

Honor Thy Father

We called him Shoelace.

He had a face that was twisted in a perturbed knot. His thin lips curved down like a backward smile.

Shoelace or Uncle Rob, as I was instructed to address him in person, lived in Staten Island, the outer borough, or as my father described it, the “step child of New York.”

“*God damn it.*” The air in the forest green Plymouth Volare` was getting hot. We were sitting in traffic on the Staten Island Expressway to see Shoelace. My father refused to run the air conditioning if we going under 20 miles an hour. “*Strains the engine.*” The gas crisis of the early 1970s was over, but not the apprehension.

It was well known that Shoelace started his days checking the obituaries, and then the death notices, the smaller advertisements that were part of the funeral director’s package.

He was what they described in the old neighborhood as a “professional mourner.” A towering figure, he was a man who spoke little, but said volumes.

He was feared.

Shoelace went to so many wakes that he could discern the quality of the casket at a glance. He came alive when he inhaled the sickeningly sweet smell of ornate flower displays that choked the viewing rooms. He attended services of those who he knew, and even for acquaintances, and acquaintances of acquaintances. It was unclear if he felt better because he was the giver or receiver of the respect from the fellow mourners.

In the backseat of the Plymouth, my legs were peeking out from my shorts and sticking to the vinyl upholstered seats. I felt the familiar tingle up my spine and the nerves burning at the back of my neck. The old man’s patience could evaporate quicker than the perspiration forming on the back of his neck in the hot sedan.

Maybe if time permitted on the return we would take another trip to the Staten Island Zoo, built in 1933 or 1936. I could never remember. It had not been updated much since. It looked tired even to my eight-year-old eyes. In addition to the usual farm animals, the zoo had a varied collection of snakes, pressing up against the confining glass habitats. They fascinated me the most.

Who knew Staten Island had so many serpents?

Father Cutrone, our pastor from St. Finbar’s R.C. Church in Brooklyn, would say Sunday was meant for two things: mass and macaroni. We don’t follow that ritual since my mother’s passing.

With no one home stirring the pasta sauce on the stove, I had to accompany my dad on the collections he made on Sunday. These collections had nothing to do with my father’s day job as a Bus Operator in Brooklyn, nor the collections made twice (three times on holidays) in St. Finbar’s.

The collections involved lots of greenbacks in paper bags.

And just like that a new ritual was established. On Sundays the two of us make the collections and then a visit to Shoelace.

Sometimes before we reached our destination on Sundays, my father would make a call from a pay phone at the side of the road. It was a welcome relief to break the tension on days when the traffic put my father on edge more than usual. The elongated phone booths were like Lucite upright coffins, I remember thinking. I definitely fixated a little too much on death like Shoelace.

"Yeah, it's me, Lou. I got it."

We pulled up in the Staten Island marina. When he was not in his funeral best, Shoelace spent his Sunday afternoons in the summer sitting on a dry-docked boat.

After we parked the car, my dad approached him. Shoelace usually had the faraway look in his eyes like he was casting a line on the open seas, instead of sitting in a boat propped up by cinder blocks on asphalt.

My father insisted I stay in the car. Shoelace glanced over, but averted his eyes from me.

I fidgeted, pressing my nose up to the glass window. Eventually, I cranked the window open as much for fresh air as to eavesdrop on the conversation between the two.

I thought about what I would say in the confessional to Father Cutrone. This was the third Sunday I had missed Mass. Maybe I would say I only missed two on purpose. But if I lied would that be venial sin or mortal one? Would an extra Act of Contrition absolve me?

"Bless me father for I have sinned; it has been three weeks since my last Confession." I practiced my prayers with my Holly Hobby doll in the car. Her black button eyes, thinly stitched mouth, and patchwork dress and bonnet were more comforting to me than the stern demeanor and velvety vestments awaiting me in the confessional box.

When my father approached, Uncle Rob's perturbed smile looked more like a snarl. My father seemed to wilt.

I grew accustomed to the banter and to the body language. For example, if Shoelace made exaggerated hand gestures he was happy with the collection my father handed him. When he was not happy, however, he would spit at my dad. Spit. The droplet looking like a tear on his cheek.

If I crossed my fingers and wished really hard it was often a quick exchange and this gave us time to have an Italian ice at the Uncle Luigi's stand. I loved Rainbow flavor, which really had no flavor, but was colorful.

There was always a sense of relief when my father hopped back into the car. Even to my third-grade self the whole exchange did not seem right, but scary like the serpents that wriggled in their glass enclosures at the zoo.

The weekends proceeded like this for the most part until the age of 11, that's when, in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn parlance, Uncle Rob "bought it."

The funeral was a big deal, lines snaked outside the big oak doors of the funeral home. Inside there was a big satin tufted book on the pedestal where mourners wrote their name and address, and a double rack for Mass cards, and the flowers, oh, the flowers. There were so many floral arrangements the funeral director refused to accept any more deliveries after the second viewing.

All the pre-planning that Shoelace did was well worth it, according to most, but not all, of the family, friends and acquaintances. What was that expression? You can't please all the people all the time.

"Too showy." Others just made the sign of the cross, more relieved than saddened by his passing.

On the way home after the funeral, my dad told me we had to make a stop at Shoelace's house off Hyland Boulevard. Instead of going inside, however, we went through the back wood shed. There on the shelf, among the deconstructed boat motors and various gadgets, was an item wrapped in a towel.

My dad gingerly lifted it up and snuggled it under his arm pit and held my hand as we jumped back into the car.

This time I got to sit in the front seat. My dad placed the wrapped up towel in the back seat. He glanced every now and then in the rear view mirror to make sure it did not slide or fall. It seemed to me if he could, he would have secured it with a lap belt.

When he got home, he opened the back seat, and the toweled item was again tucked securely under his arm. Once inside he flipped the TV on, and motioned me for me to sit down and went straight to the closet in the master bedroom he once shared with my mother.

I tiptoed and peered through the crack of the door and saw that after much rummaging he found a shoe box and gingerly placed the toweled mystery into it, replaced the lid and put it on the closet shelf.

I carefully retreated back to the living room, just in time to sit at the edge of the recliner, a perfect model of obedience, as Hogan's Heroes' Schultz was saying, *"I see nothing. I hear nothing. I say nothing."*

The contents of that shoe box, however, did not escape me.

On the next Sunday, which would have been our collection day, my father handed me the box. The contents, which had seemed so important to me a week earlier, now filled me with dread.

I opened its lid, and inside was a wedding picture. It was a black and white portrait, slightly off center in a chipped oval-shaped frame. My mother looked so beautiful, but the man posed by her side was not my dad.

The knot was growing large in my throat, making swallowing difficult. My ears felt tingly and my nose started to run like when I put too much hot pepper on my pizza.

The smiling man by her side in the photograph was Shoelace.

My father nodded his head and a tear dripped down his cheek pooling at his chin for a few seconds. He then rummaged inside his pocket and pulled out a wadded piece of tissue paper. At first I thought he wanted me to wipe my own eyes or blow my nose. Instead he motioned for me to open it up.

In the old tissue paper was a hospital wrist band with barely decipherable typed letters. I read the names, but the words did not seem to make sense. Baby Girl Andrea, Parents Robert Corazzo and Maria Bitetto.

"Uncle Rob?"

“Shoelace?”

My father had moved to the window and lighted a Lucy Strike. His chest heaved as he inhaled deeply.

During those Sunday collections, I sat in that airless car in a Staten Island parking lot, while the man who was my real father never paid me any attention. Now again I squirmed. Just like the snakes in the zoo.

After my father inhaled deeply again, I exhaled for both of us.

My lips quivered but did not curve down in a perturbed knot like the man in the portrait. Instead I smiled broadly at my father.