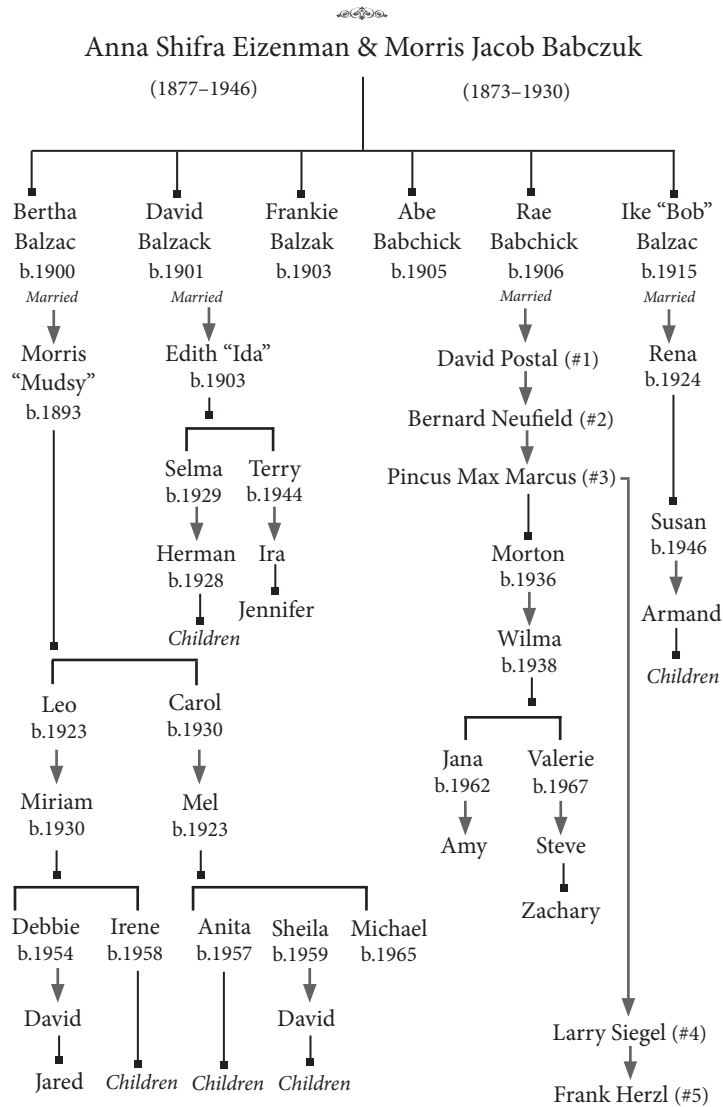


BABCZUK FAMILY TREE



Introduction

My father was the master of stories—unrivaled when it came to weaving a tale. My sister Valerie and I were mesmerized by his stories as we grew up, drawn into his world, and kept at the edge of our seats as he acted out colorful characters with great enthusiasm—his eyebrows raised and salt-and-pepper beard jutting up and down.

He was poet, writer, and film historian Morton Marcus. A professor by trade—which meant he loved to tell a good story and get your mind working, thinking about things as you never had before. He had a gift for making everything interesting, even the most mundane seemed magical.

Our parents divorced when Valerie and I were small, so weekends with Dad became one of the highlights of my young life growing up in the Northern California coastal town of Santa Cruz. Every Friday night was dinner out and a movie, followed by a Saturday adventure exploring a museum, a Greek street festival, or a road trip in the Bay Area.

As I became a teenager, my father and I would take long walks on the beach or drives through the redwood forest, talking about the mysteries of the universe, the origins of jazz, or the history of American cinema. He was a walking encyclopedia—he knew something about everything.

The stories I loved the most were about our family’s early years. Some tales were fantastic and heroic, like the time he was teaching my mother to drive, and the car stalled on railroad tracks in a ravine. As a locomotive came speeding toward them, Dad pushed the vehicle onto the adjacent hill and held it in place as the train passed below. Or, the story about how he stumbled upon a hidden UFO aircraft at Scott Airforce Base when he was in the service in 1956.

Then there were the more romantic tales, such as how our parents met as teenagers at a party on Long Island in the 1950s. Stories of our mother studying dance with Martha Graham and Dad befriending soon-to-be-famous literary figures at the Iowa Writer's Workshop. Or, the story about how beautiful Mom looked in a red sweater when she appeared on the TV game show *Jeopardy* and won enough money for them to “escape New York” and travel across the country in their powder blue VW Bug to start their family in San Francisco.

That was how Dad explained why we were raised in California, although all our relatives lived on the East Coast, 3000 miles away.

I felt very connected to my mother's side of the family in New York. We saw them once a year and had lots of cousins our own age, aunts and uncles who played games with us or just let us run around and be kids. On Dad's side of the family, we only knew his mother, Grandma Rae. She lived in a fancy apartment in New York City that faced Central Park and was very persnickety about manners, appearances, and other things she labeled as “having class.” She had once been very wealthy, and Dad had been her only child. We had no grandfather—Dad's father was entirely out of the picture.

“Why did you need to escape New York?” I asked.

“I longed for a place to truly call home, and the redwoods were calling me,” my father mused.

That was his take. My mother had another version altogether. For her, the escape from New York was about getting away from her mother-in-law, Grandma Rae, who was constantly criticizing her. I was too young at the time to understand whatever family dynamics were going on. But, our parent's “escape” meant that my sister and I didn't have significant ties with Dad's side of the family—whoever they might be—when we were growing up.

One Saturday afternoon in 1978, when I was 16-years-old, Dad told me the most compelling family story of them all. We were eating corned beef on rye and drinking Dr. Brown's Cream Soda at a deli in Santa Cruz (which he complained wasn't like a *real* East Coast Jewish deli) when he started telling me about his childhood in New York. It wasn't just one

story, either. It was several, all interconnecting to make for the most epic tale he had ever told. He gestured wildly with his hands, portraying his aunts and uncles, mimicking their thick Brooklyn accents.

He called his youth an “Oliver Twist childhood with a Jewish accent”—a devilish snicker spread across his lips as he told how Grandma Rae was as glamorous as a movie star, had been married five times, and sent him away to boarding school starting at the age of three. He'd only met his wealthy father once or twice when he was very young. At the dramatic parts, when he attempted to run away from the schools and try to go home, Dad's voice would go up an octave, his blue eyes twinkling. I assumed he was exaggerating. He was known to do that—but always in such an alluring and demonstrative way that I continually wanted more.

There were many colorful characters in his tale: grandparents from the Ukraine who worked in sweatshops after coming to America; Uncle Frankie the Cowboy, who broke horses in the West; Uncle “Jungle Jim,” who invented the famous coconut-whip drink; Uncle Ike who failed the bar exam so many times he ended up working as an orderly in a psychiatric hospital; Aunt Bertha who covered her furniture in plastic and barely spoke English; and something about a gambler who was killed.

Then there were his favorite cousins—Aunt Bertha's children, Leo and Carol. With no siblings or father, and a mother who was not around much, Dad credited them for shaping his childhood. Carol babysat young Mort when he was home from school, dragging him on adventures through Brooklyn. Leo, 11-years Mort's senior, became his only male role model, taking him to ball games, teaching him street fighting as he got older, and other “guy” things of that nature.

Dad's stories resembled those old black and white movies he would take us to see every Friday night at the Sash Mill Cinema. The rough edges of his lonely childhood story still succeeded in glamourizing a family that thrived in a New York City that I could only read about, or see glimpses of in those old noir films.

That same summer, Valerie and I traveled to Miami Beach to see our maternal Grandma Jackie, and then flew to New York City to stay with Grandma Rae. In Miami, Grandma Jackie reminisced about her father,

who made fur hats and coat collars for the Cossack Army in the Russian Pale Settlement, and the Harris relatives who ran the Broadway theaters in New York. I tried to write down all those Russian-Jewish names as fast as she could spout them off, scribbling names and birthdays until they became a maze of inkblots on paper.

When we visited Grandma Rae in New York, she hosted a family dinner party, serving her famous cabbage soup. Some of Dad's relatives ventured up from Brooklyn to her fancy Manhattan apartment. That's when I first met his two older cousins, Leo and Carol. They were both rousing storytellers, just like Dad. Everyone shouted over each other in loud, broken Yiddish and I remember feeling a bit overwhelmed with culture shock. Still, I loved the tidbits of stories they shared about Uncle Frankie the Cowboy and Dad as a boy. I took their stories at face value—I had no reason to think otherwise. I became increasingly interested in our family's roots, particularly my grandmother's generation and what their lives had been like in the Old Country.

By age 17, understanding who our family was and their place on the timeline of history became all-important to me. My friends were looking to the future and college, while I was looking to the past. I went to the library and found out how to make a family tree. This was long before the personal computer was even a thought. I checked out thick books on genealogy, which I never read, and got the address to the Church of Latter-Day Saints Family Library in Salt Lake City, which I knew I'd probably never visit. I sent letters, with a questionnaire I'd copied from a book, to relatives on both sides of my family. Slowly, I accumulated enough information to construct a family tree.

My maternal tree had shaped up nicely, but on my father's side of the family, I had practically no information. I received a return letter from Dad's Uncle Ike, saying, "Good luck in your search, but I'm sure no one wants to talk about the past." When I would ask Grandma Rae questions during our annual visits, she'd merely shake her head and shush me away. At the time, I lived so far away from the New York clan—and I couldn't fathom how a Mormon organization like the LDS could help me

learn about my Russian-Jewish heritage—that I decided to packed-away all my notes and charts for another time.

As it turned out, that "other time" came 10 years later, in the late 1980s, when I was living in New York City. It was then that I stumbled upon the first clue into the real story of my father's family. In what turned out to be a 28-year journey into discovering the truth behind what I thought were my father's exaggerated stories, a series of bizarre coincidences came my way—signs, if you will—that led me on a quest to thread together a history, not only of my family but of New York City itself, with more unbelievable twists-and-turns than my father could ever have fabricated.

This is the story of what happened to me.

PART
I



1

The Secret Drawer

New York City, 1988

Central Park South is a three-block area of 59th Street, between 5th and 8th Avenues, adjacent to the bottom of Central Park. Lined with horse-drawn carriages driven by men in top hats and sprinkled with five-star hotels, it's a ritzy patch of the city that is often congested with tourists and the occasional parade.

But, I didn't think of it as a fancy, upper-class neighborhood, and maybe I didn't really have an appreciation for what it meant to live on this stretch of Manhattan real estate. To me, Central Park South with its dense tree-lined entrances to the park, patinaed statuary, and shining brass banisters of upscale residences, was just where my paternal Grandma Rae had lived for decades.

My parents moved a lot when I was a child, especially after their divorce in 1972, so Grandma's apartment on the park felt like the permanent family home, filled with beautiful furniture, antiques, and wonderful food.

I'd been living in New York City for the past few years, since graduating college and leaving the sandy beaches of Northern California to pursue a career in photography. I was in love with New York. Rich with history at every turn, its crowded and buzzing streets inspired me artistically in a way that the peaceful, open spaces of California never could.

I was busy living the life of a 26-year-old artist in Manhattan—which included working as a photographer, nightclubbing, and spending a lot of time trying to be hip at all costs. I was also spending a lot of time with

Grandma Rae. She was thrilled when I moved to the City. I immediately became her best friend and received up to five phone calls a day regarding whether I was warm enough and eating properly.

It was a cold January day, as I strolled down Broadway from my West End Avenue apartment towards Grandma's house. She was preparing brunch for us, before cooking a family dinner that evening in honor of my father, who was flying in from California.

I rounded Columbus Circle and crossed over to 7th Avenue, passing the New York Athletic Club—the same spot where Cary Grant was whisked away in a taxi in *North by Northwest*, having stumbled into a shadowy world of crime and intrigue. I smiled to myself, remembering when I first saw that film with my father. I may not have missed the beaches, but I did miss my immediate family and was filled with excitement to see Dad. I hadn't seen him in almost a year.

He rarely came to New York, grumbling that it was no longer the city he grew up in. But, after many years, he was returning to see the family and obtain their blessings on a new book of poetry he was writing about their journey to America at the beginning of the 20th century.

As I approached 116 Central Park South, Luis the doorman was already holding the door ajar with one gloved hand and tipping his captain's hat toward me with a wink. He had watched me grow up over the years and no longer bothered to buzz Grandma's intercom to announce I'd arrived.

I crossed the marble-floored lobby and checked myself in the bank of mirrors across from the elevators. I hoped Grandma wouldn't give me a hard time about my appearance, which was often much too "downtown" for her liking. My dark, thick, curly hair fell across the shoulders of a long, vintage overcoat, that hid an oversized sweater and black leggings. Only my silver-tipped cowboy boots were exposed. I had tried to tame my East Village eclectic style for the family gathering. "Whatever," I sighed, looking at my reflection.

My outfit would probably illicit whispers from family members, but I didn't really care. I didn't have a deep connection with this side of the family. My sister and I had been raised in the freethinking, artistic milieu

of our Haight-Ashbury era parents, and there didn't appear to be much common thread with the Brooklyn clan. Yet, I adored the rare occasions when we were all together. It was a big family—full of Slavic loudness and a *Fiddler on the Roof* zest for life. When we were all together, it was beautiful chaos.

As the elevator opened on the 7th floor, Grandma Rae was already standing with her apartment door ajar waiting for me.

“Bubelah!” she hollered down the hallway.

Even though I was a grown woman she still grabbed me tightly, slobbered kisses on my cheek as she had since I was a child, then wiped away her spittle with a final pat on my face, snarling, “You!...*shaineh maidel!*” Her greeting was always a dichotomy of calling me a beautiful girl and sneering at the same time. Then her expression would abruptly turn to a boisterous laugh.

“Come, come and eat,” she demanded, pulling me into the apartment with a firm grip of her liver-spotted hand that sported a giant yellow topaz ring.

We sat and ate matzoh brei in the small kitchen. She smothered me with questions about the men I was dating, the food crumbling from her lips onto her large chest, staining the stains on the housedress which covered designer clothes.

From across the table Grandma shoved a \$50 bill in my hand. “Go see my faygeleh hairdresser and get your hair straightened. Jewish curls don't become you.” She stared at me lovingly for a moment, and then crinkled her brow declaring, “What the hell's the matter with you? You'll never get a decent man if you keep wearing those shmattas and boots. Listen to what I tell you—you need a softer look.” She sized me up and down again. “Oy, yoy, yoy,” she spewed in a pained tone looking at my hands. “Stop with the schlocky black nail polish already!”

She always wanted to teach me a lesson, have me understand that the only way to get ahead in life was to look good, dress well, and end up with a doctor or a lawyer. A typical Jewish grandmother—at least that was what I always thought. Yet often her sapphire blue eyes drifted across

the room to contemplate something far-off. I often wondered what she reflected upon in those moments.

Rae Marcus, my grandmother, was 81-years-old at the time. She loved entertaining, and at that point in her life she wouldn't dream of venturing down to Brooklyn to see relatives. They all came to her. The matriarch of the family, she held court at her fancy address, preparing, as usual, to impress them with fine food and wine. She was the one who got out of Brooklyn. She was the one who married several times into money. She was the one they looked to as a symbol of betterment.

Grandma had a strange love-hate relationship with me. She adored me as the daughter she never had and talked about me constantly to others. Yet, she couldn't control me the way she wanted to—couldn't shape my life. That's what she disliked about me.

I was of a generation with different values and ideas than the ones she had at my age. Her dreams of a luxurious life through marriage to a rich man meant nothing to me, yet she kept trying to make me fit into her mold. She couldn't understand how I saw myself in the world and how I wanted to express myself as an artist, be independent, single. Grandma constantly nagged that I didn't know my own worth. But what was her definition of worth? I had no aspirations to be a member of high society or marry a man who would take care of me financially.

We had many good times together—adventures at Carnegie Hall, box seats at the opera and ballet, eating in fancy restaurants, and laughing together hysterically about something silly. She had a sharp wit and could be wildly fun. Those were the times she told me she loved me.

I was also there for the bad times when she would fly into a rage from unmet expectations or bitter disappointments which she claimed were caused by family members—which now included me because I was in close proximity.

I was the only immediate family member who had really tried to have a relationship of any substantial depth with her. My father found her maddening, and most of the relatives stayed at arms-length due to her mood swings and gossipy ways. Yet, they all admired her and counted

on her financial help when times were tough. She had isolated almost everyone except for her niece and nephew, Leo and Carol, who were extremely loyal to her.

Grandma could also be very unpredictable. A couple of years earlier, when I had been apartment hunting and briefly staying with her, she suddenly woke me one morning, throwing the covers off me in a single swoop and yelling, "I can't have you here anymore, get out of my house!" Confused, I asked what was going on, but she ignored me, marched to the front door, and proceeded to throw my luggage and clothes out into the hallway, hollering in Yiddish that I was lazy and ungrateful.

As I dashed out of the apartment to retrieve my belongings, she slammed the front door shut and locked it. Only wearing pajamas, I stood in the hallway of the 7th floor, dazed by her actions, until a concerned neighbor opened her door and let me in to change my clothes.

I didn't speak to Grandma for a couple of months after that. Then, one day she called me out of the blue, acted as nothing had ever happened, and wanted to go to the movies. She had a conveniently selective memory. As time went on, and she kept calling, I felt that if I was very old and had isolated everyone in my life, I would want someone to give me another chance. So, I cautiously went back to being present in her life.

Grandma Rae was a very difficult and complicated woman, but I loved her. Because I had been so close to her for so long I was sure I knew her better than anyone else did.

"Your cousin Debbie is a real shit-ass!" she suddenly blurted out of nowhere. "Who does she think she is asking me to leave her my mink coat? She can have the stole instead!" She immediately got up from the kitchen table and shuffled in her pink slippers to the living room. I was always shocked when she cursed. In public she had the demeanor of a lady, someone cultured and refined. But she was not bred to it. She had carefully learned to be a sophisticate during her lifetime.

I followed her into the living room where we started to set the mahogany dining table for twelve, rearranging the silver and the Booths' porcelain china for the dinner party.

"Always set your table the night before. It's easier...and don't let cousin Debbie hang her coat in the front closet tonight...if she sees the mink

she'll start in on me ...oy, gevalt!" She threw her hands in the air, shaking her head.

"...and that Carol with her children, always putting the soda bottles on the table! So classless! She should never get the \$4000 crystal vase... you hear me?" Grandma was constantly repeating the monetary value of her personal items to me, and declaring who should get what when she died. Her voice echoed as she quickly scampered between the kitchen and the dining room. I could barely keep up with her.

After she reminded me which fork went where, she no longer wanted my help, and in my usual fashion I exited to her bedroom. Grandma ran a small designer dress business out of her apartment for wealthy women in the neighborhood. Her closets were always bursting with beautiful apparel she bought wholesale in the garment district—the labels were taken out and replaced with designer tags. I looked through her collection of ready-to-wear every time I came to visit.

Her bedroom also housed "the secret drawer." This drawer, at the bottom of her dresser, wasn't really a secret, but it contained ancient treasures my sister and I loved to rummage through. We always found something new and curious, thus the name. It was filled with photographs and papers haphazardly shoved away. They were remnants of another era. Beautiful Rae in diamonds and furs with unknown men at the 21 Club, Rae riding horseback in Central Park, trips to Europe and Florida, handsome men with slicked-back hair in suits and overcoats. It was a glamorous New York of the 1930s and 40s—a New York we'd never know. A Rae we'd never know. Because of her glitzy past, my sister and I had affectionately nicknamed her "Glamour Granny."

With time to waste as I awaited the arrival of my father and the rest of the family, I pulled open the drawer, sat crossed-legged on the floor, and began to explore. I slipped on the rhinestone casts of Grandma's original diamond jewelry, like a little girl playing dress-up, and settled in for venturing through the piles of Rae's memories. I giggled as I found photos of my first birthday party and Dad in the Air Force.

"Grandma, you look so beautiful with these flowers in your hair..." I yelled from the bedroom. She wandered in, shoving a piece of matzoh in her mouth. "Oy, you found the picture of me winning the dance contest

at the Stork Club in 1945. I was so gorgeous! Everyone would stop and stare at me wherever I went. Aacchh...,” she turned to leave. “You must use your looks while you have them!” she hollered, her hand waving in the air.

Toward the back of the drawer I found a withered envelope, buried under the weight of hundreds of loose photographs. It was yellowed and torn, and inside, neatly folded, was a disintegrating newspaper article. I gingerly opened it and a bold headline read, “Neighbors Ignorant of Babchick’s Racket.” It was from the *New York Daily Mirror*, dated Friday, September 26, 1941. It read:

Thick-necked, casaba faced, Abie Babchick was polite to the neighbors in the New Lots section of Brownsville. Maybe he hadn’t been to high school and maybe he kept to himself too much, but he was a good boy—for all those neighbors knew, he grew up to be a good man. “Abie must be doing pretty good in that restaurant,” they said when they saw him pull up before his mother’s house in an expensive car.

And in a very human way they were glad and a little jealous. They were glad for Abie’s mother, father, two brothers and a sister, all good people. They were slightly envious of the success achieved by the thick-necked, close-mouthed boy without education.

Abie—who will be buried today, victim of gang guns—was doing well, but not in any way his family or neighbors could know. Abie was making good to the tune of \$8,000 a day gross in the policy racket. The man who had been the boy who never talked much but was always polite, was the policy king of large sections of Brooklyn, known as “Jew Murphy.” What could the neighbors know of this Abie? They knew he was partial to brown, that he must be rich, that he had few friends. And that is little to know of a boy who was born and raised in the neighborhood. From police sources a clearer picture can be drawn.

His rise into big money gambling hinged on the favoritism shown him by Abe Reles, who lived “just around the corner” in New Lots. To Reles, Babchick long paid regular tribute and was permitted to “bank” a portion of the huge policy receipts. When Reles, enmeshed in operations of Murder Incorporated, had to drop the policy racket, Babchick took over. For some eight years he had been at the top.

Unmarried, with no known girlfriends, he seemed to have an almost frenzied respect for domesticity. He froze employees who asked for a dol-

lar raise, but if he heard one was expecting a baby, or if a wife or child were ill, he would spend thousands to help out.

His mother is desperately ill of a heart ailment. His brothers are hard-working, respectable men. In truth, one way, they’ve made good. But until the abandoned gang car was found Wednesday with his body in it, Abie was regarded by the neighbors as the quiet, polite boy who had made good.¹

“Jankaleh, come watch how I make the brisket!” Grandma called from the kitchen.

Who was Abie? What was a policy racket? I tucked everything back into the drawer and went to help Grandma in the kitchen.

I had asked her many times when I was a teenager in family tree building mode, the names of her brothers and sisters. Her simple answer of their names was often followed by a string of Yiddish phrases that came across like voodoo curses as if she were banishing them to Hell. I called it her “Jew-doo.” For instance, when mentioning her youngest brother Ike, she would holler, “*Ikh lib gehat zey, naronim on kropeveh vaksen on regen!*” Then break into laughter. I would look at her questioningly and she would respond by shrugging her shoulders and translating: “Fools and weeds both grow without rain.”

Back then I thought that was all there was to know. This time I was hoping for a more extended answer as I asked her, once again, the names of her siblings.

“Don’t ask, darling, they are all gone now. May their memory be a blessing.” She didn’t look up from the stove as she replied, then quickly changed the subject to another cousin who annoyed her.

The strange article I’d found in the secret drawer was intriguing. I would ask about it when the family arrived.



By 4 p.m., apartment 7D was abuzz with reunion and conversation. Dad had arrived—his beard now a bit grayer and his head a bit balding, looking like a typical casual Californian in jeans and a velour shirt. He greeted cousins, kissing and hugging, and making sure they

placed their coats in the bedroom—not the front closet—according to Grandma’s wishes.

Carol arrived with her husband and children. “Mortela, you’re so handsome!” she exclaimed, hugging Mort tightly and then affectionately rubbing his bald spot.

Next, Leo arrived, bursting through the front door and striking a pose with his legs bent and arms outstretched toward Mort. “Mottle!” he yelled, “Feel my thighs!” The muscular butcher-turned-summons-server proceeded to plop himself on the delicate damask sofa with his prim English wife, Miriam, who just watched everyone and seldom spoke.

“Mottle, remember the time I took you to see the Dodgers at Ebbet’s Field?” Leo bellowed in his rich Brooklyn accent. Mort joined him in the living room and they howled with laughter. Lovable Leo and Carol may have been my father’s older cousins, but to everyone they were just Uncle Leo and Aunt Carol.

One by one the cousins arrived. We ate. We drank. The soda bottles were on the table. Grandma Rae rushed around to serve everyone as voices got louder and louder, each person shouting atop the other, until the sound was a legato of white noise.

As dinner ended, cousins retreated to separate corners of the apartment for conversations. Cousin Debbie, Leo’s daughter, who never said a word about Grandma’s mink coat, chased after her screaming 8-year-old son Jared. Carol’s son Michael was assessing Grandma’s things for their potential value. Cousins Terry and Selma discussed housing prices in New Jersey, and Grandma was in the kitchen preparing dessert—tasting each serving as she dished it onto the china.

Carol went to rummage through the coats in the bedroom for a hard candy, and I went to join her.

“Hey, Aunt Carol,” I asked, “do you know who someone named Abie was?”

She suddenly froze, hunched over the pile of coats. Slowly she turned her round body toward me, peering over the rim of her glasses.

“Whaa? Whaa’d ya’say?”

“Who was Abie?”

“Oy, God rest his soul, go ask your Uncle Leo. And don’t talk so loud!”

I returned to the living room making a beeline for my father and Leo, who were still laughing uproariously, this time about some memory of their Uncle Dave, a.k.a. “Jungle Jim.”

“Hey,” I interrupted them, “do you know who someone named Abie Babchick was?”

“Abie?” Leo looked at me with surprise, then lowered his voice and leant toward me, as if about to reveal a secret of great proportions, and whispered, “Don’t let your grandmother hear you say that name.”

“He was one of Grandma’s brothers,” Dad replied.

“Look, we shouldn’t talk about this right now,” Leo said, shaking his head.

“I found a newspaper clipping in Grandma’s secret drawer, and...”

“Not now!” Leo interrupted me, swaying his arms in a hush-hush motion as Grandma Rae entered the living room announcing dessert.

“What did you find?” Dad asked.

“Come look,” I turned to go to the bedroom, my father and Leo following, closing the bedroom door behind them. I pulled out the drawer, felt around for the withered envelope, took out the fragile newspaper article, and gingerly handed it to Mort.

“Look what you found!” Leo chuckled with astonishment.

After skimming the article, Dad looked at Leo. “This is OUR Uncle Abe?”

Leo winked, “That’s our Abie. It was a terrible thing that went on.”

Carol walked in and inspected the weathered newsprint in Dad’s hands. Her eyebrows went up. “Oy, here it comes. A lot of yelling for no reason.”

Just then, Grandma opened the door. “What’s with all the kibitzing? Come, come into the living room for dessert,” she insisted. We all looked at her at once, as if guilty of some crime.

When she caught sight of the article in Mort’s hand, she frantically reached for it and started screaming, “NO! NO! Give that to me! Don’t ever say his name! Don’t speak my brother’s name!” Then she turned and ran to the kitchen, slamming the door behind her.

Mort let out a gust of nervous laughter at Grandma's reaction. Leo and Carol shook their heads, having expected it. I stood there in amazement, trying to understand why Grandma's reaction had been so volatile.

As Leo, Carol, Dad, and I moved back into the living room, relatives with horrified expressions waited to know what happened. Grandma had locked herself in the kitchen and several cousins were banging on the door to be let in.

In a corner of the living room we gathered around Leo, who told us that Abie was a racketeer and made money—a lot of it—to support the family. He had been Rae's favorite brother and she was devastated when he died.

Who murdered Abe? That was what my father and I wanted to know. What happened to Abe's money? That was what the cousins wanted to know.

Grandma eventually opened the kitchen door, tears streaming down her reddened face, and insisted the evening was over and everyone should go home. She refused any questions about Abe and wanted to be left alone. As she ushered the family out the door, I snuck into the kitchen and slipped the faded newspaper article into my purse for safe keeping—and further investigation.

2

Family Matters

The following day, Dad and I ventured up to the Bronx to visit Carol. I couldn't get over the drama that had ensued upon finding the newspaper article, so during the train ride I asked Dad what he knew about this uncle's murder.

"I knew Abe was a gambler and had been killed, but I had no idea he was a racketeer. I was told as a child he was a restaurateur." From his strained expression I could tell Dad was trying to piece it all together. "It certainly hadn't been part of your stories years ago," I commented.

During our visit with Carol, I was privy to some juicy stories and a deeper understanding of who the family elders were. I learned that Grandma's brothers and sisters all had variations of a similar last name. I also learned that they described each other by comparing their physical attributes to popular movie stars of their day. Aunt Carol's dry sense of humor and boisterous behavior always reminded me of the TV actress Roseanne Barr, but with a Brooklyn accent.

Carol described Grandma Rae's oldest brother Dave as a tall Charles Boyer with soft eyes and thick brows. Along with his wife Ida, he owned several luncheonettes over the years, but he is remembered in Brooklyn lore as "Jungle Jim"—the guy in the grass skirt and pith helmet—at his famous coconut-whip stand at Strauss and Pitkin Avenues. He used the last name of Balzack.

Ike, the youngest brother, resembled Tyrone Power—the swashbuckling, romantic actor—except he was chubby. Ike was the only sibling conceived in America, in 1915, and who graduated high school. Ike was considered the "real" American, and many of the family's dreams were