





My older brother Joe and me
posing in borrowed clothes.

Roxbury, 1935.



Me up front and Joe riding shotgun.
Roxbury, 1938.

A Death at Champney

It was cold and after dark, and I must have been so involved, crouched on my hands and knees over my chalk drawing in the gutter, that I didn't see the car coming. Ear-splitting, screeching brakes startled me as the old Model T swerved my way, flickering shadows of its wooden spoked wheels over my face. The driver honked his horn and barked, "Get the hell out of the street, you goddamned stupid kid!" His car squealed to a stop inches away from my nose. Grabbing my chalk, I hopped back onto the curb and watched the old car chug off, balls of black smoke coughing from the exhaust pipe, *puff puff puff*. Above me twinkled the endless rows of blinking lights that made up my sorry firmament, the Roxy Theatre marquee. The Roxys were a chain of elaborate movie palaces, and how one ended up in my miserable neighborhood in Roxbury, Massachusetts, I'll never know. I was living for the moment with my parents just next door, one flight up a dark stairwell in a cramped and shabby apartment, with little in the way of furniture, food, or hope.

My memory begins with violence. A bitter cold wind whipping through a February night. Sleet stinging my face. Snow swirling, its fluid patterns whirling through harsh shafts of light thrown off by municipal streetlights back into the night. My older brother Joe was standing beside me in an alley off Dudley Street. An alley we played in every day. A mixture of terror and awe gripped our features as we watched two gigantic men beat the living hell out of each other in a ferocious fistfight. We were the only children in the pushing, shoving crush of adults crowding closer to watch the men throw punches. Blood glistened on the shiny bald head of one of the men, the one who was taking furious smacks to the face and chest. Excitement rippled through the crowd as the men and women screamed insults or encouragement. My hands were numb, and my body trembled with equal parts fear and cold.

With an awful gasp, the bald man went down hard, a locomotive blowing steam as his breath turned to fog in the frigid, late-night air. He hit the icy ground face-first, wheezing and making a horrible gurgling sound. A flashy prostitute in a yellow hat screamed, "He's dead! Lord have mercy!" The brute who had beaten the bald man kicked the fallen warrior in the head and stalked off into the alley's murky shadows. Who knows why Joe and I stayed on and watched while most of the adults walked away. The bald man on the ground groaned for a moment, then shook, convulsed, and wheezed his last breath. A couple of cops came by ten minutes later. They didn't do much except ask a few questions of the straggling adults who had stayed on to gasp and wallow in the horror of watching the dead man's blood turn the white snow red.

A horse-drawn wagon pulled up and some men heaved the bald man's body onto it. Dangling over the edge of the tailgate, his lifeless head bobbed up and down like a ball on a string as the wagon pulled off. Blood pouring from one of his ears left a trail marking his sorry exit from this life, drop by drop in the snow. My heart broke for that poor man and I sobbed a bit. This event has remained crystal clear in my memory throughout my life. It was the winter of 1937. I was six years old.

Roxbury was a dangerous, poverty-stricken neighborhood, dead center in the city of Boston; it was known at the time as a "colored district," its population almost entirely African-American. Aside from my usual bad-boy activities on the city's mean streets, I was completely consumed with drawing. It was as if a force within me compelled me to draw, any chance that I could grab. Ironically, Boston's Museum of Fine Arts was only five or six blocks from the neighborhood I grew up in, but it may as well have been across the chilly Atlantic.

Art was not an aspect of my family's life in any shape or form. My mother forbade me to draw inside our apartment anymore because I had covered one of my bedroom walls with all kinds of crayon drawings. I have no idea where the crayons came from. I probably stole them. We lived in abject poverty and literally did not have a cent. Probably fearing the landlord's wrath, my father decided to paint over my crayon drawings one day, and left a coffee mug full of white paint on a table. Joe took a huge gulp thinking it was milk, and there was a frantic scramble to rush him to the hospital and have his stomach pumped.

Heading upstairs to the second-floor apartment I temporarily called home, I'd pause and place my ear to the door. My father worked nights as a steward in a Boston hotel. When he was home during the day, if his nose wasn't buried in a newspaper or magazine, he and my mother were

arguing. That is, if she was home and hadn't quit or been fired from the latest in an endless string of waitressing jobs. If I heard the shrill voices I so dreaded, I'd run downstairs and hurry next door to the Roxy. There I could watch the crowds coming to see a movie, or admire all the colorful "coming attraction" posters while I waited out yet another screaming match.

When my father was at work, my mother spent a lot of time alone, crying and listening to the radio. She paid little attention to me or to my brother Joe, except to explode into a tirade over nothing every so often. Her face would flush and her blue eyes would be seized with a manic electricity that almost seemed to throw off sparks. The fury that could erupt from her tiny frame over a spilled bit of jam on your shirt was out of control and terrifying. My mother Marie was a porcelain-pretty brunette with striking blue eyes. A slight woman, weighing barely a hundred pounds, she was in frail health, often anxious, and always wringing her delicate, flawless hands. She kept a fanatically clean house and was forever shining this or dusting that, despite the fact there was barely anything in the apartment to keep clean. Her clothes were always fresh and crisply pressed due to her obsessive diligence at the ironing board, and she presented an immaculate appearance at all times.

I never could have known it, being so young, but my parents' was a marriage that should never have been. They had no love for one another, and though currently living as man and wife together under the same roof, we were not a family in any conceivable sense of the word.

My mother was born in November of 1910, in the Boston Lying-In Hospital. Now known as Brigham and Women's Hospital, at the time of her birth the hospital served those in indigent circumstances. Her father, a man with the fantastic name of Nehemiah Hemeon, died shortly after her birth. Her mother, also named Marie, and known to us as Grandma Stoner, was a frequent visitor to our apartment as she lived only three or four blocks away on Ruggles Street. Joe and I had lived with her almost since the day each of us had been born. The only details I know about my mother's childhood were garnered from my parents' divorce records.

The Family Welfare Society of Boston filed a report on Grandma Stoner in 1916, when my mother was six years old, saying they "did not believe she was a proper person to have her daughter." The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children record reports that an anonymous letter was received, stating that my mother's mother was sending young Marie out on the street to beg for money with a tin cup (a common practice among the poor at that time), but there was not sufficient evidence to

make a neglect complaint. From that wisp of information I can guess that my mother's childhood was most assuredly bleak.

My mother would often leave my father for periods of time that could stretch to three or four months. I'm not sure where she went on these "trips," but sometimes she would take Joe and me and move in with Grandma Stoner, in the cramped little row house we all shared on Ruggles Street, for the duration of her latest estrangement from my father.

Grandma Stoner had married again after Nehemiah's death, to a man named Robert Stoner, whom I know nothing about. Widowhood had visited her a few years into that childless marriage. My mother was the only child she'd brought into this world.

My mother met my father while working in a summer hotel in New Hampshire in 1928. My father was a good-looking man with hazel eyes and dark olive skin. He was four years older than she was. Whatever golden romance flared between them in the White Mountains during those days must have tarnished early on. The fact that my mother was seven months pregnant when she married my father in July of 1929 indicated there must have been tremendous dissension between them in order to have postponed marriage that long in a moral climate where an unmarried mother was considered ruined—not to mention the fact that my mother was Roman Catholic. My father came from a staunchly Catholic family as well. I have no idea why my parents postponed marriage for so long. Was my mother resistant to the idea of matrimony, or was it the more obvious choice, my father? Had a summer fling exploded into circumstances neither one of them could accept or cope with? Had love ever pulled their hearts together?

My brother Joe was born that September. When he was a few months old, my father forced my mother to return to restaurant work. By December of that year she was once again back living with her mother. Reconciling shortly thereafter, my parents took a train to Florida, hoping to find better economic prospects in the South. They left Joe in Grandma Stoner's care.

Returning to Roxbury alone and pregnant with me in the autumn of 1930, my mother once again moved in with Grandma Stoner to await my birth, which came on December 14 of that year. Finding no relief from the Depression in Florida, my father returned to Roxbury soon after I was born. The first few years of my life were defined by the ceaseless merry-go-round of battles, split-ups, abandonment, and reconciliations that riddled my mother and father's unfortunate union. The Boston Public Welfare Society provided aid to them for a number of months in

1931 and 1932, some of the most dismal days of the Great Depression. The woeful financial straits my parents found themselves trapped in could only have encouraged the demons that bedeviled their domestic relationship.

For all intents and purposes, Grandma Stoner was my mother for the first decade of my life. Even during the erratic reconciliations my parents attempted when I lived with both of them—usually for a month or two—I more or less saw Grandma Stoner on a daily basis because she lived just around the corner on Ruggles Street. Both of my parents contributed to the cost of caring for Joe and me, but Grandma was always complaining that my father never paid up on time. She bad-mouthed him to anybody who'd listen, any chance she got.

Jittery and high-strung, Grandma Stoner was always yelling and screaming at us. It's my guess that the primary reason she was our caretaker was because of the money my parents paid her for our keep. I have no memory whatsoever of a kind word, a hug, or a kiss from my mother, ever. She was so distant she may as well have been an apparition. The only time she paid attention to her children was when we were acting up and she had to discipline us with a red-faced tantrum or a spanking.

I loved her, though. I dreamed that maybe someday everything would change and she'd show me that she loved me too. My feelings for my mother were projected onto a stranger, which she was to me. My love was never reciprocated. How can a child comprehend the lingering sting of rejection and indifference from his own mother? My father was equally distant and cold to us, but I couldn't help noticing how other people seemed to like his company. With his handsome charm, I could never understand why he wasn't as full of personality and laughs with us at home, as he was with his friends and acquaintances. He and my mother were trapped in a loveless marriage. The arctic indifference he bestowed upon his children was perhaps an honest expression of his feeling trapped by the circumstances of his life.

Of Irish and French-Canadian descent, Grandma Stoner was a short, formidable woman of well over two hundred pounds. I can't recall ever seeing her without a cigarette jammed between her pursed lips. Joe and I thought she was an ancient old hag. It is striking to look back and realize that having been born in 1893, she was only in her late thirties and early to mid-forties during the years she was our guardian. She, too, had striking blue eyes, but they were much smaller than my mother's,

kind of beady. They made her look mean, which there was no doubt she was. She kept her graying hair wrapped up in a bun, and I never saw her without a clean white apron on. A few scraggly gray whiskers jutted from her chin. Joe and I spent countless moments being horrified by their presence, and spent even more time hatching plots to snip them off when she was asleep or passed out on the couch after another round with the whiskey bottle. “But more will just grow back!” I’d always tell Joe.

Grandma Stoner’s temper had the force of an earthquake. The walls on Ruggles Street seemed to rattle when she’d get rolling. It’s astonishing I didn’t end up with cauliflower ears, since yanking me around by them was her favorite form of discipline. My brother and I were inseparable during those years on the streets of Roxbury. It wasn’t just brotherly love that kept us close, but also a necessity in terms of basic survival. Although I had a few black playmates before I began my school years, for the most part the color lines were impenetrable in Roxbury. The litter-clogged streets we played on had one simple rule, and that was blacks stayed with blacks, and whites stayed with whites.

Joe and I and our little neighborhood gang got into countless scrapes and fistfights; you always had to watch your back. Once in a while Grandma Stoner would send us down to stand in a breadline, or to get oranges or blankets handed out to the poor that day by a government agency or the local mission. Even at that young age I hated every humiliating second of standing in those lines of the down and out. I knew those people in their shabby clothes were the dregs, the poorest of the poor, and that *I* was one of *them*. Making my way home I had to take extra caution not to have even those meager handouts stolen from me by other kids or men with scary stares.

Having the O’Neills as neighbors was a boon to Joe’s and my defenses. They lived on Ruggles Street too, a few doors down from us—all eighteen kids, their parents, and maybe a couple of aunts thrown in there. It seemed as if the O’Neills’ front door never stopped opening and closing, no matter what time of the day or night.

Ruggles Street seemed vast to my childhood eyes, with its series of drab row houses all joined together, each one with a tiny little fenced-in yard in front, maybe ten feet by ten, with patches of crabgrass and weeds fighting for sun among the dirt and debris. One of the O’Neill daughters, May, was a friend of ours. Her specialty was hanging her backside over the porch railing one story up and taking a crap for the entertainment of her siblings and pals, who would collapse in screaming fits of laughter as yet another poop plunged into the stained bushes below.

There were a bunch of abandoned cars behind Grandma Stoner's house, which looked out on Champney Place. I remember sitting on the ripped-up seat of an old junker with Joe, spinning the steering wheel, when I heard May call out, "Hey, Bobby and Joe!" We climbed out of the car. Shielding my eyes from the sun, I looked up as May eased her snow-white bum onto the railing and shouted, "Bombs away!" Joe elbowed me in the ribs and said, "Bobby, she's got no pee-pee." We laughed like hell, but it was the first time I had been exposed to that part of a girl's anatomy, and it was a real shock that haunted me for weeks. This was a tender subject for me because my circumcision had been put off until I was six years old. During that visit to the doctor's, I was terrified that the man in the white coat with the bad breath was intent on cutting off my penis. I thought maybe the doctor had cut off May's for real.

My school years began when I was six years old. Grandma Stoner had decided to keep Joe back one year so that we could begin the first grade together. We were enrolled in Saint Rita's, a parochial school in Roxbury. The nuns who taught us seemed to frighten a lot of my schoolmates with their flowing black habits and stern expressions, but they didn't scare me. They were certainly strict. I'm sure I railed against their discipline at times, but overall, I found the nuns to be gentle. Those fine women were a caring and soothing maternal presence for me and a kind influence in my rough and turbulent life.

I was astonished when I first saw the big schoolyard at Saint Rita's, after spending my life up to that time in the cramped quarters of my neighborhood block around Champney Place. When I heard the bell ring after recess that first day of school, I thought it meant that classes had ended, so I walked the five or six blocks home. Grandma Stoner was not at all happy to see me reappear at her door so early, and hauled me back to the equally disapproving nuns. I never liked school, so I guess from day one my actions were sort of an indication of how things would play out in that arena.

I'm not sure if Grandma Stoner had electricity in her row house in my early years. She would light kerosene lamps as night fell, and she had an icebox, because I can remember stealing ice from the iceman's wagon when he delivered a block every couple of days. She had a music box, a beautiful machine of glass and brass that only she was allowed to crank. I know we had electricity by the time I was ten or eleven, because I must have heard Kate Smith singing "God Bless America" ten million times that year on the junky, secondhand radio Grandma Stoner had somehow acquired.

Grandma Stoner loved cats. A month could hardly pass without her trying to sell a litter of kittens, or trying to give them away when they got too big. The house always reeked of cat pee.

Saturday night was Grandma Stoner's big night out every week. Saturday night dinner was always the same thing: hot dogs and beans. When dinner was finished, she'd fill a huge tin tub in the kitchen and take a bath. One time Joe and I hid under the kitchen table and watched her dab at her chubby arms with a big soapy sponge, all the while puffing on an endless chain of cigarettes, before flicking the butts into the sink. I dreaded Saturday nights because after she got dressed and had a few sips from her whiskey bottle, she'd yell for Joe and me to climb the stairs to the windowless attic. The roof up there was so low that Grandma Stoner would have to stoop as she lit a kerosene lamp in the corner. When the attic door would slam shut, the key turn, and the lock click, my heart would sink. The routine never changed; I knew I wouldn't hear that key in the lock again until late the following morning.

I could tell when morning came by the increase in everyday sounds outside, and by the tiny shaft of light that came in through the keyhole and under the door. The attic was furnished with a ratty old bed and a chamber pot. We had a couple of broken toys to play with and some worn comic books. In retrospect it's sort of miraculous that with all our roughhousing Joe and I didn't knock the kerosene lamp over and burn the place down. Grandma Stoner never left us anything to drink, just two Milky Way bars sliced into little pieces and left on separate plates.

Grandma Stoner was a flat-out lousy cook. She might go five nights in a row serving Joe and me mustard sandwiches. Two slices of white bread and a dollop of French's yellow mustard and nothing else. Sometimes I'd sneak downstairs at night when Grandma was asleep and gulp spoonfuls of sugar to satisfy my sweet tooth, then have to come up with a good story when she began screaming about somebody stealing from her the next morning.

When I was about seven years old, we accompanied Grandma Stoner on a visit with some friends of hers. Joe and I ended up wrestling on the floor beneath a table. I felt a sharp jab in the palm of my right hand. When I held it up, I saw a needle sticking into it. An old man who was there tried to pull the needle out, but it broke in half. I was taken to the hospital where I pleaded with Grandma Stoner not to leave me alone. I underwent an operation in which the doctors couldn't find the other half of the needle in my hand, so they had to operate again the next day. Somehow the needle had traveled, and they found it in my arm.

The operation left a long incision in my palm and a smaller one in my forearm. I was kept in the hospital for almost a week. I've always been left-handed, so the accident didn't affect my drawing ability. The main thing I remember about my hospital stay was that I was scared and lonely. I had a paper doll of cowboy star Gene Autry for company, and I'd hide it under my pillow any time the nurses came around. Grandma Stoner came to visit me a few times and even brought Joe along once, but my parents never set foot in the hospital, for whatever reasons they might have had.

I spent most of my time in school daydreaming and drawing in my notebooks. Most of my time out of school was spent finding trouble. Joe and I were constantly getting into one scrape or another. We were very adept thieves. Snitching candy, apples, and other small items from the local store was a favorite pastime. On rare occasions, we made the journey to Lynn, a seaside industrial community roughly fifteen miles north of Boston. My father grew up in Lynn. His parents and brothers and sisters still lived there. My father's younger sister Dorothy, whom we called Aunt Dot, would drive into Roxbury in her coupe a couple times a year. She'd pack Joe and me into the rumble seat and drive off past Revere Beach, with its amusement park we never got to visit, and on through the salt marshes into Lynn. Riding in Aunt Dot's coupe was always a big deal for Joe and me and made us feel like big shots.

I adored my father's parents, whom we called Gramma and Grampa. Visits with them were a world apart from anything I knew in Roxbury. Gramma and Grampa Caulfield were always kind and gracious. Gramma was a terrific cook, and never stopped encouraging us to have second and third helpings at meals. However, my affection for them didn't prevent me from rifling through their coat pockets or dresser drawers in search of loose change when their backs were turned.

Back on Ruggles Street, Grandma Stoner did her best to keep us in line, but in reality, we had no authority figures whatsoever, apart from the occasional reprimands and constraints imposed by the nuns and administrators at school. Despite her alcoholic indifference toward us most of the time, Grandma Stoner was fiercely protective of Joe and me. People on our block knew enough to keep their distance from Grandma Stoner and her rolling pin, which once or twice a day would threaten to come crashing down on the skull of somebody who had crossed her.

Once a week, every week, we'd accompany Grandma Stoner to a grimy parlor in a house a few blocks away from ours. Easing her bulk into a plush chair beside a rickety table, Grandma Stoner would manage

a rare smile when a scary, pruned-up old woman with lingering body odor and black teeth slithered through faded curtains carrying a teapot. Flickering candlelight shimmered in the golden finish of the teapot, and illuminated stagnant streams of incense. When Grandma Stoner finished sipping her tea, the dregs of her tea leaves would be spread out on a saucer and the old crone would lean in close to read them. I'd look at my distorted reflection in the teapot or close my eyes and daydream. Occasionally I'd give Joe a roll of the eyes and then count the seconds till we could get out of there. I guess Grandma Stoner must have liked what the fortune teller was predicting because this went on for years.

Joe and I loved the Fourth of July. Fireworks like cherry bombs and Roman candles were legal in those days, and they were sold in a store just around the corner from us on Dudley Street. We never had any money to buy them, so the day after the Fourth, we'd rummage through the trash bin behind the store. We'd almost always find enough firecrackers and cherry bombs to cause some trouble and scare the hell out of a few adults who mistakenly thought all the explosions were over for that year.

Firewood and newspapers were stored in the cellar at Ruggles Street to fuel Grandma Stoner's big, black kitchen stove. One day, Joe and I lit some matches and set the newspapers on fire just to watch them burn. It wasn't long before billowing white smoke filled the house. The fire department arrived in a whirl of ringing bells, and big men in fire hats carrying canvas hoses rushed in the back door to douse the flames. After the firemen left we got a five-alarm spanking and were sent to bed without any supper.

Not long after that episode, Joe and I were performing one of our daily chores—splitting wood for Grandma Stoner's stove. As usual, I held a piece of wood on a stump while Joe raised the ax and swung it down hard. Somehow, he misjudged his aim and bashed me in the head. Within seconds, Grandma Stoner's plump legs were pounding down the cellar stairs in response to my screams, she herself screaming at the top of her lungs at the sight of the blood gushing from my head. In the hospital my head was shaved. I can still see all two hundred-plus pounds of Grandma Stoner hitting the tile floor when she walked in and fainted after seeing the doctor pull a hook-shaped needle through my gaping wound. After I was stitched up, my head was wrapped in gauze, mummy-style, with only my eyes and mouth showing.

By this time, I was seven years old. I had once again missed so much school that I was kept back to repeat the first grade. So much for going through school in the same grade as Joe! I have no idea if the doctor's

bills were ever paid. Joe and I also had childhood bouts of measles and chicken pox. In those days the house was quarantined at the first hint of those diseases; so, if Joe was down for the count with something, I couldn't go to school, and vice versa. I'm sure we missed even more time in the classroom for that reason.

I always liked the winter months, if for no other reason than the fact that the snow would make the neighborhood look beautiful for a day or so, until everything was covered in soot and grime again. The cold weather drastically reduced the wild goings-on I saw on the streets everyday in the warmer months, things that reflected the darker side of the human condition—hookers and flashy pimps parading around, drunks and bums who never smiled, petty thieves, bullies, and very minor gangsters in really cheap suits—all playing out the drama in their lives at full speed.

An overhead elevated subway train we called the “el” passed by the end of our block, not eighty feet from our front door; every ten minutes or so we would hear the electric screech of steel wheels on iron rails, accompanied by clanging bells. Even all that racket seemed muffled by winter's snow. One time the snowflakes were so endless that we had to shovel a tunnel through a ten-foot-high snowdrift to get to our back door, where we found one of Grandma Stoner's favorite cats frozen stiff.

By the time I turned eight, I was getting into fights every day at school, or on the way home from school. When I couldn't find anybody to pick a fight with, I'd end up swinging punches with Joe. On a February day after yet another huge snowstorm, my friends and I grabbed a snow shovel and took turns sliding down a steep snowbank adjacent to the street. Joe came strutting over, and when it was his turn he shot down the slope with terrific speed, directly into the path of an oncoming car. It was one of those moments when time stands still, and it did for me that day as Joe got caught up in the spokes of one of the car's wheels, spinning around in a blur of blue terror in the long seconds before the driver skidded to a halt.

My feet were almost tearing through the pavement as I ran along Ruggles Street screaming, “Joe's dead! *Joe's dead!*” In a haze of cigarette smoke and whiskey interrupted, Grandma Stoner dashed out the back door with a butt between her lips and her crisp white apron blowing in the wind. She did her best to cut through my hysteria and find out what had happened, made all the more difficult because of my blubbering friends. To my astonishment, Joe came home in an ambulance that night, his brush with death no more severe than a few scrapes and a broken

ankle. Somebody at the hospital had given Joe fifty cents, which was an absolute fortune in our eyes. He tried to hide it from Grandma Stoner, but the two shiny quarters disappeared into her hands, and probably that Saturday night, into the till of the local bartender.

The amount of time my parents spent trying to unite as a family under one roof, in that glum apartment beside the Roxy Theatre, measured just a few months during those early years. When Joe and I had returned to live with Grandma Stoner, it wasn't jarring; it was like coming home after a vacation down the block. I saw my father rarely after that, usually only when he would show up at school to talk the nuns out of expelling us for whatever trouble we'd caused that week. At one point Joe and I were expelled for being "incorrigible," but my father somehow had us reinstated, no doubt winning the nuns over with his considerable charm.

In May of 1937 my parents returned to work for the summer in the New Hampshire hotel where they'd first met. Early on, my mother fell extremely ill. Doctors performed an emergency appendectomy, followed by a hysterectomy and a long convalescence at Massachusetts General Hospital. In the gloomy months that followed, my mother suffered a nervous breakdown, an incapacitating emotional disorder marked by fatigue, loss of energy and memory, and feelings of inadequacy. Joe and I were protected from hearing any of this.

In the spring of 1938, there was one last attempt at reconciliation between my parents. Joe and I crouched outside Grandma Stoner's living room window and eavesdropped as my parents met there to discuss the possibility of getting back together again. The conversation was barely five minutes in when it exploded into a shouting match, with Grandma Stoner joining in and yelling the loudest.

My mother's voice trembled as she begged my father to make a home for her and her sons. My father railed over her sickly nature and accused her of milking her illness instead of going out and working and contributing to family finances. I looked in the window and saw my father slap my mother in the face. Her tiny body collapsed to the floor in gut-wrenching tears. After slamming the door so hard it shook the house, my father stormed off in an absolute fury.

I was walking home from school the next day when I spotted my mother at the end of the block, handing a suitcase to a cab driver. He placed it into the trunk and opened the cab door for her to get in. Running toward the end of the block as fast as I could, I called out, "Mom!"

She didn't seem to hear me. The cab began moving and I banged on the window, yelling, "Mom!" She reached over and locked the cab door without so much as a glance in my direction. The taxicab pulled away as I shouted, "Mommy, don't go!" She never looked back.

Joe and I were heartbroken. It seemed no one really wanted us or loved us. I stuttered until I was in my early teens. I'm sure this was a manifestation of the tumultuous circumstances of my domestic life, not to mention life on the hard streets of Roxbury; although, in my young mind, I thought—as most kids do, no matter what their social circumstances—that everybody except rich people and cowboys lived like I did.

My father's mother, Gramma Caulfield, was a tiny woman in her late fifties. She was barely five feet tall. Right after my parent's final battle in the living room, she began making more frequent visits to Roxbury. Her parents had emigrated to America from the island of Pico in the Azores, a rocky outcropping of lush islands with sharp, cone-shaped peaks located in the Sargasso Sea of the North Atlantic, about nine hundred miles west of Portugal and seven hundred and fifty miles north of Africa. This earthquake-prone chain of islands was inhabited only by birds and plants until the 1400s, when it became home to a hardy population of settlers of Moorish, Flemish, and Portuguese descent. The Azores were an important way station in the Portuguese trade routes, and also an extremely popular destination for Jews fleeing the punishments meted out by the courts of the Inquisition, a period in which the Catholic Church persecuted the practice of Judaism as a sin punishable by death at a burning stake. The Azoreans are a deeply spiritual people. One of their greatest annual celebrations is held in honor of the Holy Ghost during Pentecost. Over twenty-one major volcanic eruptions have wracked these islands in the last six hundred and fifty years. People in the Azores are accustomed to calamity.

Gramma Caulfield had hazel eyes and olive skin, as did I. She was born in Massachusetts, and had grown up in Provincetown at the tip of Cape Cod. Her family had been prominent members of that city's fishing community. Family legend has it that she met my grandfather, an Irishman from Newry in County Armagh, when he was a member of the English Navy and his ship stopped in port. This was long before the Irish Rebellion of 1916, when Ireland was entirely under British rule. His name was Owen Caulfield, and he had once served in the Queen's Guard at Buckingham Palace during the reign of Queen Victoria. When his ship docked in Provincetown, he met my grandmother during shore leave. Soon after that he decided to stay in America and jumped ship.

Their romance led to marriage in 1904, when he was twenty-six and his bride just twenty. They settled in the north shore city of Lynn, where they were to spend the rest of their long lives.

It was always an exciting occasion when Joe and I would spot Gramma Caulfield walking down Ruggles Street after getting off the overhead “el.” Joe and I would run to greet her, and she’d always give us a quarter, then lean down and in a conspiratorial tone tell us not to let Grandma Stoner know we had any money. She’d encourage us to buy whatever we wanted or urge us to go see a movie at the Roxy, which cost ten cents at the time.

After watching Gramma Caulfield shoo cats away every five seconds during her visit with Grandma Stoner, we’d hurry down the block to the Roxy Theatre and buy our tickets at the kiosk fronting the street. From there it was a fifty-foot walk to the lobby entrance, past the colorful posters of coming attractions I loved so much, and a gauntlet of tough punks who’d try to bully us into giving up our tickets. More often than not, we made it inside the lobby doors after a few rounds of flying fists.

Like millions of other kids, I absolutely loved the movies. There were all kinds of short movies and cartoons they’d show before the feature; my favorite of all were those with Gene Autry, the singing cowboy. The appearance of The Three Stooges logo on the Roxy’s big screen would bring the house down every time. Serials like *Flash Gordon* starring Buster Crabbe would keep you in suspense for a whole week, as you waited to find out the resolution to each episode’s cliffhanger. You got a lot for your money at the Roxy, and a double feature on top of everything else. Those dazzling images on the movie screen were one thing, but the fantasy world projected by the movies was actually taking place within the borders of Roxbury, and there were some pretty wild things going on in the theater itself. A solo trip to the restroom sure beat anything onscreen in terms of potential thrills and chills. You always had to watch your back. You never knew who or what might come at you out of the ornate dark corners.

When I was stepping out of the Roxy into the harsh sunlight after an afternoon matinee one day, a man jumped in front of me and shot another man in the face. Blood gurgled, people screamed, and the victim kept trying to stand up, all the while shrieking in agony. The odd thing was that the shooting seemed less real to me than what you’d expect, after all the gunplay I’d witnessed on the Roxy’s silver screen. The bang the gun made sounded more like a pop, though the blood spurting everywhere was all too real.

Grandma Stoner was a big movie fan. She was always dragging Joe and me along to the Roxy with her. She preferred “women’s pictures,” movies heavy on love, love, love, which bored us stiff. Although one night during a Bette Davis movie, the action in the audience far outpaced the canned dramatics onscreen. Halfway through the movie, two rows in front of us, raised voices between two men reached the boiling point. One of the men leapt to his feet and raised his arm. A sliver of steel caught the flickering light from the projector. The shadow of his hand clutching a blade appeared against the black-and-white image of Bette Davis. He plunged the knife into the other man over and over. Panicked people fled screaming up the aisles. The house lights clicked on and Bette Davis was suddenly playing to a rapidly emptying house. Grandma Stoner grabbed my hand and hauled me out of there.

Shortly after this incident, Gramma Caulfield visited Ruggles Street again, bringing two sets of brand-new clothes, including shoes, for Joe and me to wear when we returned to school in September. We never had a chance to wear those clothes because the very next day, Grandma Stoner pawned them. One way or another, this got back to the relatives on my father’s side of the family. I was being raised in the lowest of socioeconomic surroundings, and the occasional appearance of my father’s middle-class relatives must have been a boon to Grandma Stoner’s pocketbook one way or another.