

Not Doing Too Well

One Saturday morning, Ed Mancini and I were driving down to Mystic Harbor to check out an estate sale. Ed was hoping for some old tools to add to the pile of flotsam he keeps in one of his three backyard sheds, while I was on the lookout for more books to add to the piles I already have and will never read. A pointless excursion for both of us but a great opportunity to enjoy the ride down King's Highway (U.S. 1).

As I drove, I was telling Ed about my father, the colonel, how I was terrified of him as a kid and, as a consequence, did everything I could to make myself scarce in the house to avoid his scrutiny. Ed remained unusually quiet in the passenger seat while I related my paltry tale of childhood trauma. I thought he was just enjoying the scenery or taking a nap or maybe even listening to me. Suddenly, he just began telling me about his father back in Maine.

I should say, at the start, that Ed is the kind of guy you just can't imagine as a child. He seemed to have always been this irascible middle-aged guy from East Ramshackle, Maine who just sort of materialized one day with his thick, salt-and-pepper mustache and his gruff Down East manners in gentrified Newman's Corner. Before this unburdening of memory in my car that day, Ed never really talked much about his family or his upbringing, at least not to me. I got the impression that it was a sore subject with him, that he had narrowly escaped some mysterious family curse. So, it was a surprise to me, as I drove east on King's Highway, that he would suddenly be visited by memories of Mancini pere.

“My fathuh was a man who hadda have everything just so...you know, even atta restaurant the bake potaduh hadda be over heah on the plate and the veal cutlet or scrod or whatevuh over theah, and never the twain shall meet; God forbid if no extra bread and tartuh sauce was on the table...he would get very, uh, unsettled.”

“So, your father was a stickler is what you’re saying, right?”

“A stickluh?”

“You know, a stickler for details, sort of anal, like Tony Randall in *The Odd Couple*.”

“Oh yeah, but he wasn’t prissy or snobby like that Randall charactuh, he was more like Lee Marvin, a real hard ass. He was a stickluh, though, no question ‘bout that. He didn’t or couldn’t, function if something was outta place or if it messed with his routine.”

“Was your father also called Ed Mancini?”

“Uh-yup, Steady Eddie Mancini is what they called him down at the public works depotmint where he worked.”

“Was he a handyman like you, Ed?”

“No way! Once the workday was ovuh, he didn’t wanna tinkuh with any tools. Stuff was always breaking down around the house and he wooden lift a finger... That’s probably where I got the bug to fix things. Somebody hadda do it or the place would fall apart.”

“Necessity is the Mothers of Invention, as Frank Zappa would put it,” I said, thinking my attempt at humor had brought the subject to a close but I got the impression that Ed hadn’t even heard me.

“When we were kids, me and my bruthuh always kept an eye out for where Steady Eddie was, ‘specially onna weekend and, like you, make ourselves as invisible as possible without actually hidin’ from him, ‘cos he always had these ridiculous choahs for us to do in the yod...”

“Choahs?”

“Ya know, make-work kinda things...”

“Oh, CHORES, right...”

“They were pointless exercises in futility, you might say. We fig-yuhed the longuh we stayed outta his sight, the less chance he’d come up with one of these ridiculous choahs. But he always got aroun’ to it anyways. Like the annual job of movin’ the woodpile.”

“You mean, chopping and gathering wood for the fireplace?”

“Hey, that would make sense,” said Ed, staring out the window at the passing marshland and the boats in the distance on the Long Island Sound. “No, this was just movin’ this honkin’ heap uh wood that was already theah, already chopped and gathuhed and had been theah from about the time of the second Ice Age. Every year, Steady Eddie wanted it somewhere else on the proputtu. We nevuuh actually used the wood in the fireplace ‘cause he wanted to save it, in case we lost power in the wintuh.”

“That makes sense, Ed. Deep in the back country of Maine, hell, you must have had some pretty rough winters.”

“Yeah, we did but we nevvuh lost power, leastways not long enough to requiruh burnin’ wood inside the house,” he said, wincing at the remembered domestic tension this caused. “Plus, we hadda buncha generatuhhs that my fathuh got, spares from the public works depotment they let him bring home, and we ran those down cellah when we lost powuh. Ah, sheesh, the noise those things made, on and on till the powuh was restohed. Drive alla the rest of us numb but not my fathuh, No, I actually think he liked the sound.”

“So you had this prodigious but pointless pile of wood in the yard.”

“Right. And it was exposed to the elements all year round, which made it useless on short notice ‘cos most of it had stotted to rot, ya know. Every year when my bruthuh and me hadda move it, with Steady Eddie standin’ in the window starin’ out at us to make sure we were doin’ it to his specs, we’d end up tossin’ some of the logs in the woods behind the house when he wasn’t lookin’. The pile

kept shrinkin' until sometime when I was in high school it had shrunk to just a few rotted logs that had mostly turned to dirt. Steady Eddie didn't seem to notice that pot, ya know, the shrinkage...he just wanted to lord ovuh a pile of wood like Napoleon with the pyramids."

Ed nodded sadly and continued, "Ya know, it's funny. At his job, Steady Eddie could unclog the entire town sewer system in a mornin' shift but ask him to fix a running terlit or leaky faucet at home and he just...wasn't, uh, interested, shall we say. He would just camp himself in front of the TV, splayed out theah in his Barca Lounger in that kind of T-shirt they call a wife beatuh."

"A wife beater? What the hell, they don't still use that expression, do they?"

"I nevuh gave it much thought before but you're right, that is pretty horrible. But that's what they called 'em back then, even the women called 'em wife beatuhs and all the old Italian men wore 'em. 'Hey, Sal, you want I should get you some wife beatuhs at the K Mart? Three for ten dolluhs'."

"OK, I get the picture. Sort of *Raging Bull* meets Archie Bunker."

"Yeah...and I guess I was Meathead."

"And your mom was Edith?"

"No way...My mom was a classy lady, very proper and kind of sophisticated compared to my dad. She went to tea parties and played bridge, ya know..."

"Sorry, I didn't mean any disrespect."

"I know you didn't," said Ed, looking a bit sad now at the memory of his mother. "Anyways, there's my fathuh in his Barca Lounger, which by the way no one else ever dared to sit in, including the cat. When Gomuh Pyle or that Gilligan show was on the tube, he would not be budged from that spot. Ya know, the Gilligan show where the fat captain and the goofball sidekick with the tennis hat are stranded on that island with a couple of babes and some rich swells."

“Yes, I’m fully aware of the misadventures of the ill-fated castaways, Ed. But don’t sell the Professor short. He was their ticket out of there.”

“Right, I always thought the Professor was...well, nevu mind, what I thought... You just naturally havva dirty mind when you’re a teenaguh.”

“Wait, a minute, though. From what you say, Steady Eddie does not seem like the sort of guy who’d be a devotee of situation comedy.”

“Right you are. He may be the only person in the history of the world, no, the entire universe, who did not watch those shows as comedies.”

“What do you mean? He took them seriously, like dramas or real-life documentaries?”

“What do they call it in the colleges now when you go back and take apart throwaway pop cultchuh like it’s some great artifact from ancient Mesopotamia? Decompose?”

“Deconstruct?”

“Right. My fathuh practically invented that. He would actually deconstruct Gilligan and that island, can you believe that? He would offuh runnin’ commentary, it was almost like he thought Sargent Cartuh and Gomuh and Gilligan were real people. He’d talk back to the TV screen like these people would be able to learn somethin’ from his input, ya know, his great wisdom. And somehow the episode would end differently if they only listened to his advice.”

“Kind of ruined the viewing pleasure for the rest of the family, didn’t it? I mean, some people might have wanted to watch those shows as, you know, light entertainment.”

“Are you kiddin’ me? Nobody even dared speak when Steady Eddie was in Deconstruct Mode. We just kinda tip-toed through the tulips outta the room. Or at least I did. I retreated to my headphones and the Stones and the Airplane.”

“So he just sat there watching these shows by himself, making commentary to the walls?”

“Well, yeah, pretty much...would you wanna be in that room, with his B.O. from work and his chain smoking, especially if he’s hadda couple Molsons?”

“Point well taken, Ed,” I said, trying to picture that grizzled Mancini pere in his Barca Lounger and just could not conjure a clear image. “So what sort of things would he say?”

“Oh, I dunno...he would sorta act outraged at the depiction of military life in that Gomuh Pyle show...ya know, ‘hey, if he’d said that to a superior offisuh in my company he’d get two weeks in the brig.’ Or ‘This is completely screwy’ he’d say about some coconut communication device the Professor rigged up. Or he’d question everything about the believability of the plot, call the Captain a ‘tubba lod’ and Gilligan, a ‘fruity cabin boy’, you know, on and on.”

“Why didn’t he just switch the channel or turn off the television?”

“Well for one thing, we didn’t get more than two channels back then, we were way out in the boonies and there wasn’t cable TV at that time, ya know. You switch channels and ya get the network news and that’s the last thing he wanted...or anyone else inna house wanted, what with Vietnam death tallies and assassinations and race riots and whatnawt. But for anotheh thing, I think maybe it filled the hours for him between the grind of the workday and goin’ to bed. Sometimes it seemed like bein’ at home for him was anotheh full-time job. I suppose there were worse things he coulda done, and believe me, I saw some terrible stuff going on in other houses back theah...don’t even wanna think ‘bout that...but thank God he never hit my mom or me or my bruthuh or sistuh.”

“What did your mother think?”

“My muthuh?” he said, with a wistful sigh that bestowed retrospective sainthood on her. “She, well, she did the best she could. He was the bread winnuh

and back then ya put up with an awful lot if he was your bread winnuh. Ya know, ‘I’m givin’ up 40 years of my life to work a job I hate so’s you can have more than canned beans and hand me downs’.”

“Did they have a good relationship, your mom and dad?”

“Hard to know. It’s like they existed in separate worlds.”

“How do you mean?”

“Lemme give you an example. One evening, my muthuh, sistuh and I came home from the store. As we were all totin’ in bags, there sat Steady Eddie Senior in all his Barca Lounger glory with the wife beatuh on and the cigarette danglin’ from his lips. He didn’t even look up at us. He just says, kinda outta the side of his mouth, and with his eyes still on the screen, ‘Call Becky Angstrom’. The Angstroms were longtime friends of my mom’s. Then he says, ‘she called to say your friend Mildred is not doing too well.’ Then he pauses and for the first time looks up at us and adds, ‘In fact, she’s dead.’ You know, the way he’d have said, ‘Becky Angstrom wants your oatmeal cookie recipe’.”

Silence in the car as I desperately tried to suppress a laugh. Then I couldn’t help myself. I started laughing so hard I nearly drove off the King’s Highway into a white picket fence.

“Go ahead and laugh,” Ed said. “I can laugh about it now, too. ‘She’s not doin’ too well...In fact, she’s dead’. I use that expression alla time now.”

“And your father was just disconnected from the emotion that this might induce in your mother, and maybe in you and your sister, too?”

“Correct. He just turned back to his TV show and picked up the plot where he left off with the implication that all conversation was ovuh ‘cause Sargent Carter was sayin’ something and he didn’t wanna miss it.”

“Was there something wrong with your father, Ed? Did he suffer some sort of trauma, maybe a head injury? I don’t say this to be judgmental or cruel but

that's some serious disconnect from normal human emotions. Something must have traumatized him besides the daily grind of his job."

"He saw some shit inna war is all I can figyuh. His brothuh, my Uncle Leo, told me that it was my dad's job to hose down the bombuhs and fightuh jets that crash landed....pull the bodies out, or the parts of the bodies, that sorta thing. Day after day, that's gotta do somethin' to a person."

"Oh, you know it did. That's hard stuff to get over, Ed."

"They didn't really do PTSD back then. If you could stand up, walk straight and had alla your limbs, you were good to go after World War Two...directly into the work force."

"Is that when he got the job with the public works department?"

"Uh-yup. They gave priority to returning war vets, and to a 22-year-old it seemed like a good job...no, it was a good job. Hell, I'd gladly take a job with the public works depotmint in Newman's Corner, ya know. Get some freakin' benefits, for once...Anyways, he took the job and never looked back."

"And he was never diagnosed by the VA for his war trauma?"

"No, he never got, or wanted, help. He just kept it in and let out all the frustration on Gomuh Pyle and Gilligan and sometimes at the rest of us too."

"Is your father still alive, Ed?"

"Nope," Ed said with some finality, and then, after a pause, added, "I guess you could say he's not doing too well..."