Northside

I grew up in Youngstown, Ohio. Zero to eighteen. Zero began at 5:05 the afternoon of July 23rd, 1948. Eighteen years later, I left to join the Army. By then, the city led the region's descent into what demographers would later refer to as The Nation's Rust Belt. Steelmaking moved to Japan and all Youngstown could do was hold the going out of business sale. Mills laid off, the downtown decayed into a warren of crumbling buildings and empty streets. Bars sprung up on every corner. You didn't need a social science degree to figure out the city was in an urban death spiral. Everyone I grew up with got out as soon as they could. If they had money, they went to college. If they didn't – well, there was a war going on; Uncle Sam offered free trips to Fort Bennington.

Mom was a nurse. She worked at Southside Hospital sensibly named as it sat just south of downtown, a half mile from the Mahoning River. There was a Northside Hospital too, on the opposite side of the river, up the hill overlooking downtown. Two miles north of Northside Hospital stood a huge grimy complex of buildings named St. Elizabeth's. That's where all the Catholics went. Those were all the hospitals Youngstown had. If you lived on the east side or west side, you took your pick. Catholics, no matter where they lived, went to St. E's to meet their maker. God made their life simple.

Some people called Woodside Receiving a hospital too though I think they used the term simply to spruce up what went on there. The police dumped drunks off at Woodside while they clattered through their DTs; anybody acting too goofy for their own good generally got a trip there too. Woodside 'received' them then sorted out where

they'd go next. Dried out drunks usually headed to the county jail. The others – if they were still crazy after a week - got sent to the state asylum down south in Columbus.

In the 1950s, there were two types of nurses: Registered Nurses (RNs) and Practical Nurses (PNs). My mom was an RN. RNs needed a degree and did things like give shots and run the pill cart. A PN just needed experience. They did the enemas. RNs outranked PNs. Orderlies occupied the lowest rung in the hospital's hierarchy. Orderlies made up beds, emptied vomit bowls and ferried supplies from the basement stockroom to the patient floors. Residents outranked RNs and doctors outranked everybody. It was straightforward; everyone knew where they were.

Across the street from Southside Hospital was Oak Hill Cemetery. Once I was old enough to understand what the word 'ironic' meant, I thought it ironic the largest cemetery in town sat next to its largest hospital. What an efficient way to run a hospital - in through the front door, up to a nursing floor, down to the morgue then out the back and across the street.

Most things done then in Youngstown were as efficient. You didn't need an Eastside or Westside Hospital when you already had two facing each other across the Mahoning River. Two hospitals were more than enough to handle Youngstown's ill, mackerel snappers excepted. St. Elizabeth's provided a fine lesson to Youngstown's east and west siders who sometimes whined because they didn't have their own hospital. If the Catholics could make due with one hospital, the rest of us should be happy with two.

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The hills surrounding Youngstown seamed with iron ore. Where the hills flatten out, thick deposits of bituminous coal lay twenty feet down where ever you dug. Ore and coal - that's all you really needed to make steel. Clever entrepreneurs bought up ore hills, opened coal mines and built the first blast furnaces in the 1880s then dumped all the wastes into the river. By 1900, the blast furnaces poured iron twenty-four hours a day and not one fish remained in the Mahoning River.

Steel took off after WWI. Henry Ford built a thousand Model Ts a week in Detroit, Cleveland launched giant cargo ships into Lake Erie, and Pullman railroad cars rolled out of Chicago as fast as George Pullman could stick them on wheelsets. Youngstown was a stone's throw from all three cities and couldn't pump enough iron. The mills expanded and begged Europe for its tired, poor, and huddled masses. They came too – Irish, Slovaks and Italians; thousands of them headed to northeastern Ohio once they passed Go on Ellis Island.

Most of the newly minted Americans didn't particularly like any of the other newly minted Americans. Each ethnic group established its own neighborhood around the steel plants and pretty much stayed within it. Except the Italians. Little Italy was a dozen crisscrossing streets in Briar Hill, right along the north bank of the Mahoning but the

Italians treated the rest of the city liked they owned it. In the 1920s; wherever you had Italians, you had the mafia and the mafia was like Amazon – everybody's a customer.

The first 'families' established themselves in Cleveland at the turn of the century, then migrated down to Youngstown as the mills expanded. Once Prohibition was repealed, the DeMarcos saw an opportunity to extend their Cleveland liquor franchise into Youngstown. You didn't need to be Carlo Gambino to figure out that a growing industrial town filled with blue-collar immigrant types would drink a lot of beer. Which meant a lot of money to a Mafioso in the right place. In 1932 Vito DeMarco bought a three family on Alameda Avenue in Briar Hill. He opened up a beer distributorship around the block, showed a few locals how a Thompson submachine worked and boom, and within six months, owned all the beer business in town.

People say some lousy things about the mafia but you have to hand it to them - they are a pretty efficient too. By the end of WWII, they ran all the rackets in Youngstown – insurance, gambling and prostitution. They probably sold drugs too but in the 1950s, drugs hadn't taken off yet. They taught us about wretched addicts in junior high but nobody ever saw one. The mafia ran a lot of 'legit' businesses as well – most of the drycleaners, all the good restaurants and Vito's beer distributorship. Everybody's a customer.

We were hunkies. My mom's mom was a Toth, born in a little village outside of Budapest. Grandpa was a Szabo, a family name as popular in Hungary as 'Smith' in

this country. Szabos were everywhere. Grandpa came from Visegrád, a town just north of the Austrian border. Grandma and Grandpa immigrated to America when teenagers but never met until their early twenties. They both worked for a wealthy family on the north side of Youngstown. She was their cook; he the chauffeur.

Two young kids on the bottom rung of the American Dream; they fell in love, stole kisses in the kitchen and dallied in the back of the garage. But they dallied a little too often. After a year, in early 1907, Grandma discovered she was pregnant with Uncle George. The Toth's were Catholic and Great Grandma Toth Old World devout. She went to mass at St. Cyril every morning, spent a couple of hours later in the day tending her rosary and had pictures of Pius X scattered about the house. Great Grandma Toth wasn't going to let any child of hers get knocked up without an upright husband standing by her side. Which is what she said to Father Kovacs when she needled him into performing a small family wedding at the church then backdate the whole thing in the parish record. The priest did the wedding just fine but as a man who feared both God and Great Grandma Toth, he did a priestly fib and told her to rest easy: everything was right with God date wise. Five years later, the Liberty Life Insurance Company asked the parish for a copy of Grampa's marriage license when he took a new job at U.S. Steel. That's when Grandma discovered the parish recorded the real date of her wedding.

Grandma and Grandpa joined Father Kovac's charade. Nothing was worth risking getting Great Grandma Toth riled up over. The insurance company got the legit date

and twelve years later, Great Grandma Toth made her final journey to St. E's and took the fiction with her. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief when she was gone. Grandma and Grandpa quietly changed their anniversary day.

Aunt Ruth came two years after Uncle George. It was Aunt Ruth who would marry Steve Zutti twenty-three years later. That's when the Szabos and Toths got their familial connection to the mob. Mom came five years after Ruthie. My grandparents named Mom Bŏglárka after one of Grandma's dead sisters but everybody just called her Clara when I was growing up. I discovered the truth as a six year old one day while rifling through Mom's purse and read that strange combination of unpronounceable letters in the *Given Name* box on her driver's license. When I asked her why no one called her 'Booc-laar-ka', she just rolled her eyes and said, "that's why."

Mom attended nursing school courtesy of President Roosevelt and the New Deal. But Roosevelt took his pound of flesh for the free education – two years' service in the Bureau of Indian Affairs. By the time Mom graduated, the war had begun and she was off to Fort Berthold, an Indian reservation in North Dakota. Mom loved it there. She slept in a barracks, got three squares a day and fifty-five dollars every month. Central North Dakota was bitterly cold in winter, but for the rest of the year, the mountains gleamed, trout jumped from Lake Sakakawea and she breathed the cleanest air of her life. She only came back because the Army had a ton of spare nurses when the war ended and some bureaucrat calculated they could send three Army WACs to the reservation for the price of one civilian nurse. So all the civvies got mustered out.

Mom was raised as devout a Catholicism as Great Grandma Toth but her faith weakened at the Indian Reservation. She lived with the Arikara, Indians who had lost everything. For eight centuries, they had lived all over the Dakotas and eastern Montana; in small villages, growing maize and squash, hunting elk and Bison. The Indians venerated the earth; it provided everything – life to Arikara, life to the world around them.

Then the white man came with bullets and bibles. They slaughtered the bison, stole the land, and killed as many Indians as they could. Whomever remained, soldiers drove onto two hundred acres of land once part of the Mandaree forest, but now stripped of trees, just dust and sage. This was the Fort Berthold my mother found when she arrived in 1943. It had become a ghetto filled with government built shanties, cheap liquor and handouts from the New Deal.

The Indians told Mom about their Gods. They were nothing like the Jesuses that graced the stain glass windows at St. Cy. Their Gods lived in the wind, danced among the mountains and walked with bears and antelope. Those Gods gave them a faith far greater than anything Mom ever felt from the Holy Mother.

Mom met dad right after she got back from North Dakota. He had just started a job at U.S. Steel as a journeyman millwright. His supervisor was Bela Szabo, Mom's father. Bela brought him home one evening after their shift ended for a couple of Carling Black

Labels. Dad hit it off with my mother the night Bela introduced them. Grandpa was still boasting to Grandma about his matchmaking skills, when it came out my dad's family were god fearing Pentecostals. It was too late by then. Mom and Dad had fallen in love.

At first, Mom couldn't understand why her parents were in a dither about Pentecostals. She didn't know exactly what the religion believed, but Dad was fond of beer and smoked a pack of Chesterfields every day so she figured it wasn't a whole lot different than being Catholic. But Grandma and Grandpa knew about Pentecostals alright – they charmed snakes, rolled around in the sanctuary and talked gibberish. That ranked them right up there with witches. Catholics burned witches.

When two kids are in love, they listen to no one. Especially to wacko Catholics talking about snakes and pagans. Nothing her parents could do would stop Mom from marrying Dad in 1947 at the Apostolic Faith Temple on Oak Hill Avenue. The wedding was the first and last time Grandma and Grandpa ever entered that so-called church. They found the wedding pleasant enough: the congregation treated them like family, the ceremony was dull even by catholic standards and nobody pestered them about sin. They would not push their luck a second time even when Mom begged them to watch her baptism five years later. Baptisms were blow out events for Pentecostals; it broke Mom's heart after they refused.

When Mom and Dad married, Dad wasn't a faithful church goer. He went on major holidays, if someone died or when his mother dragged him off to the summer revival

services at the fairgrounds. After they first got married, my parents attended the Faith Temple on dad's old routine. But in 1952, they both went to one of the August tent revivals. That evening, the day's heat roasting the brains of all the believers under the big top, the hand of Jesus touched my dad.

Revival preachers are God's fishers of men and women. That night Dad got caught and as the organ played 'How Great Thou Are', he walked down the middle aisle, collapsed at the feet of a Reverend LeRoy Hardy and received the Savior into his heart. The next evening, the same hand grabbed my mother. She stumbled down to the blacked robed Reverend and let the Lord Jesus enter her heart too.

This was all viewed by Grandma and Grandpa with bewildered dismay. Grandpa didn't believe any type of spiritual awakening should turn a person into a teetotaler, but my Dad swore off booze the night he was saved and the Chesterfields followed a couple of months later. Grandpa mourned the loss of a decent drinking buddy.

Grandma and Grandpa still loved their daughter but they respected her religious choice with as much tolerance they did those of the godless Borneo pigmies that St. Cy raised money to convert each Christmas. In the first years of their marriage, Mom's religion caused a lot of friction between her and her parents. But once I came along – the first of four children – things smoothed themselves over. They were grandparents after all and suddenly religious differences went to the backseat, at least until I was old enough for Grandma to slip me off to St. Cy's from time to time.

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When I started third grade, my grandmother was in her early fifties. She had already become a big numbers player. The ‘numbers’ was a betting game similar to the lottery. You picked four numbers and gave a bookie fifty cents or a buck to bet on them. Winning numbers were chosen each night. Everybody played the numbers. It was one of the rackets run by the Italians.

We lived with my grandparents then – mill work had become rough and Dad was either laid off or on strike most of the years I was in grade school. Once I turned nine, Grandma would send me up to Salvidori’s grocery store on Hillman Street two or three times a week with a dollar and one or two numbers to put it on. I hardly ever talked to Mr. Salvidori – he usually stood either behind the meat counter taking a cleaver to some part of a cow or on a ladder stocking shelves. Mrs. Salvidori ran the cash register and I gave the money to her.

To make a bet, you told Mrs.Salvidori your numbers and how much to put on each one. She never wrote down a thing; just took your money and slipped it underneath the cash drawer of the register. Most times, of course, you’d never see your money again. But people won – one or two every day. Even my grandma hit the numbers once and a while. Hitting the numbers was a big deal. On a dollar bet, you could get a hundred bucks back; if you were really lucky even two hundred.

Mrs. Salvidori's son Joey would drive over to give you the money. I really admired Joey. He was tall, lanky and had black hair greased back in shiny ducktails - the James Dean look for sure, but to me, who'd never heard of James Dean, just the coolest looking guy in the neighborhood. Joey drove a 1955 burgundy red Studebaker Roaster with wide whitewall tires, heavy chrome bumpers and a bullet shaped grill that made the car look like a rocket. I'd never seen anything more gorgeous. When he wasn't driving it, the Studebaker sat gleaming in the driveway behind the grocery store. Joey was supposed to spend his day helping Mr. Salvidori in the store but every time I saw him, he'd be working on that car, rubbing coat after coat of wax into its shiny skin. I remember one time I sitting in the back of the store watching Joey shine up the car and his mother came out and started chewing him out over something. She grew more frustrated the more she talked. Finally she said, "Joey, you make me sick just looking at you." And Joey shot back, "Then don't look at me." and went on with his waxing. *Man* I thought, *what a cool thing to say*. I was really impressed. "I get sick just looking at you." "Well then don't look at me." For several years I hoped like heck someone in my family would say they got sick just looking at me and I'd have my response all planned out. Nobody did.

When Joey drove in your neighborhood, you knew what he was doing and you watched to see who got lucky that day. I realize now it was Joey who ran the numbers and his mom just fronted for him. Mr. Salvidori wasn't part of any family; he had to pay protection money just like all the other businesses. He owned the only grocery store in

the neighborhood and everybody went to it for something. One of bosses just told him they were going make a little book there. Joey made a few bucks; Mr. Salvidori got a discount on his insurance.

I was with Grandma on a snowy day in the winter of 1957 when Joey showed up at her door. "Hey Mrs. Szabo, you win again. Second time in since July. You got the luck. Maybe you pick some numbers for me," he said after my grandmother let him in.

Grandma laughed, "Joey - I knew those were lucky numbers. Just knew. And you know what? I got them from those Pentecostals."

Joey looked up at Grandma, "The Pentecostals? What's with the Pentecostals?"

"You know, my Clara…" her voice trailed off, "my Clara the Pentecostal."

She turned around suddenly as if she was going to smack the kitchen table, "Joey, I raised her in the church just like my mother raised me. We went to Mass twice a week, never missed Wednesday confession and prayed the rosary before bed every night. She loved the church. She loved her school. The nuns told me she always knew her scriptures, said the prayers and helped around the classroom. Her last two years in high school, she led the Pope's Mission to Africa for the whole parish. I was so proud.

“Then she meets Rudi and falls for all that Pentecostal hocus pocus. Most of it is blasphemy Joey, just blasphemy. They desecrate the Virgin. And the Holy Father. Her preacher calls him a false idol. We worship a false idol! I get mad just thinking about it. Then they have the gall to say everybody but them is going to hell. And Clara believes it all. That makes me sad - and angry too.”

Joey looked at her. “Listen Mrs. Szabo, Clara is a good lady. I remember her helping me with catechism in the sixth grade.” Joey paused, “No offense but her husband’s a dope. And them both living with you now? You and Mr. Szabo are saints. Putting up with him and all that crap while he eats the food off your table. And the kids – she got three kids don’t she? What’ll happen to them when they grow up?”

Grandma let out a long sigh. “I know Joey, I know. I can’t help what Rudi believes. He can think we’re all going to hell; who cares what he thinks. But don’t drag my daughter and grandchildren into it. I’ll never give up on Clara. Or the kids. And as long they’re here, they’ll hear the truth about God. Someday, they’ll understand the lies they’ve been told.”

Grandma looked out the window. Light snow blew through the empty yard. Then she took a deep breath, turned to Joey and smiled, “Anyhow, I got the numbers from those Pentecostals.” Grandma looked at me and said, “Now don’t you tell your mother this but it came from her., She listened to some idiot preacher on that radio station she always has on. And he says the Lord was coming back in 1998. On September 9th 1998. I say

‘Clara, how can you buy a tale like that? That’s forty years from now. The guy will be dead, you’ll be an old lady and nobody gonna remember anything.’ He wanted money of course. If the Lord’s coming back in 40 years, no sense saving a lot of money for retirement. Send it to me. Robbers, every one of ‘em.

“So as Clara is telling me all this, I think - that’s it: 99 and 98, September 9th in 98. It was like Mary grabbed me by the shoulder. 99 and 98. So I tell Benny to go see your mom and give her a dollar on 9998. And there it is. Nothing lucky Joey. You have to listen to what He tells you.”

Joey laughed, “Great story Mrs. Szabo” Joey pulled a roll of bills out of his coat pocket, “Jeez, I’m gonna tell ma how you got the numbers. She won’t believe it. A hundred bucks is a bunch of money.” Joey counted out ten ten dollar bills, folded them in two and gave them to Grandma.

“Thank you, Joey.” She went to her purse and pull two dollars out. “Here take two bucks and make yourself a little wager. And you tell your mother I’ll be over later today and she can pick a couple for herself and Mr. Salvidori.”

Joey smiled. “Thanks Mrs. Szabo. You keep prayin’ for Clara. She’ll be OK. You take care. I’ll be back to see you again real soon,” and he was out the door.

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Grandma played the numbers, Uncle George played the numbers, all the Toths did. Aunt Ruth played the numbers before she married Uncle Steve but things changed after that. One of Uncle Steve's brothers married Lilly DeMarco, the granddaughter of Vito, the DeMarco that started the beer business Uncle Steve didn't need to play the numbers. Dad said he was one of the guys who picked the numbers.

Uncle Steve owned Youngstown's only print shop. Aunt Ruth ran the office and two DeMarco nephews worked the Linotype and lithograph machines. Uncle Steve did OK. He always drove a Lincoln and gave us kids big presents at Christmas. Dad was never fond of mafia types but he liked Uncle Steve. "He takes care of family. He always asks about you. Treat him respectful; maybe he'll get you a job at the print shop when you finish high school," was the advice I got after the big family Thanksgiving dinner when I turned twelve.

Aunt Ruth and Uncle Steve had one kid; a boy named Dickie. Dickie was six years older than me so when I was in grade school, he was almost an adult in my book. He quit high school after the tenth grade. Uncle Steve bought him a Chevy Malibu and he got a job running errands for the DeMarcos. Dad said not to ask him anything about it.

Whatever work Dickie did for the DeMarcos, it didn't take a lot of time. His real job seemed to be betting on horses. In the summer, he drove to Thistledown, the track up near Cleveland, every day. When Thistledown closed for the season, he headed south

and played the ponies in Florida with some jai alia thrown in on rainy the days. By the time I started junior high, I rarely saw Dickie except on holidays. He still lived with his parents but moved up to Cadillacs, black suits and shoes that glisten like mirrors. He was always kind to me, even gave me a ride in the Coupe De Ville a couple of times. If a racketeer could live like this, I figured it was a pretty good life.

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We moved out of grandma's house when I started seventh grade. The mills were working again, Ike had left the White House and the family seemed to have a bit more money. We moved to Mahoning Heights, a small town west of Youngstown. Mahoning Heights was only ten miles from Grandma's house but all the relatives said we lived in the sticks. The town would eventually evolve into an urban sprawl of three bedroom prefabs broken up by dingy strip malls. The rackets never moved out there; Mahoning Heights was too far from downtown and had too few people to make it worth their while.

Our first years in Mahoning Heights were the Cleavers in Mayfield. We had a spanking new house. Dad worked the evening shift five days a week and a regular pay check meant he could trade in the old Rambler for a late model Ford Fairlane. Mom ran for Treasurer of the PTA and won. But the mills were already diseased by their greedy owners and cheap Japanese steel. Youngstown began its slow slide to industrial necrosis. Within three years, Dad took a second job, then a third.

In high school, I enrolled in college prep hoping for a miracle scholarship that never came. But Uncle Sam had a job waiting for me and to get it, all I had to do was cough three times in front of an oblivious doctor. That got me four months in Army boot camp then a trip to Vietnam to fight the heathen commies. I lucked out; too nearsighted for combat, I ended up a quartermaster clerk in Da Nang. Da Nang sucked but compared to brawling with the Viet Cong, heaven.

After the Army, I only went back to Youngstown for the funerals of my grandparents and eventually my parents. There were no other reasons to ever go back.

Between the 1965 and 1990, Youngstown lost a third of its population. The steel mills – every one of them - closed down. So did all the companies whose businesses were built around the mills – machine shops, ore brokers, railroads, truckers; you name it. A&P opened a grocery store on Market Street that killed all the neighborhood places. Mr. Salvidori's was gone by 1970.

The numbers racket died shortly after that when the State of Ohio figured they might as well have their own numbers game and introduced the lottery in 1971. The mob families redistributed what worked remained, expanded the drug business and went through their own version of consolidation. Youngstown earned the moniker of 'BombTown USA' as rival families blew each other to bits. They found Joey Salvidori floating in the Lake Milton in 1977 with two bullets in the back of his head.

Where there is no money, the mob has little interest. By 1990, no one in Youngstown had any money. The south side, where my family and my grandparents lived for years and years, became a slum; just block after block of empty, decaying houses. The city started tearing them down in mid-1990s but ran out of demolition money before making a dent in the dung. The houses fell apart. When one of them caught fire, the city just let it burn and hoped a couple more would go with it.

When my father died, I drove through the old neighborhood taking pictures of our first house on Sycamore Street, my grandparent's on Rose Avenue and the old building Salvidori's store was once in. I wandered around for a couple hours. I only saw one other person the whole time. It was very sad. Thirty years before, this neighborhood had been filled with kids, families sitting on their porches and neat little houses outlined by green grass – but now concrete and rot, its memory only in the dead.

And my cousin Dickie? He's seventy-seven, drives an Escalade, owns a four-bedroom house in a Youngstown suburb and still plays the ponies at Thistledown. He cut out going to Florida for the winter race season. It was too far for an old man to drive and Dickie didn't trusted airplanes. He never worked a regular job a day of his life.