

Behind the Cigar Store

By Bill Ratner

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Last Summer I visited my uncle Gerry in Chicago in his 62nd floor condo in Oprah's building. I know it's still Oprah's building because downstairs in the fitness center I shaved next to Steadman. And I really wanted to ask him, Are you really Oprah's boyfriend, or is it just kind of an 'arrangement?' I didn't ask. I just lathered up and stole glances at him from the adjacent sink. Big guy. About 6'6". Very impressive in a towel.

My Uncle Gerry is my only blood relative besides my kids. He's ninety-eight. He lives alone in his condo. He's doing pretty well for ninety-eight. He tells me, "Twice a month I put on a suit, take a cab downtown to the office and sign checks."

He's a lawyer. For years my uncle was 5'7" and 165 pounds of pure ambition. But he's slowed down, he's 5'5." But he's doing fine. He has little white mutton chops and bright red hair that his barber pours out of a bottle once a month.

My uncle's birthday is in December. On this trip he told me, "I think I can make it to ninety-nine. I want to see Obama re-elected." I always thought my uncle was a Republican. He's a real estate attorney. When I was twelve he asked me, "Want to see the deed to the Empire State Building?" He reaches behind his desk, hauls out an elegant black carrying case, unlocks it with a luggage key, and lifts out a thick embossed paper covered in gold leaf, in the shape of the Empire State Building. "You know what this is worth, kid?"

"No."

“Depends on what you trade it for.”

“Like in Monopoly?”

“You give me a dozen shopping malls, a steamship line, and a couple of PGA golf courses, I’ll give you the Empire State Building.”

He was always good with numbers. As a kid he operated the cash register in my grandmother’s cigar store. My uncle is my conduit to the past. And being ninety-eight he tells stories about our family - over and over. He tells the hell out of them. My favorite is about the time Sicilian gangsters robbed my grandmother's cigar store.

My uncle and my dad lived in the back of the store at 4304 Kedzie Avenue on the South Side of Chicago across the street from Crane Plumbing Company, and all the workers came over and bought candy, cigarettes, ice cream, and cigars from my grandmother. The store was next to St. Pancratius Polish Catholic church, an Irish pub, a Jewish dry goods store, an Italian Social Club where they fixed everything from the price of concrete to whose kneecaps oughta’ get smashed.

My uncle says, “There were Dagos, Polacks, Irish, and Jews - we had everybody down there. Today you’d call it a rainbow neighborhood.”

It was nineteen twenty-eight. My uncle was thirteen, my dad was seventeen. And they loved baseball. But they couldn’t afford gloves. They used old leather work gloves, and catching a fly ball hurt. St. Pancratius had a team with real baseball gloves and uniforms. Father Gubelsky bought cigars from my grandma, she spoke Polish with him, so even though my dad and my uncle were Jews they played for St. Pancratius. My uncle said, “Your dad and I were good ball players. Nobody cared we were Jews.

Although one time my best friend Dribbitch Kanowsky accused me of killing Christ.

“Jiddick,’ he said. That means Jew bastard. ‘Jiddick, my pa says you Jews killed Christ. I should kick your ass.’

“I said, ‘Look, Dribbitch, the Romans killed him - two thousand years ago. You can read about it in a book. I personally had nothing to do with it.’ He believed me. But I asked my ma, ‘How come we live with the Polish Catholics? They hate the Jews.’”

“They don’t hate the Jews. They hate the Italians. And don’t think about that stuff. This is America.”

That summer my dad got a job operating a drill press at Crane Plumbing Company across the street. His arms got big, he drank beer. He was first-string catcher for St. Pancratius now. One afternoon a couple of guys walked onto the ball field.

“Hey, Polacks, we wanna play on your team. I’m Matty the Car, and this here is Vinnie the Veg.” They had little pencil moustaches and hang-dog eyes.

My dad goes, “Vinnie the Veg. You wops wouldn’t know a baseball from a kidney stone.”

Matty pokes my dad in the chest.

“Morta Christo,” which is Italian for Christ killer. “We play better baseball than the Polacks and the Jews.”

My dad grabs Matty the Car and puts him in a hammerlock.

“Listen spaghetti twister. Scram before I shove a Louisville slugger up your wazoo.” Matty wriggles out and he and Vinnie put up their fists, my dad picks up a bat, Father Gubelsky runs over, “Boys, boys,” Matty and Vinnie run off yelling, ‘You’ll be sorry,

you Polack-Jew bastards.' Stuff like that happens all the time.

"The next day your dad comes home from work like usual with his arms covered in metal shavings from the drillpress and a beer in his hand. My ma says to him, "What, you drink beer now? Jews don't drink beer. We sell beer."

"Your dad finishes his beer and swipes my new hat off my head. I grab for it, I miss, I chase him through the store out the back to the storage shed. 'Gimme my hat, fatso.' But your dad put my hat on, stands stock still, and looks up. On the balcony of the upstairs apartment, silhouetted in the afternoon sun stands Mrs. Bernansky – a big-breasted Polish Catholic lady with chestnut-brown hair cascading down her back and a loose flowered cotton dress, her stockings rolled halfway down her calves, and she has on a pair of little gray leather slippers. Your dad goes, "Those are the feet of an angel. At 4 o'clock the Crane Plumbing Company steam whistle blows – it's the start of the afternoon shift, and Mr. Bernansky goes to work leaving Mrs. Bernansky alone on the balcony, and your dad standing by our storage shed watching her. 'Good afternoon, Mrs. Bernansky.' Mrs. Bernansky stares toward the horizon, hands on her hips. She fingers her hair. Her legs are gently parted. "She's a goddess."

Ma comes out. "Julius, she's a married woman, and she's a shikse."

"S-h-h-h, Ma, I'm just being neighborly."

Inside the cigar store a customer pounds the bell on the counter, and me and my ma go back in to wait on 'em. Two guys stand by the front door with hats pulled down over their eyes. The tall one points at the cigar case. My ma unlocks it and hands 'em a coupla' cheap hand-rolled domestics. "La Vieja Habana," she says. "Good cigar." As usual I ring up the sale and write out the receipt. Meanwhile your dad is nowhere in sight.

"If these cigars ain't what you say they are, we're comin' back."

I recognize the guy's voice. "I know you. You're Matty the Car."

“Shut up,” and he pulls out a blue-steel snub-nose .38 caliber revolver and sticks it in my face.

My ma screams for my brother, “Julius, we’re being robbed. Julius!”

And from upstairs comes the sound of Mrs. Bernansky’s bed springs.

Matty the Car stares at the ceiling. “Lover boy can’t help you now.”

“Julius! Where are you?” And this is where the bedsprings stop creaking.

“Let’s get outta here,” says the other one.

“No. I want some decent cigars. Lady, gimme that box of those Romeo and Julietas. Do it.” My ma fumbles around inside the humidor. I’m staring down the barrel of a .38.

Then without a sound your dad slips in the front door and stands behind the two guys. He’s not wearing my hat. And like a first-string catcher throwing a runner out at second base he cocks his arm and slams his fist into the back of Matty the Car’s head. Bam! Arrgghh! Matty pitches forward, collapses on the counter, drops the gun, it skids across the floor, your dad grabs it, and points it at a very pale Vinnie the Veg. Matty the Car is on the floor out cold.

Your grandmother’s cigar store had the only telephone on the block. She made a little extra money with it by charging a nickel a call. She calls the cops, they show up, and they haul Matty the Car and Vinnie the Veg down to the station house and charge ‘em with armed robbery.

“Gee, uncle Gerry, then what happened?”

“Well, the next day everything went back to normal, the robbery didn’t even make the papers. There was another ball game to play, ice cream to sell. It was the South side of Chicago. That kind of thing happened every day.”

“What about my dad and Mrs. Bernansky?”

“Well, he never admitted that anything untoward happened during his visit upstairs. But late that night I’m lying in bed and your dad makes an odd request. ‘Red, I need you to go upstairs and knock on Mrs. Bernansky’s door.’”

“For what? Mr. Bernansky’ll kill me if he catches me.”

“He’s at work. She’ll have something for you.”

“What?”

“Just do it.”

“So in the dim light of the evening I climb the stairs, knock on the Bernansky’s door. She opens it, just a crack, I can smell her perfume, like a dozen roses. She hands me a paper bag. I run back down the stairs, I open the bag; it’s my hat. Your dad says, ‘All right, see you got it back.’”

“But Mr. Bernansky could have found it.”

“Shut up genius and go to bed.”

“You know I still have that hat. That was 84 years ago. It’s like it was yesterday. Life goes by so fast. Hey, let’s you and me go upstairs and say hello to Oprah.”

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