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Act 2: Tastes in Common (1938-2002)

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Recommended Citation
Allen, James S. "Act 2: Tastes in Common (1938-2002)." (Nov 2010).

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Act 2:
Tastes in Common (1938-2002)

…the priceless private joy of family living, dining and sharing.
– Marion Rombauer Becker (1973)

Like my father Lou, I prefer my steak blackened and my toast burnt. My wife Anne is nonplused by this hereditary perversion; but then like her mother Fran, she a-dores carrot-raisin salad and pan-fried okra. So be it. These genetic traces, I think, are more than our preferences for customary comfort food. They are tastes in common for the necessary rituals of family life.

Holidays are the most obvious instances of this adage. At New Years the Allens invariably devoured the leftovers from Christmas, but also a Smithfield ham, a sweet potato casserole encrusted in meringue, spoon bread simmered in butter, and black-eyed beans baked with bacon and sausage. Loathed by the kids, the beans were a concession to my mother's affection for her North Carolina childhood and to her affectation of a French cassoulet, servings of which we tolerated skeptically for good luck.

At Easter Mom prepared for us a roast leg of lamb rubbed with rosemary, rice steamed in onion stock, carrots glazed with tarragon, and my favorite condiment, Cross and Blackwell's crushed mint jelly. The meat's flavor still makes me daydream of this meal's many variations with friends and relations: palak gosht at a Punjabi restaurant in central London; mousaka in the tavernas of suburban Athens; and mesquite-roasted mut-ton on the Navajo reservation in northeastern Arizona.

Memorial-Day and Fourth-of-July weekend picnics occurred outside, not far from my father's grill on which he seared his USDA prime steaks Pittsburgh-style – quick-charred to leave the center raw – while my mother fashioned the rest of the meal for a host of folks: a macaroni-and-cheese enriched with butter and cream, hearts of let-

tuce in a balsamic vinaigrette, and iced cream smothered in melted bitter-sweet chocolate. My mother was never much on vegetables except in season; then we had green asparagus with her own hollandaise sauce, Silver Queen corn on the cob, and slices of Georgia Girl tomatoes and Vidalia onions.

Finally, at year's end, Thanksgiving and Christmas celebrations were practically identical. The fresh turkey was stuffed with two kinds of dressing, one with chestnuts in the hind cavity, the other with oysters in the neck. Side dishes were equally predictable: mashed potatoes daubed with salted butter, creamed baby onions, spring peas with mushrooms, and various homemade pies: pecan, pumpkin, and apple, the latter confection always accompanied by a chunk of sharp cheddar cheese. Even the children were served a white Bordeaux-Graves, one aged in oak casks, because we disdained its sour dryness.

The only culinary distinction between Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners was the seasonal gelato and sorbet log, a dessert specialty of Gifford's in downtown Silver Spring. Thanksgiving meant slabs with a pumpkin center, in the appropriate shape, surrounded by French vanilla. The Christmas motif replaced the jack-o'-lantern by a bell of dark lime or a Santa of cranberry, both encased by a creamy mint. I will never know how everyone else resisted scooping the outer layers first to eat the decorative middle last.

My mother was particularly adept at reductions and gravies. I recall helping her with the large pan of meat drippings whose surface fat she made a modest effort to skim. There was no point in fixing a roux with the sifted flour; it rarely lumped up for long in such a greasy pan. Occasionally I seasoned the mixture with either wine or beer while waiting for its hue to match the roast that Dad was carving. It was the central complement to a cuisine derived from the Rombauers' Joy of Cooking cookbook and concoct-

ed with few of the consumer-food conveniences of today.

It is a wonder we survived the inevitable dyspepsia. Nor were these frequent fetes conducive to long-term fitness. I can only imagine our blood's LDL and trans-fat counts afterward, especially for those of us who later gained weight and smoked like our parents. But we heeded little of the health effects from our festive feats. We took them as they came. They were holiday observances requiring Lillie's lace tablecloth, Garga's lighted candelabra, and Dad's endless invocation before grace at each meal.

We ate because that is what we did together. We never questioned my mother's garnished comestibles any more than we did the reasons for our gathering. Years later, without a comparable family of my own to feed, I realize that these saporific feasts were designed by my parents to define a collective identity. I see now, our meals then simulated what Mom and Dad sought to create, to restore rather: a familial world that had escaped them as children and that they aspired to recapture for us. They needed the taste of another past.

This notion makes some sense in my father's life. For much of his adulthood, he felt unappreciated and neglected, perhaps because he was the youngest of the brood, but more than likely because he craved more caring custody than he got at home. This emotional ambivalence is curious. From the outset his parents had tried to establish a household that was both warm and secure. By the time Dad was born on May 23, 1910, his mother stated, the Allens prized the fierce, protective affection of a "close family circle."

Yet the first image we have of Dad, as an infant, is strangely dispiriting. He is seated, looking lonely and distressed, in the midst of a spacious lawn whose location is impossible to specify. The dim sepia photograph deepens his apparent isolation from kin.

(What had he ingested, one wonders?) All his life, Dad idolized his doting father, however preoccupied the latter was at the bank; Lou said virtually nothing about his stately mother. Although Garga was ever generous and attentive, she turned on occasion proud, cool, and aloof; she knew her worth. In an imperious sentiment alien to Ben Sr., she insisted, "It is hard for me to picture now my four dear children to be away from us." The Allens were proximate but not intimate.

Comment [1]: The Maid

My mother recollected how irritated Garga was whenever Henrietta Furlong, the Irish domestic, sat down to table once everybody had been served. Henrietta's stories were amusing primarily because they defied my grandmother's priggish sense of propriety. Garga had hired Henrietta not long after the latter's arrival from Ireland (c. 1910). In time, when the maid's fiancé of many years died, she became a member of the family and would be buried in the Allen cemetery plot. So Henrietta's note to my mother soon after her engage- ment to my father in 1937 is touching in its awkward effort: "Please excuse being so late I am not as good at writing letters but I send this card to express my Love and good Wishes for your Future Happiness." She must have recalled her forsaken nuptials decades earlier.

Dad and his siblings were sent off to schools at an early age. In my father's case he spent the elementary grades on Park Avenue in East Orange and at the Collegiate School (1919-1922) in New York not far from the White Hotel where his parents lived in town. But Westhampton Beach was a much longer trip. For the secondary grades, Dad attended Choate Preparatory School in Wallingford, Connecticut (1922-1928), and two years at Princeton Prep (1928-1930). New York, not just Westhampton, became an extra train ride away. Notwithstanding legitimate pride in his alma maters and notable classmates, such as the amiable son of the financier Andrew Mellon, my father did not like school. I think it was more than a learning disability; he was homesick.

As a young man, Dad was a traveling representative for the American Chicle Company (1930-1933). His first assignment, he often bragged, was to determine why customers favored Beechies, a rival brand to Chiclets. Such were the rudiments of retail marketing, including visits to small shops up and down the east coast during the Great Depression. Dad remembered fondly this practical training in commerce, but he was on the road alone. His temperament was too gregarious to endure solitude for long.

My father's proclivities were better suited to the developing travel industry. In 1933 he started with the Columbian Steamship Line to South America. This work was

much more appropriate and fun at sea with clients. In 1934, however, a sales job with Pan American World Airways appeared in New York, thanks no doubt to Irving Trust's venture capital in Pan Am, which had also benefited Dad's brother-in-law, Lewis Pierson, Jr. It was a more prestigious position than peddling gum or playing shuffleboard. The first international airline, Pan Am catered to public officials and corporate executives, the original frequent fliers before deregulation democratized air travel in the 1980s.

Dad's work was a perfect excuse to see the world. For the next several years, he flew far and often, which put him in regular contact with others akin to him in his sociable inclinations. His family had not journeyed much; here was an opportunity to complete his education. He learned about other cultures, in Latin America and beyond, whose habits he mimicked for instrumental as well as social purposes. In a 1946 article published by The Times Herald, Elizabeth Oldfield noted how well Lou imitated the accents of his interlocutors: "Allow me to congratulate you, M'sieu!" enthused one Frenchman who mistook Dad for a compatriot, "your Eenglish ees perfect!" After years of experience, this role-playing had become instinctive, no, incorrigible.

In summer 1937 Lou re-encountered Sis at LaGuardia, then New York's North Shore, Airport. More than eighteen years had elapsed since they had last seen each other in East Orange. (The Smiths left for Asheville in 1919, a few years before the Allens relocated to Notamiset in Westhampton.) My father used to tell of pushing my mother around in a pram. Dad also played ball with the twins, Jim and Go. Similarly, Kay and Ben had befriended Popsie and kept in touch. So when Lou did not at first recognize Sis, she quickly knew what to do: she tasked him with her travel arrangements. He soon recalled those elusive gestures of a remote moment in their lives. Impatient and mindful of

the impediments to his past and future bliss, my father proposed a couple months later.

My mother's quest for family is more obvious: she came from a broken home. When Mom was born on September 27, 1915, her parents avoided one another and separated three years later. Lillie carried the kids off to Asheville where she was too infirm to mind the emotional needs of others. Late in life Mom recollected having to dust off the snow from her mother's blankets as the invalid lay helpless outside on the porch. Plush accommodations hardly sufficed. The retinue of a nurse, a cook, a maid, a chauffeur, and a housekeeper could not sustain the little girl's insistent need for kin.

By the time Mom was eight, her mother had died; and seven years later, far off in Buffalo, her father died, too. Jim III had been a shameful shadow whose every move was disparaged by his wife's scornful remarks. His relations seemed embarrassed by his so-called "business in the West," even forgetting the year he was born. Mom once described him as "pitiful"; towards the end of his life, she alleged, he worked as a waiter, an assertion Popsie's memoirs do not confirm. Whatever the truth, the loss was real.

Mom attended the Claxton School in Asheville for the elementary and middle grades (1921-1927), Asheville High School (1927-1929) and the Dwight School (1929-1933) in Englewood, New Jersey, for the secondary grades. Her memories of these years were palled by a sense of neglect. She was regularly shuffled from one relative to another for the holidays, and not always with her brothers Go and Jim. Before their mother passed away in 1923, Popsie had already married Frankie Steinhart, Jr. and lived in Havana. There was no strong, affective center before Mom's trip to Europe with her siblings in the summer of 1930. Together they cruised from New York to Rome, traversed Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and France by train, and landed in England before they headed back

to the States. It was the closest thing to domesticity that Sister had as a gawky yet ambidextrous teenager sampling escargots for the first time.

In the fall of 1933, after graduation from Dwight, Mom traveled again with her clan to attend finishing school, the Villa Gazzolo run by a "Comtessa" Meighan in Verona, to study languages and music. This trip lasted about a month from New York to Naples and up the peninsula – Pompeii, Sorrento, Capri, Rome, Florence, and Venice – before Sis stopped off for the year. While the others re-crossed the Atlantic, Go stayed on as a chaperone, albeit in Rome where he worked as a supernumerary clerk in the US embassy. Both Mom and Go were restless and took excursions to France and Germany, eliciting fiendish stares and hisses from Nazi sympathizers a year after Adolf Hitler came to power (apparently German Nazi xenophobia was more overt than the Italian Fascist variety). Briefly, during another respite from the Comtessa, Sis lived with the Kruegers in Munich, ostensibly to improve her facility with German and the piano.

The trips were of no avail. Mom and Go absconded from Europe months earlier than planned. They embarked on an affordably uncomfortable Japanese steamer, whose leisurely route was a surreptitious cover for Mom's abbreviated studies in Italy and Go's (in)convenient courtship of a young English woman on board ship (his marriage to Molly Montesole soon ran aground). Back home at long last, Sis did not return to Asheville; the house there had been sold. Instead, she lived alternately with Aunty in Charlotte and with Jim in Newark. In 1935 she debuted at the Asheville Country Club with sister socialites like Eugenia Edwards (before the latter married Foster Mackenzie).

Consequently, once Mom and Dad met up after a hiatus of two decades, they were keen to create the families they never had. They both wanted one very much for them-

selves. Banalities aside, personal circumstances prompted this union of kindred interests, as did changes in American popular culture. Clipped tunes of the Jazz Age, such as "Ain't We Got Fun?" (1921) and "Oh, Lady be Good" (1924), gave way to sentimental melodies of the Depression, such as Judy Garland's "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" in The Wizard of Oz (1939). "There's no place like home, Toto!" In their marriage my parents lent credence to this cliché. The family was a nostalgic as well as an economic bulwark against a lifetime of unshakeable insecurity.

While courting my mother, Lou wrote Sis long letters expressing his desire to establish a predictable stability to their lives: "Please, – *always,* – [remember] for *ever* and *ever* that I will *protect* you, *live* for you, *love* you, *care* for you, *worship* you until my dying day." Mom's letters to Dad are lost, but her diary – partially written in a fractured German – evinces a similar vulnerability that came from an unsettled early life. She felt abandoned by her kin. Sis's frustration of living with Aunty and her brother Jim made my father's attentions, especially when she was hospitalized with a serious kidney infection in November 1937, all the more attractive. It took little to coax Sis, who had been reared a Catholic, to become an Episcopalian, one final concession to her engagement. Shortly after Mom was released from the hospital by December, Lou and Sis announced their nuptial plans; and on February 25, 1938, they were married.

The wedding album offers faint insight into the bride and groom's inner life. Rather, it portrays a small but posh occasion hosted by Mom's Uncle Bill Krueger in the Lewellyn Park neighborhood of West Orange. Each of their parents' weddings had hundreds of guests; Mom and Dad's had only a couple dozen, nearly all of them close relatives. Reverend Arnold Lewis, the rector at Westhampton's St. Marks, officiated. Dad

Nota Bene:
The family was a nostalgic as well as economic bulwark against a lifetime of unshakeable insecurity.
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chose his brother Ben as best man, Mom selected her sister Popsie as matron of honor. Because Jim was born only minutes earlier than his twin brother Go, the more mature Uncle Bill gave Sis away.

The familiar faces of relatives are striking: Frankie Steinhart's radiant smile, Ben Sr.'s gracious warmth, Garga's stout pride, Jim and Go's uncontained amusement, and Aunty Ekegren's endearing affection are evident in the informal photos, which were taken by Ira Hill then in vogue on Broadway. With the support of two privileged families, it was "the beginning of a Perfect Life of Companionship and Happiness," as my mother put it. They now charted on a new course of their own. Theirs was a moveable feast the likes of which Ernest Hemingway never wrote.

After a honeymoon in Nassau on the "Carinthia" – the playwright George Bernard Shaw was their evasive stateroom neighbor – Mom and Dad returned to New York where they settled for the next five years. They had two different apartments: first one on East 57th street, then a duplex on Broadway in Hastings-on-the-Hudson which was superbly sited for access to work and visits with confidants, such as Jack and Jane Cunningham. They traveled weekends to Long Island more often now that Ben Sr. had retired from Irving Trust. But their magical tour hastened to a turn during a trip to Toronto with Garga in November 1939. It was there they received word that Ben Sr. had died at the cabin. My father was dumbstruck. Mom, too, long rued the loss of this paternal reassurance.

New life was some consolation (and diversion from other events). Within eleven months of Ben's death, Lou and Sis had their first child, Louis Sutherland Allen, Jr., October 2, 1940 (in the Battle of Britain's last weeks). Then Marie-Louise arrived on February 9, 1943 (as the Japanese evacuated Guadalcanal). She became "Weezie" just as Mom

had become “Sister”; the sobriquet was easier for the children to enunciate. The next child, Ben Sr.’s namesake, was born September 25, 1946 (during the Nuremburg trials). Dad’s brother Ben Jr. had no offspring, so my parents appropriated his name, unwisely, *en passant*. The unspoken tension over this nominal indiscretion survived until my brother proved himself worthy of his uncle’s approbation.

To no such controversy I appeared at 4:06 pm EDT on Tuesday, August 12, 1949 (just before the USSR detonated an atomic bomb), the summer my father won the annual fishing competition in Ocean City. For years, on a side table, his silver trophy stood next to my bronzed baby boots; neither name nor prize nor shoes concerned anyone but us.

In 1943, after course work in business at New York University, Dad landed another job in customer services with American Airlines and was assigned to the main office in Washington, DC. This decision was a big step for Mom and Dad; it meant leaving behind everyone near and dear to them in New York. They rented a house on Fort Hunt Road in Alexandria, directly across the street from the Belle Haven Country Club, next to Nelson and Lydia Snyder, who became agreeable habitués. New to town, my folks wanted time to learn about the communities in the DC area before buying property.

The search was for a bigger domicile in a better school district. Mom and Dad were reluctant to dispatch their kids to private schools. Both of them had drifted through their formal education – clearly their teachers had failed to reach them – though they acquired some sophisticated tastes. In New York, they had attended concerts with Garga, whose name is engraved on her mother-of-pearl opera glasses. Later they bought and played a grand piano. But they looked to keep their own children at home. The choice was at 800 Edelblut Drive, north of Silver Spring, a twenty-room structure on a two-acre

lot in exurban Montgomery County, well known for its excellent public schools. The architect John Nutter, who lived nearby, was pleased with the style he deemed "all mine."

The house was situated in a palatable neighborhood, the grandly assonant "Burnt Mills Hills," whose residents counted many children our age. A tiny slice of the Baby Boom generation, fully 79 million of us born between 1946 and 1964, crowded the local schools. But that was everyone's problem, not solely my indulgent parents'. At least they had premises as befitted the family's needs. It was the center of social activity essential to my father's work and his desire to make visible his status in society. He was a proud man with much to be proud of. His home became "Oak Hollow," an address appropriate to its arbor of looming oaks and to the empty core of a burnt-out tree stump left by the previous owners (it took years for termites to reduce the remnants to mulch).

With or without the fine hardwood trees, the move was wise for less immediately apparent reasons. Dad's aspirations beyond marketing for American Airlines had stalled. His boss, Herbert Ford, alerted him to how important a college degree was to promotion in the company. Because there was nothing Dad could do about that, not at his age, he decided to seek other work. My father realized that Montgomery County was prime real estate (its population tripled in twenty years from 164,401 in 1950 to 522,809 in 1970); someone had to sell the property, right? Dad needed a license and an entrée into the business, both of which he secured in the offices of James C. Conley, a leader of the county Board of Realtors and Suburban Maryland Builders Association. Progress was arduous, but my father persisted until he prospered.

Six months before we packed for Burnt Mills Hills in March 1951, Garga died in Westhampton. I was too young to sense how difficult this death was for my parents.

I do not think it was a disaster comparable to Ben Sr.'s passing twelve years earlier. But it meant the timely division of Garga's personal effects, including an original Paul Revere silver bowl sold to Tiffany in New York. Used off-handedly for what-nots and loose change, the badly tarnished piece had long deceived the family about its historical value. It must have belonged to one of the Captain John Allens in Manchester.

Because Dad had already committed himself to staying in Washington, we did not relocate to Long Island to live in his mother's old house or to build another one like it on Aspatuck Creek, as Ben Jr. did. But Mom and Dad carried off much of the furniture they wanted now: books, tables, chairs, prints, and Charles Robert Patterson's "The Glory of the Seas," which they hung in the study. Dad was also bequeathed a sizeable amount of money to remodel the premises and, of course, to invest in land. This inheritance forwarded his effort to achieve what his parents had managed.

The house quickly became the locus of my folks' quest to live up to their familial legacies. We enjoined more than a pleasant locale, we inhabited an institution that welcomed fast friends, close neighbors, and well-disposed professionals; they were nearly all charmed by my father's distinctive sociability and by my mother's nimble management of the household and busy calendar of formal meals. For decades my parents held or attended dinner parties every week, it seems, with bonhomie and aplomb in a spirit of genuine comity. As my father asked with a grin, "Who has more fun than monkeys?" Well, from all I can tell, Mom and Dad made the monkeys envious.

The roster of connections is too long to conjure up in its entirety, though they appeared frequently and became oral lore. For instance, varied are the fabulations of one in particular, the mysterious Ray Noonan; but for the life of me I have no idea who he was

or whatever became of him after he returned to New York. Our guests, memorable and unmemorable alike, savored this consummate blend of business and distraction, as if there were any distinction between them at the Allens. It was what my parents loved doing as naturally as eating, drinking, and smoking.

The yearly cycle of socializing occurred in different parts of the house. Winter and spring occasions happened indoors, in the living and dining rooms or downstairs by the recreation-room fireplace. *Puissant* aperitifs (think: highballs) were served to smaller parties in Dad's den, whose books, shelved floor to ceiling, were inherited from his mother. Summer and fall entertaining went on outdoors in the screened and railed porches, both accessible from the front hallway and the back kitchen, besides from the flagstone patio my father designed for larger groups. These exterior additions to the house, amply funded by Garga's money, accommodated silver and china place settings for eighteen seats. However much trouble it represented, for my mother especially, social life was also home – for us, yes, and for a Dickensian cast of characters (ill. 5).

Among our closest neighbors were Herb and Eva Berquist, despite Eva's Swedish immigrant parents with a portentous name – for my wife Anne and me – the Freiburgs, who lived with them. The elders had kvetched about our noisy carousing, so Mom and Dad made amends by inviting their convivial daughter and her jovial spouse. The complaints stopped, but the invitations did not, long before the Freiburgs had both expired. Years later, Herb also died suddenly – of an allergic reaction to a bee sting – leaving his increasingly eccentric wife, orphaned by her widowhood, at our obliging doorstep.

Likewise, the coal-and-fuel-oil dealer from across the street, Andrew Dellastatious, came to visit after work. "Mr. Dell," as we dubbed him, barely reached the fifth

Comment [2]: Ray Noonan

In a generous gesture, my family nursed a seriously ill man, the courtly New Yorker, Ray Noonan. He and Dad must have met in the airlines years before Ray's heart attack, necessitating by-pass surgery in Washington, DC, and his prolonged recuperation at our house in Silver Spring. For weeks Ray lived with us in elegant serenity until he was well enough to care for himself. I remember overhearing a telephone call he made to a lady-friend in New York during a subsequent visit at our cottage in Ocean City; to our slack-jawed amazement, Ray embroidered shamelessly on our improvisations at the beach – where Mom and Dad fashioned cocktails in recycled jelly jars and drank bottled water because what came from the tap stank of sulfur. By Ray's account, we were lounging in luxury worthy of the French Riviera. I can only imagine what the paramour thought of his mannered hilarity.

grade in rural Virginia; his diction and humor were an embarrassment to “Mattie,” his primly deaf wife, but a constant source of amusement to us. “Ain’t that a doozie?” he would ask after telling an indecent joke, slapping his thigh in delight. Mr. Dell loved to regale. To his family’s dismay, he ultimately turned over his thriving enterprise to the sources of his best yarns, the most loyal of his employees. Every now and then Mr. Dell’s amiable, youngest son Jack dropped in – without his father – during the holidays.

Most at home were Dad’s chums who, like him, loved to fish, to hunt, and to golf. Frank Bryce, our dentist, was a skilled angler, a sharp shot, and a patient putter. He was also a poor judge of women, two of whom he married and one of whom he did not. It was the last, Charlotte, who cared for him the most. Several times a week, Frank stopped by for a drink, unaccustomed as he was to hurry. For years our most assiduous guest, he never dissembled his country-boy roots in Florence, South Carolina.

Other accomplished adherents of Dad’s game-fishing group, the Ocean City Light Tackle Club, were mustered. Successful professionals all of them, their names make a mellifluous flow – Jack Kerkam, Joe Barse, Tom Beddow, Sobie Kemon, John Chambers, Reggie Foster, Pres Gatley, Bill Lane, and Perry Van Vleck – for the most part attorneys, physicians, and shrewd businessmen like my father. The same men joined Dad in his duck-hunting club, an informal association known as the “Big Ten,” and at the Columbia and Greencastle country clubs, of which these sportive types were also members. Abiding bonds were based on mutual interests, but also nourished over the years during delicious meals and substantial libations at our house. As the popular apothegm of appreciative fishermen affirmed, “the lines were always taut.”

My father’s partners and associates also relished the excuse to party hard. Each

of them hails a hearty recollection: Jim Conley got Dad started in residential and commercial real estate, Charlie Norman's aged and blind father-in-law fought at Gettysburg, "Pete" Gray seldom tempered the gusto of his tales told in mixed company, and "Buster" O'Day belied his bumptious reputation. The equally unassuming Bill Wheeler lived next door, until he and his wife bought an incongruously immodest property in Centreville off the Chesapeake Bay and another on Singer Island in Florida.

These men helped my father develop the community on the former English farm between our house and Colesville Pike, now known as Northwest Branch Estates after the large stream that runs nearby. They were instrumental as well in the Greencastle complex of apartments and townhouses further up Route 29 that replaced the country club. Their wives, like those of Dad's fellow outdoorsmen, were there, too, as Mom's companions. I remember the glamour of their manners and the distinctive consonants of their names: Eleanor Kerkam, Dottie Barse, Virginia Beddow, Betty Kemon, Edith Wheeler, "Bill" Norman, Milly Gray, Louise Van Vleck….

Among Dad's more curious contacts was Irwin Lust. Irwin's family name was no misnomer. Each time he appeared at our Independence Day picnics, he had another "wife" in tow. Heavily made-up, almost all redheads, these consorts tried to hide in the car during his visits. But we children and our neighborhood buddies adored Irwin because to celebrate the "Fourth" he brought with him hefty crates of the most potent fireworks available anywhere: ash-cans, cherry bombs, roman candles, shooting stars, and others whose percussive qualities were apt to the occasion. Damn, they were magnificent.

The Lusts owned movie theaters in the Washington, DC, area, so Irwin also boasted cartoons and short movies in sixteen-millimeter format for my father to project

outside on the patio after dark. Although he averred it was inadvertent, Irwin once gave my father an "off-color" film to thread, the first lurid frames of which informed everyone but inattentive children to its actual nature. The showing was abruptly transferred indoors for the adults to view on their own. The youngsters remained outdoors, detonating enough gunpowder to torture the local hounds, who howled in anguish with each explosion. Tormented canine Holden Caulfields, all "catchers in the rye" for the evening, the dogs bemoaned far more than the fleshly sybaritic flicks.

Still more curious was the wife of another notable contact: the psychic Jeane Dixon. Married to the realtor James Dixon, she was not yet the darling of Nancy Reagan and Sissy Spacek when she dined with us before the publication of Ruth Montgomery's laudatory A Gift of Prophecy in 1965. We all knew that she had a reputation for erratic behavior, so we were not surprised when she and her husband left precipitously, mid-meal, muttering ominously. For a week we awaited calamity, but it never arrived. The only mishap was the foreseeable loss of my father's proposed deal with her husband.

Not all guests were neighbors and businessmen. There were the Annas, William and Mary Elizabeth, who led the congregations at St. Mark's in Fairland (which we joined most Sundays) and St. John's in Beltsville (which we attended when running late). Both country parishes were too small to support a full-time parson until 1966. Then the Episcopal diocese assigned Vicar Paul Mericle to St. Mark's and Reverend Anna to St. John's. Unsure of the new vicar's eponymous afflatus – could he work miracles or not? – we sought ministration instead in the older reverend's sociable theology.

A big barrel of a man, Mr. Anna reveled in fine food and fellowship. His wife was congenial, too, but more proper than her bluff husband. She usually managed to

fetch the pastor back to the rectory for a passable night's sleep before 8 a.m. services, some of whose sermons, I recall, were none too coherent by 10:30. But the right rector's catholic benevolence shined, steadfast. God's eternal grace, he taught us, was most fully manifested in the true believer's faith and action, a sensible credo drawn from the Anglican Church's twelfth article on good works. For this magnanimous latter-day latitudinarian, the Holy Eucharist's bread and wine were a real as well as a sacramental meal.

Over the years our home hosted visits from Mom and Dad's brothers and sisters. On my father's side, Kay and Fred St. George Smith arrived, not long after we had settled in, to drop off their daughter Audrey to attend Mount Vernon College for Women in Washington. Ben Jr. and Hig also appeared on occasion, but the trip to Maryland was too long for the irascible brother. We never saw Evie and Lewis Pierson in Silver Spring – they had separated early in their marriage, and Evie died two years after we moved – but their girls, Jackie and Junie, gladly graced us with their presence.

As for my mother's siblings and their spouses, they came, too. I never quite knew how they were all related until I discerned familial traits. On the one hand, Fred and Ben Jr. were a tad tetchy in the morning; hangovers turned them crusty, gruff, and rude. On the other hand, the ever-playful twins, Jim and Go inherited each other's flare for fun. Nothing deterred them, not even the clashing temperaments of their wives, Jim's Laura and Go's Rosie; the former was as brusque as the latter was suave. Suaver still, Popsie and Bill Malone never deigned to come. If the Smiths and Allens were not quite kith in their idiosyncrasies, they were definitely kin in their obdurate sins.

In this way, the house in Silver Spring served as the epicenter of my parents' extensive networks. It was a banquet drawing together associated and related people,

a collection whose presence did not take up so much as add to our space. The children adapted to the visitors, developing a ritual of making a discreet, diffident appearance, to be on display for the parents; they were justifiably pleased with their children. But once the ceremonial welcome was over, we retreated, undetected, to another part of the house.

Often we supped in the kitchen before the guests arrived. That was fine with us. We wanted little to do with grown-ups, and the feeling was mutual, I am sure. Our parents believed that in company young people were best neither seen nor heard. Only after we had matured did we have a chance, at long last, to get to know this world. Through this panoply of personalities here and elsewhere – in Ocean City during the marlin-fishing derbies each August, and in Chevy Chase for rounds of golf nearly all year – we kids learned better who our folks were.

Time for Coffee…

And then home changed. First of all the extended family contracted, starting with the deaths of Evie in 1953 and Kay in 1956. When Go and Rosie were expelled from Cuba with the rest of the American expatriates in 1960, they left for Buenos Aires to begin life anew. About the same time, after the Krueger brewery was sold in 1959, Jim and Laura bought a farm in Yancyville, North Carolina, not far from Laura's Duke tobacco interests; and soon thereafter they built a house on Ocracoke Island. Quite suddenly in 1965, Ben Jr. died, a shock akin to the loss of Ben Sr. in 1939: my father was the last of his cohort alive. More alone now than ever, he confronted his own mortality.

With the 1960s our immediate family began to devolve in turn. Lou Jr. headed to the University of Richmond in 1959 and the University of Virginia School of Medicine in 1963. The old Cub Scout returned only on holiday. No longer so mischievous, Wee-

Nota Bene:
The palate we have in common as family actually lives on in the ceremonies we perpetuate.
(page 94)

zie finished Meredith College in Raleigh to work for American Airlines in Arlington by 1964, the same year a more erect Ben travelled to Virginia Tech in Blacksburg. Ben earned his commission in the US Air Force and was posted to Honolulu in 1968, a year after the bookworm, me, ventured forth to Brown in Providence. Thus dissolved the nest.

The openness of my parents' lives proved an unexpected source of loneliness. The gatherings, which had been so casual, gradually developed a constrained character; my father sought to impress his peers and partners in a house instead of a home. It became increasingly evident in the mid-l960s that Dad's drinking was teetering out of control. At various times, as the youngsters grew up, we noticed but did not think much of it. Ben was actually more offended by the cigarette smoking. Self-absorbed teenagers, we had our own obsessions. Such adolescent rebellion stumped our elders' best intentions. Rearing little children in the 1940's, Mom and Dad participated in the Baby Boom, but the resulting generational gap did not make their lives, or ours, any better.

A pleasurable pause for our parents, perhaps for the rest of us, too, came in spring 1969. We sat for a group portrait. Weezie had married Henry Kempf, Jr. the previous December, so Hank joined the photo session. Lou was an intern at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta and would soon be assigned by the US Public Health Service to the Navajo reservation in New Mexico. There he would meet and marry Freida (yes, Fr<u>ei</u>da) Johnson in May 1972. Ben was a civil engineer still stationed in Hawaii. I was an insufferably cocky college sophomore – the less said about the bookworm the better.

The photos of us are pathetic. The photographer, Joan Knight of Silver Spring, caught one or another of us with our eyes closed, frowning or mugging for the camera. But the picture of Mom and Dad together in the living room is a minor masterpiece.

They had achieved precisely what they had set out to do at their wedding, to create the family they never had, notwithstanding their deepest doubts about doing so. They had accomplished even more, they had provided unstintingly for our advantageous starts in life; in short, they had done better by us than their forebears had done by them. Like a Thomas Sully painting of nineteenth-century notables, the photograph captured the pride of all parents in their children, but also in themselves on behalf of their offspring.

From this moment on, it became apparent, our existence approximated a salad spinner; as with droplets on lettuce leaves, we were all flung outward, Mom and Dad included. There had been few solo trajectories until then. For years we journeyed together to New York, visiting Fred at his East 69th Street apartment and then at Ben Sr.'s hunting cabin in Quiogue, where Fred and Kay lived after Garga died. We divided our stays on both sides of the estuary, half of us at the cabin, the other half with Ben and Hig facing the Allen homestead. (Ben Sr.'s duck blind still stood amidst a copse of sea oats.)

Similarly, each Easter weekend, we holidayed at the majestic turn-of-the-century Marlborough-Blenheim Hotel in Atlantic City, New Jersey (where I suffered fits of acutely embarrassing abdominal distress and parental punishment for mischief I committed after being tucked into bed for the evening). The month of August had been reserved for Ocean City and a long October weekend spent moonlight-fishing for channel bass in Cape Hatteras on North Carolina's outer banks. So, as a troupe, we were much on the road until we kids went off to college; even then, our folks escorted us and our baggage to the schools, notwithstanding the ambivalent impatience we felt about life on our own.

Such independence finally cued my parents to scatter, as well. Of course, there had been earlier forays. During the Berlin Airlift in the spring of 1949, for example, Am-

erican Airlines assigned my father to assist at Templehof Airport. And his hunting and fishing jaunts often put him on the road. But the empty seats around the kitchen table suggested that Mom and Dad should stray more. In 1965 they left me at home with Frank Bryce, who was in extended refuge from his second wife. My parents sailed the SS France to the Mediterranean and loved it. Then when I departed for college, they booked their cruises in wintertime, mostly to escape the inclement weather – and to relive a youthful fascination with the sea.

Their destinations included Latin America, particularly the Caribbean, Dad's former stomping grounds. The oldsters also saw Ben in Hawaii and had the temerity to accompany Lou and Freida there on their honeymoon. While I was in the Navy, my namesake flew to Mexico City in 1971 and visited Athens in 1973. Because the marlin migrations had veered from Ocean City, the OCLTC held its annual derbies elsewhere: at Macuto, Venezuela (1972, 1977), at Oregon Inlet, North Carolina (1973, 1976), and at Cozumel, Mexico (1974, 1975). My father made the 30th derby in 1977 his last, spending January and February in West Palm Beach instead. Happy to join in these early junkets, Mom let Dad winter over in Florida by himself until their wedding anniversary.

As we children moved on, my parents felt freer to eat out. Their restaurants of choice were the places they took us when we were tots: Fred and Harry's for broiled crab cakes, Crisfield's for fresh shucked oysters, Columbia Country Club for fourth of July picnics, and Blair Mansion Inn for an authentic Italian antipasto. Dad refused to dine at Mrs. K's, a venerable Silver Spring institution, because of its shredded carrot salad. So he said. Then as they grew older and less venturesome, Mom and Dad simply went to the nearest ethnic restaurant, such as the Hunan Manor and Chef Theo's in White Oak.

Their passion for eating well belied my mother's retreat from planning, cooking, and cleaning up after sumptuous meals. My parents' tastes changed with American consumer preferences, choosing the simplicity of meat and potatoes and prepared frozen foods, much as did middle-class suburbia. For years entertaining had been an effort, and now a cherished leisure prevailed. Dining was still preeminently relational, but its essence had altered. The amenable diligence of a restaurant server, like the cheerful "Doris" at Fred and Harry's, or the intermittent visit from a grateful, younger *rouė*, like Bobby Jester of Ocean City, matched the menu.

Meanwhile, home life had staled. Real estate values declined with a national economy in transition after 1970. Business at the local level shriveled as Montgomery County's population grew at one-third the rate of the previous decade. So there were fewer transactions to discuss over dinner. Dad began work on commission with a travel agent, but it was a much less hospitable job. Stock market values flatlined, another frustration to my father's longstanding interests in Dennison Manufacturing, the corporation that sent the children to college and then some. Everyone else found solace in retirement.

By then Dad's drinking had become less a social desideratum than a physical dependency. His behavior during parties alienated his partners, and it took its toll on Mom. For about ten years, she experienced his alcoholism without much help or understanding from children or fellow parishioners. It was a mortifying stigma, she believed, and so she suffered its trauma by herself. Dad's illness necessitated medical attention, but none of us, many hundreds of miles away, knew how to get it for him – even if we knew what to do. As it was, we were just as paralyzed by Dad's bouts of inebriation (and recrimination) as he was. A bitter time it was for everyone – most often between 4:00 and 8:00 pm.

Comment [3]: Dennison Manufacturing

Before its merger with Avery Corporation in 1990, Dennison Manufacturing was a conservative, family-run enterprise headquartered in Framingham, Massachusetts. Since 1844 it has made paper-products, office supplies, and adhesives, such as the self-adhering stamps now used by the US Postal Service. Its most influential president, Henry Sturgis Dennison (1877-1952), experimented with company-sponsored benefits like unemployment compensation and profit-sharing with the employees. He was also one of the few business leaders to endorse Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal (something my staunchly conservative father would have been shocked to learn). Once Dad had more than half of the Allen assets invested in this concern. Its headquarters are now in Pasadena, California, my wife Anne's hometown.

A pivotal turn finally came in the early fall of 1984. My brother Lou was attending a meeting of pediatric psychiatrists in Washington when as a health care professional he realized that now was the time: my father's treatment could not wait. The consultation – a calamitous encounter – ended in acrimony; but this shock, together with mounting traffic violations and unprovoked conflicts with old pals, made my father understand: he had to act. He had abandoned if not betrayed the family, his entire raison d'être, for which he had labored so ardently, so long.

Although Dad sought no medical intervention and he continued to drink – Paul Masson "Blush" in lieu of Old Forester 86 proof – he grappled manfully with his implacable malady. We all noted his courageous fortitude and supported him as best we could, especially Ben who had returned years earlier from Hawaii to live at home and then nearby in Silver Spring. However tenuous, it was a remarkable recovery for Dad, to be sure, but also for my mother. She recalled the painful loss of her father to alcoholism. But this time, her supplications had been answered, her faith redeemed.

Two in-laws were lucky in learning late of Dad's affliction. Ben married Lori Schroeder in June 1983, and I wedded Anne Winston in December 1984; both women arrived long after the worst. But Lori endured more than Anne because my sister-in-law lived closer and had been an Allen for more than a year before Dad's rehabilitation. Anne did remark his unconquerable loquacity and craving for sweets, the curious side effects of his new regimen. These eccentricities were preferable to previous miseries.

The relief we all felt was captured well in an impromptu photo of Mom, Dad, and the four children – with Lou Jr.'s youngest boy, Dyami, standing in for the rest of the clan – taken in October 1984 (ill. 6). We were outside the front door to Mom and Dad's

house, grinning generously at a camera mounted on a tripod in the front walk. Perhaps because of the informality of the moment, we were all at ease again, savoring a freedom we had not tasted for a good while. Our pleasure was as broad as Dad's whose smile expressed his long-yearned-for liberation. We all had every reason to smile with him.

Four years later, Dad's physician discovered a malignant tumor on his pancreas. It was from the bronchogenic carcinoma he was found to have a few weeks afterward. Decades of smoking L&Ms were the chief culprit. The internist, Michael Leibowitz, told my father that he should not give up his annual winter trip to Florida. Both of them knew the diagnosis augured ill; Dad might as well enjoy his visit to the beach before he started treatment. The rest of the family had no idea what to do; in the Navajo tradition, my eldest brother Lou sent each of us pieces of quartz to keep faith in Dad's recovery. No one wanted to know the prognosis of the metastasis, least of all my mother.

Upon his return, Dad sustained the brutal rigors of chemotherapy and radiation, which kept him alive for several months longer than anyone anticipated. Shortly before Thanksgiving 1989, however, he decided to forgo any further procedures. They had become too much to bear. With the hospice nurse and Lucy Stith praying at his bedside while Mom got some rest – she had been up with him all night – Dad passed away at home on the morning of December 5. He was buried in Westhampton Cemetery on a cold, windy, wintry day the following weekend. Cousin Audrey graciously hosted a warming collation of mulled wine and clam chowder at the cabin.

Mom lived on for another twelve years. Once she had overcome grief and anger with my father and his death, she had a long and independent widowhood (though she

nearly expired of dehydration in a bathtub from which she was too anemic to extricate herself for days). Her children happily visited. Ben had dinner with her every Friday evening. The rest of us had dispersed and settled elsewhere, but came back as often as we could. Lou Jr. and I had our usual meetings in Washington, DC. After a while in New York and Connecticut, Weezie flew in from Florida.

Mom always greeted us at the front door, her head bowed in gratitude, and had us sit to talk in the den with nibbles and coffee, tea, or wine. Her predilection for telling stories continued, plenty of which were refurbished as her recollections evolved with age. Like her skills at gin rummy and crossword puzzles, the details of her childhood grew more precise as those from breakfast alone languished, for cause. She was hungry more for company than for food. Her nourishment was now of another sort.

Little did we know that Mom's gentle wheezing and coughing were symptoms of emphysema, the same "acceptable" illness that killed her mother. We thought they were the natural concomitants of aging, such as her stooped frailty and momentary *aporias*, but they were not. Again smoking (Salem menthols mostly) was the origin. Her disinterest in eating was one consequence of her troubled metabolism working without adequate oxygen. When she contracted bronchitis in January 2002, she had to be hospitalized. That is when her lung condition was diagnosed; Dr. Leibowitz was as surprised as we were.

After a month in convalescence and a month in hospice, Mom died with Ben, Lori, Weezie, Hank, and a nurse by her bed. It was soon after midnight on April 2. A week of grieving in the house, crammed with our entire brood, closed in an uncommon requiem when our Hannah Cherry, a Pentecostal, taught my brother Lou and me how to talk with the dead as our mother lay in an open casket. Although Dad was buried in West-

hampton, we honored Mom's sentimental preference for a grave (and cenotaph to her spouse) at St. John's cemetery in Beltsville. She remained a homebody right to the end and beyond: "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations" (Psalms 90.1).

Years later I think of my parents and siblings as characters in Arthur Miller's play, Death of a Salesman, performed for the first time in New York the year I was born. There are qualities of Dad in Willy Loman, especially his forced optimism in the face of harsh realities. By the last scene, as the Lomans confronted their final crisis, Willy declaims, "The door of your life is wide open!" Dad wanted to believe that, whether or not he had reason to do so. Despite real and imagined obstacles, some of his own making, he succeeded in every way that the tragic Willy Loman did not; but if need be, whatever his faults, he, too, was willing to sacrifice anything for his familial ideals.

There are features of Mom in Willy's wife Linda. She also professed heartbreaking faith in her husband, the children, and their success, come what may, but she longed for her independence. Overwhelmed by grief, Linda's last words to Willy, "We're free …We're free," express Mom's paradox with life alone, as a widow, surrounded by memories of her family that was no longer there. I like to think that none of us, her offspring, resembles the affably effete Biff and Happy Loman, who never realized their namesake's dreams for them. Thanks to Mom and Dad, yes, there is more hope for us.

My parents were witnesses to historical change in twentieth-century America. Too young to know much about World War I, they shared fully in the development of a consumer economy from the Jazz Age onward. They patronized speakeasies during Prohibition (at least Dad did), bought larger and more expensive automobiles, and started smoking when it became socially acceptable to do so (their wedding pictures in 1938

show them gracefully holding cigarettes during the reception). They also were marked by the Great Depression, which left them feeling financially insecure long after they had nothing to worry about. I remember my mother urging me as a child to clean my dinner plate, however sated I was, because who knows when the next meal will come.

Even more, my parents' lives were deeply marked by the New Deal and the new function of the federal government to regulate the national economy. As beneficiaries of laissez-faire, Mom and Dad were naturally hostile to Keynesian fiscal and monetary policies. For my folks, a regulated economy made no sense, no more so than did the welfare measures for the well-being of everyone else. The advantaged few despised this governmental intrusion. Overbearing bureaucratic agencies were as useless as Social Security and later Medicare – until their benefits ultimately appeased the rich.

Comment [4]: Relative Economic Status

The scholarly literature on rising economic and social equality in the mid-twentieth century is ripe with implications for the Allens. My father's advantages vis-à-vis the average wage-earner declined noticeably as a consequence of federal programs to grow the middle class in the wake of President Roosevelt's New Deal. Real wages were at their highest in 1973; and the income tax was its most progressive before 1981, substantially narrowing the gap between rich and poor. Mobility was thus greatest in the US between 1940 and 1980, precisely when my parents experienced a relative decline in economic status, while their children witnessed a relative rise in professional esteem, thanks largely to the nascent role played by cultural capital.

World War II passed without much affecting the Allen newlyweds. They were starting a family when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, where their future daughter-in-law's father, Fred Schroeder, earned a Purple Heart. Mom's brothers sailed the Pacific – Go in the Navy, Jim in the Army Air Corps – and returned with few tales to tell. My father served in the Merchant Marine to patrol New York harbor for German submarines (I am not sure what he would have done had he found any). The closest to the war Dad got were the ruins of Berlin and the German Lugar he bought during the airlift in 1949.

By then the Cold War was in full swing, another reason for my parents to be suspicious of liberal politics. Communism was a threat they took to heart, even though when Senator Joe McCarthy was discredited in 1954 they named a pet crocodile after him. The reptile was an ironic political commentary ill-suited to a menagerie of dachshunds and Chesapeake Bay retrievers in the household – at one time, there were 16 of them with

conventional names such as Doxie and Chessie. Otherwise, the stakes were too high to deprecate conservatives overtly. There were material interests to protect and neighbors to consider, aside from complications like President Nixon's rapprochement with Red China and his obstruction of justice during the Watergate affair.

My father and mother were engaged in the community at church, the OCLTC, the Big Ten Gun Club, the Columbia and Greencastle Country Clubs, and the Burnt Mills Hills Homeowners Association. Dad was an early member of the OCLTC and never missed a derby in 30 years, which he won in 1949, 1950, and 1976. His love for the outdoors made him a conscientious conservationist. When the state of Maryland issued "Save the Bay" car tags, my father was among the first to subscribe. Mom assisted with Girl and Cub Scouts, the Altar Guild, and the many church duties that Father Anna asked of her. When he retired in 1977, his able successor, Father John Bals, did the same until his death in 1995.

My parents were most vigorous on behalf of the children: the Boy Scouts, the PTA, and the local Civil War Round Table, which introduced us to the immediacy of history in our backyard. Dad brought us to hear Bruce Catton and to nearby battlefields to find Minié balls. He also took time to teach us how to fish, sail, and golf, whether or not we were all adept, because he wanted the kids to learn the pleasures and duties of fair play with others. As the sociologist Robert Putnam would explain decades later, "It is important to ask how the positive consequences of social capital – mutual support, cooperation, trust, institutional effectiveness – can be maximized" in modern civic life. Such is what Mom and Dad tried to do for much of their lives.

The Allens were two children ahead of the Baby Boom, but they shared in the

consequences: crowded maternity wards, split-shift elementary schools, expanded college opportunities, and the value changes in a younger generation whose adolescent peers were more important than their parents. Only briefly did Mom and Dad have to fret about our rebellion in the 1960s; their older children were soon out of the house. Lou Jr. trained to become a physician, Weezie attended a Baptist college, Ben enrolled in ROTC and was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant in the Air Force.

But the Civil Rights movement and the war in Vietnam were inescapable facts of public life. Schools were integrated long before Lucy and her husband James discreetly yet self-confidently asserted themselves in our midst; the Communist threat was real in Southeast Asia, and so was military conscription. After receiving a low number in the lottery instituted by the Selective Service System in 1969, I joined the US Naval Reserve. My father was both proud and relieved.

The consumer society's "Ozzie and Harriet effect" – the effort to live up to the norms dictated by popular culture – came naturally to my family. As my baptismal photo suggests, we embodied a white, suburban, middle-class model, not much different from the fantasies depicted on network television. Hours of exposure to TV advertising were unnecessary to make us into what we already were. A charter patron of an American Express credit card in 1957, my father had the means and the predisposition to buy every appliance, every gadget, every possible product in America's postwar salmagundi of retail commerce to compensate for the rising costs of labor around the house.

Instead of hiring domestic hands, my parents bought efficient washers, dryers, dishwashers, refrigerators, freezers, vacuum cleaners, and lawn mowers. It was a household widely antipodean to those of their childhood before the Depression. Home was now

remote from the lives of the extended family, from the likes of Harriet, Lucy, and Hannah who worked for us. In lieu of the illiterate yardman Roland Johnson who came twice a week until his health gave out in 1968, my parents hired a mechanized yard service that mowed the lawn in the summer and blew the leaves in the fall. It was just not the same.

These developments were part of the postwar boom in prosperity. The suburbs of Washington, DC, were no exception. Dad was a smart businessman, and he seized opportunities as they arose in the 1950s and '60s. By the time he saw me off to school, he had surpassed his father: his assets were considerably larger and each of his children attended college to enter the ranks of the professional middle class. He had cause to be content. But he was utterly unprepared for the economic conditions of the 1970s. Energy crises, stagflation, and high interest rates effectively stymied the stock- and housing-markets.

The eclipse of my father's manifest success weighed on him. He felt threatened by the evolution of American society that since the New Deal had been backfilling the chasm between superfluity and necessity with a surge in middle-class incomes from 1947 to 1973. My father's relative status was nothing what it had been for his progenitors or, for that matter, my mother's. Almost anticipating the change years earlier, my father once wrote my mother, "Please remember you are the *finest*, that you request and demand *respect*, *kindness*, *tenderness*, *high honor* and always spoken to as a *lady*." A major societal transition made this expectation implausible. Ancestral coats of arms, purchased by mail order, impressed no one else; new, prestigious consumer goods were never enough.

I attribute my parents' gratuitous prejudices to their inability to understand historical change. Their reflexive dislike of Jews, blacks, ethnic immigrants, and the impoverished was of a world long since gone. What had been quaintly fashionable in private – the

slights and taunts demeaning the less fortunate – was no longer declared in public. It was as if my folks had never heard of sweated labor, southern lynching, or the Holocaust.

Non-WASPs were not fully American, Mom and Dad believed; the impoverish-ed had only themselves to blame. Out of habit, my mother referred to perfectly harmless people as “little man” or ”poor soul.” The complex realities belying these denigrations, however, posed a threat to long-held assumptions. As neighborhood crime intruded, my namesake felt besieged, rightly so. In 1972 the house was burglarized; and many valuable relics, such as my grandfather’s antique shotguns, vanished. Not long afterward Dad was mugged in the driveway; his worst suspicions confirmed he never felt safe again at home.

As our family grew with each wedding, the in-laws were hard pressed to win my parents’ unconditional love: Hank was a Catholic (though Weezie eagerly converted), Freida was a Navajo (but Lou embraced her tribal ways), and Lori was too young and her father a union man (yet Ben knew him as a war hero and faithful father).

When it was Anne’s turn, the elders felt vindicated. I had called from Oklahoma to tell them the happy news of our engagement. “What color are her eyes?” my father asked. “They’re green, Dad.” He sighed audibly, and I knew why. He was forever fear-ful of his children’s misplaced affections. I do not know how else to rationalize this slowness to accept, much less trust, our expanding relations.

Cultural diversity appeared in other ways. It was reflected in a locality that for decades had been a bastion against social change. Nearly all our neighbors were WASPs. Down the street, Stewart Bainum was the sole exception; he was a bona fide Seventh-Day Adventist. Then the Stones, a Jewish household, moved in on Gateway Drive at the edge of Burnt Mills Hills (we children played there anyway). Eventually, the Wheelers

Comment [5]: The Entrepreneur

Stewart Bainum was not just anybody’s neighbor. By 1985, as the owner-founder and CEO of Manor Care and Choice Hotels International, he had become one of Fortune Magazine*’s* 400 wealthiest Americans. He also developed a serious interest in Maryland state politics. In 1994 he considered running for governor, but decided against it for family reasons. His less adept sons remained polit-ically active. Back in the 1960s, however, Dad had lent Mr. Bainum a substantial sum of money – $10,000 then, about $100,000 now – to start his hotel venture. Within a year or two, as I recall, Dad demanded the return of his investment because Mr. Bainum had been so careless about the accounting. As I think about it, despite his unwitting rectitude, or so it seems in retrospect, my father was not just anybody’s neighbor, either – and he knew it.

departed and a series of professionals and their families made the house next door more a bird's nest than a home. Mom and Dad resigned themselves to the fact that, like the Harmels nearby, they were Jews, too. Que sera, sera.

Then the first blacks arrived diagonally across the street. Don Dawes owned a waste management company; and his daughter participated in the 1992 Olympic games, yet my parents rarely mentioned their names. Opposite them, Dr. Douglas Lord and his wife, an heiress of Sherwin Williams, built the largest premises in the vicinity. They dwarfed everyone else's. Mom and Dad complained, but never noticed the new proprietor, Jack Abramoff, the Republican lobbyist whose associates, such as Representative Bob Ney of Ohio, also did substantial prison time for bribery and related crimes.

A year after my mother died, Abramoff bought her house, in spite of its obvious dilapidation, which we paid dearly to address. He wanted the place to lodge the students in a yeshiva he intended to establish on property attached to the former Naval Ordinance Laboratory. That unsavory deal, which came under criminal investigation for tax evasion, failed. Still more in a pinch two years later, Abramoff sold our old dwelling to a black business owner and his wife, Shaun and Eunice Meyers. Historical change opened up Burnt Mills Hills, much as it had a century earlier on High Street in Newark.

These reflections give pause. They are efforts to profile my parents during their lengthy lives of waning privilege. I recall from a thick album of clippings, for example, how important the movie Gone with the Wind (1939) had been to them early in their marriage. The chivalrous romance between Vivien Leigh's Scarlett O'Hara and Clark Gable's Rhett Butler appealed to Mom and Dad, I suspect, because it represented what my folks wanted for themselves and their family, the prerogatives of an older, long-lost mo-

ment. As late as the Depression, hierarchies still reigned: single women required chaperones, and all men wore hats to signify their roles in life.

Years afterward, Mom and Dad reverted to that moment with another of their favorite films, The Sound of Music (1965). Hollywood's cloying kitsch aside – cinematic mawkishness at its worst – the Von Trappes enacted a deep-seated longing for familial stability in the midst of crisis, not of the antebellum South but of Austria's Anschluss with Nazi Germany. The unabashed nostalgia captivated my parents. "The hills are alive with music," as was my elders' pertinacious commitment to us, their children, and to our future. We *were* their hills and music. As we moved away, it was as if the hills and the music moved with us. It no longer mattered who lived next door.

One rainy night in March, just short of a year after my mother's funeral, I returned to Silver Spring. I was on my way in an auto rental from the airport in Baltimore to Washington to attend a professional meeting for the weekend. On my way back to the airport the following Sunday afternoon, I would join family and friends at St. John's for Reverend Kathy Jordan's consecration of my mother's newly laid gravestones.

But late Thursday evening, I needed a bite to eat. I stopped at Crisfield's on the corner of Georgia Avenue and Colesville Pike. It was not the old restaurant long in business further down Georgia Avenue, where my parents took us for oysters on the half shell, but a new operation, now defunct, which provided more formal fare. I ordered a sole *meunier*, a green salad, and a glass of sauvignon blanc, delighted to linger on the light, delicate, sautéed fish, the Boston bib lettuce, and the tart, dry wine.

Distracting enough in itself, the meal started me musing. My mother did not cook fish well. My father did not like white wine. Anne also prefers a garden salad after the

main course. But Crisfield's menu listed far less pretentious items we all put away in our younger years: shrimp cocktail, sea scallops, and braised potatoes. These were familiar foods at the beach, within digestible distance of the ocean, far from my acquired preferences for Sancerre and Valençay's cindered chèvre.

Dad loved making a show of re-creating his father's New England clam chowder. Garnering the ingredients, preparing the stock, and simmering the soup filled a full day. The result was seasoned by my father's half-serious banter as he served up the first bowls to his hungry children. "Isn't that the best chowder you've ever eaten?" he would ask, begging for compliments that arrived perfunctorily. "I don't believe my father ever fixed it any better than that," he continued. We humored him while we ate.

Normally we had seafood only at restaurants such as O'Donnell's in Washington, the Captain's Galley in Ocean City, or Hackneys in Atlantic City. Everyone knew my mother could never rival the shad roe, the lobster tails, the crab imperial, or the bouillabaisse prepared from the day's catch by more accomplished chefs. Mom neither sought nor discussed recipes for fish (or for another prize of her sporting husband, wild geese). That was not the point of her work in the kitchen. She had other things in mind, which no one begrudged her.

Two days after the meal at the new Crisfield's, I invoked these memories at the cemetery with Ben and Weezie, but also with the affable Bob Davis and his wife Patricia (their solicitous attention to Mom and Dad had made them family, too). This moment on Sunday meant a rest from our journeys, in time and space, far from home. We understood that it was certainly not the last occasion for us to gather. Birthdays, graduations, reunions, and, yes, still less august excuses, like picnics and passing visits, all blessings of

another sort, are more than sufficient to continue eating, drinking, and sharing omnivorously together, just as we did with our parents when we were kids.

We no longer eat the same things. The communal fare was far too rich to sustain decent health, and we have developed rituals of our own in other venues. It is still worth recalling the many holiday and celebratory feasts we relished then on New Year's Eve, Easter, Memorial, Independence, and Labor Days, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. The palate we had in common as family actually lives on in the ceremonies we perpetuate: christenings, birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, and funerals. They are as indispensable but also as anodyne as the meals themselves, far more delectable for communions of another sort, even without food like blackened steak and burnt toast.

Dialogue with *Lucy Stith*

LS: *"How 'bout that? It's Jimma."*

JSA: *"Lucy, I haven't seen you in ages."*

LS: *"You haven' changed a stitch. You the same like you was a chil'. Yes, it's been a while. I jus' grew ol'. I couldn' take care of your mama no mor'."*

JSA: *"Why apologize? You were the same age as Mom and like family for more than thirty years. Besides, you had your own folks to consider."*

LS: *"What's lef' of 'em. You know'd my James lef' me for another woman? He didn' leave me a dime. And my chil'en all lef' home long ago. They done gone. Nobody knows the woes I seen, nobody."*

JSA: *"But you had your faith."*

LS: *"Yes, I did. The Lord kep' me close. But I also want'd my piece of the rock. This here belong'd to me, too. Yes, it did. I know'd one day, if I jus' hung on, it'd be al' right. But I was done tir'd when your mama died. I couldn' do no mor'."*

JSA: *"Anne and I live far away in Illinois now. We sold Mom's house. Maryland is no longer the same for us than North Carolina was for you."*

LS: *"Yes, I un'erstand. I lef' the farm when I was a li'l' girl. My people was po'r sharecroppers, and there was no way we could live like that. It was bein' slaves all over again. Goin' north was to work. DC was a livin'. There the white folk lef' us alone. That was good and that was bad. When there was no work, when riots broke, when the drugs and gangs came, that was bad."*

JSA: *"How did you manage with my parents then?"*

LS: *"I told 'em my mind, but I kep' my heart to me and mine. So when I heard what I*

couldn' stand, I spoke a li'l' softer, after I turned up the radio a lil'l' louder. But anyone listenin' would 'a' heard, I suppose like you."

JSA: *"Yes, Lucy, I did."*

LS: *"Well, your mama and daddy, they heard what they want'd. I guess we all do. Ever'body heard Dr. King – Martin belong'd to ever'one – but only we heard Malcolm X 'cause he was ours."*

JSA: *"I'm sorry that I didn't hear more."*

LS: *"Don' you worry, Jimma. You heard enough. You jus' tell your folk to keep listen-in', like your daddy when he lay dyin'. He and I, we prayed, and I know'd he heard, he heard, and so did the Lord. He done good 'cause, you know, all God's chillun got wings – like your mama. She prayed, too."*

JSA: *"We should never speak ill of the dead. They can't speak for themselves any more."*

LS: *"I dead and I still talkin'. So what 'm I doin' here? It makes me wonder, is this you or is this me?"*

JSA: *"I'm not sure I know."*

LS: *"Well, then, I don' know neither. Maybe that's how it oughta be."*