

Elliot Slater
Rat Fink

They were driving down Aspinwall Avenue in Brookline in a black 1959 Volkswagen Beetle. Sam's father was driving, his step-mother sitting in the passenger seat, wearing a pink straw hat. Sam was in the backseat with his sister Susan, who was tending to their new little sister, Shoshana, squirming in a bassinet.

Sam was thinking about Rat Fink, a grotesque cartoon mouse invented by Ed "Big Daddy" Roth, model car design genius. Rat Fink was the anti-Mickey, hero to a group of Sam's younger neighborhood friends who were enamored of hot rods and motorcycles.

Sam's father was driving them to a brunch in another part of Brookline, bi-monthly events where academics and their families met, their children often disappearing into upstairs bedrooms and tree-houses. Sam and Susan, always outsiders, didn't often join them. Sam loved his father's colleagues, especially the kindly Saul, who allowed Sam to beat him at chess, and who had a wonderful, deep, Boston accent, redolent with humor and wisdom. Saul had had polio as a child. He walked with arm braces, navigating the crowded rooms wearing a huge smile and large, embracing laugh. Sam looked forward to these brunches. Plus there was the fun of the new baby.

Susan was happy to be watching Shoshana, or Shoshi as they already called her. Susan was ten years old, Sam eleven, the one time of year they were a year apart, just before his birthday.

He had the idea that he would tell his stepmother all about Rat Fink and Ed "Big Daddy" Roth. She was one of the only adults who really listened and talked to him, and he only saw her once a week.

"Leah, have you ever heard of Rat Fink?" he asked her. Susan rolled her eyes. *She* had.

"Do you mean the song?" Leah asked. "Allan Sherman?" Sam looked at Susan with a teasing face.

"R!" he sang. "I say R-A! R-A-T! R-A-T-T!"

"Stop it!" said Susan, laughing.

"R-A-T-T-F-I-N-K RATTFINK!"

"Shh. You'll wake up Shoshi," Susan said. Their father perked up.

"You know, that song was originally a song by the Ames brothers, when I was an undergraduate. 'Rag Mop,' it was called then."

"All Allan Sherman's songs are parodies of actual songs," Leah clarified. She smiled at Sam. She knew he would be interested in this fact, which he was, though not as much as he was by the fact that his father and Leah appeared to know who Rat Fink was.

"Well, do you know who Rat Fink *is*?" he asked them.

"I know *what* he is. An especially evil fink. I think this might have been a Yiddish word, or expression, for an informer."

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“‘Rat’ is also an American slang term for an informer,” Sam’s father said, accelerating around a corner. They all leaned to the right, as if they were on a roller coaster.

“I think it is a German-Yiddish expression. A fink is a snitch, a rat, an squealer,” said Leah.

“A tattletale,” said Susan.

“That’s right, Susie,” said Leah.

“A stoolie,” said Sam, not to be outdone.

“Exactly,” Leah said, turning again in her seat, grinning.

“Well, actually, I meant the cartoon Rat Fink, not the song. You know, on the cars. The dragsters.”

It was clear Leah did not know.

“Ed ‘Big Daddy’ Roth? He makes car models, and Rat Fink is this really cool cartoon he puts on t-shirts. He’s really a great artist.”

His father and Leah exchanged smiles.

“My friend Eddie has this cool t-shirt with Rat Fink on it, and he has all the model cars. Eddie is really good at putting them together. Of course his father sells tools. Mr. Aucoin has his own truck. Snap-On-Tools. He has a Rat Fink decal on his truck! Except Mr. Aucoin makes real hot-rods. But Rat Fink is not a stoolie. Rat Fink is really cool.”

Leah was interested. “In what way is he cool?” she asked.

“Well, he’s really funny. He’s also sort of scary. I mean, he is really big. And kind of disgusting. He’s really great. Eddie has a Rat Fink model he’s working on right now!”

“But why do you like him, Sam? I am not clear.”

“I like all that stuff. Ed ‘Big Daddy’ Roth has all these great details he puts on his models. Really cool stuff, like German army stuff. Like motorcycle gang things. Eddie’s father has stuff like that on his motorcycle. He also has a real Nazi flag! It’s so cool. I wish I had a Nazi flag.”

Leah paused, and looked at him. She had a beautiful face, big eyes made slightly exotic by eyeliner, pale skin and dark hair. Sam and Susan had always thought of her to be like one of the good and kindly magical women from the Oz books, what with her flamboyant clothing, her ability to prepare food they had never heard of, her knowledge, her sweetness, her easy laugh.

“Why would you want a Nazi flag, Sam?” she asked.

“Because they’re so cool!” he replied, his enthusiasm causing him to sit forward in the back seat. Leah looked around her seat at him, her right hand gripping tight the handle above the glove compartment as Sam’s father sped around a slow driver.

“Nazi iconography,” said Sam’s father. “How they lured boys into the Hitler Youth.”

Leah ignored his interruption.

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"Do you really understand the Nazi flag, Sam? What it represents? I had relatives who died under that flag, in German concentration camps. They were Jews from Hungary, from the countryside. They died in Auschwitz. Near the end of the war."

Sam was stunned. He understood that the Nazis were bad. Hadn't he spent half his life playing army and fighting them? You could see them on his favorite TV show, *Combat!* all the time. But he had no idea they had killed Leah's family.

"Not your parents, though, right?"

"No Sam, great-aunts and uncles and older cousins. My parents and grandparents were here. My mother was born here."

Sam was embarrassed beyond anything he had ever felt, quite different than shyness. He was finding it difficult to think of what to say. That the Nazis had killed Leah's relatives was deeply shocking to him. And what did this mean about Ed "Big Daddy" Roth? Was he a Nazi? Was Rat Fink something the Nazis would put on their tanks? He pictured Rat Fink seated in the turret of a panzer tank, wearing Rommel hat and goggles, directing his storm troopers to murder Leah's relatives.

Sam had never really thought about the Nazis killing the families of the Jewish people he knew. In his neighborhood, there was this one family, the Cohens, whose son Stevie was often assigned as his partner for projects in their classroom. Their masterpiece had been a diorama of the Battle of Lexington and Concord, as tableau from the retreat, which for Sam and Stevie had been a happy confluence of playing with toy soldiers, paper Mache, schoolwork, and going to Stevie's after school.

Stevie's mother had a big welcoming smile, and never bothered them. Sam could tell she enjoyed having him there, and listening to them work together. Sam liked going to their house. They had a stereo, and a marble chess set, and artwork on the walls, unusual items for Sam to see outside of his grandparents' house, or his father and Leah's apartment, or the Brookline brunches, or to a lesser extent his own house. Stevie Cohen's father excited a certain amount of comment from those of Sam's friends who had ever sat in the back seat of the Cohen's station wagon when Mr. Cohen was behind the wheel. "He wears a toupee!" Timmy, who lived near Stevie, had told Sam, astonished that there really was such a thing. "You can see where it's glued on!" Had he Nazis killed some of Eddie's family? Had they stolen Eddie's father's hair?

Once at the brunch, Sam was unable to settle down. He didn't feel like playing chess, and anyway Saul was deep in conversation with a woman Sam didn't know. Susan was engrossed with their new baby sister, who had attracted a crowd. Sam ate a bagel spread thickly with cream cheese and smoked salmon. He drank some orange juice. He sat by a bookshelf and removed titles one by one. Regrettably, there were no biographies of Ed "Big Daddy" Roth, Allan Sherman, Francis Marion, (aka The Swamp Fox), or Ray Charles, or, for that matter, anyone he had ever heard of.

Chopin was playing on an elaborate hi-fi. The Preludes, the album cover said. His father was surrounded by women, and they were laughing and laughing. Leah came over and sat next to him. She smiled. "Are you

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enjoying yourself?" she asked him. "I'm taking a little break from Shoshi. I have so much help today!" She laughed. Sam didn't know what to say. "I hope you understand why I feel so strongly about the Nazi flag."

"I'm sorry about your family. I don't really want a flag like that."

"It's OK, Sam." She laughed in this wonderful way she had, that brought you right into her good humor, rather than feeling like the object of it.

"Was your mother sad when her family was killed by the Nazis?"

"The war was sad for a lot of people for a lot of different reasons. You know Kiyō?"

Another friend of his father's Sam loved.

"Kiyō's relatives were sent to a concentration camp, here in America. And they were Americans! Japanese-Americans. Kiyō had learned to speak Italian from workers on his family's farm, so he fought in Italy during the war. Really an amazing story. It was all very complicated. The war was hard on everyone. It was especially hard on the Jewish communities my ancestors came from. So many."

"Did any of them get away? And come here?"

"Yes."

Sam was interested. "Who?" he asked.

Leah glanced over at Shoshana, who was being held in the lap of an older woman, Susan at her side. Then to Sam's father, who gave her a little inquiring look. She shook her head and returned to Sam. "There are so many stories," she said. "The Applebaums, my father's family, were from Poland, and came here a long time ago. In the nineteenth century. My mother's family, the Markovitzs, the Hungarians, some of them, also came in the nineteenth century. My mother was born not too long after your grandmother Nana. The Hungarians were well off in Hungary. More so then the Appelbaums had been in Poland. They were more flamboyant too! They owned vineyards and had servants. My grandparents' marriage was arranged, and not so happy. My grandfather came here before the turn of the century, and left my grandmother behind with four children. He was gone for ten years!"

Sam thought, "Just like Dad." His parents had divorced when Sam was two.

"Her relations were kind to her. Their servants were too. She had four children, her husband was in America, not much money. They sent her groceries, usually at night to save her embarrassment, and sent one of their servants to help her out sometimes. This servant would always call my grandmother 'Gradige Frau', a term of respect."

Sam was already confused, but he loved the way in which Leah told stories, always smiling and laughing at her own jokes.

"Finally one day my grandfather sent for his family, and they went to New York City, to a fourth-floor walk-up. And then my grandmother got a fortieth birthday present. My mother! She was born in 1904. My mother

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told me that when she was a little girl her family all sat around at night reading out loud letters from Hungary. These letters were written in German, which they spoke at home. Hungarian was the language of commerce, their business. All these Hungarians had delusions of grandeur." Her laughter was filled with delight. "They were always asking for money. Especially Uncle Vilinesh. Once he wrote asking for money because he was humiliated that he had to buy ready-made shoes!" She laughed again. Sam didn't know what ready-made shoes were.

"Shoes from the shoe-store, instead of the hand made shoes he liked," she explained. "This wasn't the case with my father's family. They just came here, and got on with it. They loved America. The Appelbaums were much more fun than the Markovitzs."

"So most of your family escaped the Nazis?" Leah smiled at Sam, and he felt bathed in her attention and kindness.

"Yes. Most of my family lived here. In Chicago and New York." She seemed to sense what Sam was looking for. "I can tell you one story about my Hungarian relatives, the ones that stayed in Hungary. Most of them simply disappeared and we don't know exactly what happened to them. But there was this one young married couple. All the Jews in their village were rounded up by the Nazis, and herded into a synagogue, and the building was set on fire while people from the town stood and watched. They managed to climb out of the synagogue, this young couple, but in the confusion they were separated, and neither knew if the other had survived. This was in 1944, near the end of the war. After the war ended they both went back to the town to look for each other, or to find out if there was anyone left who knew what had happened, that knew who was able to escape. And do you know what happened?"

She was smiling. She had the expression on her face that Sam associated with her telling Susan and him stories on summer vacations in Maine, at his grandparents' house. They would all be sprawled on the big four poster bed in his father's room, and Leah would tell long, magical, funny stories, serials really, that lasted for weeks.

"What?" asked Sam.

"They were walking down the street, hoping to see someone they knew, and they ran into each other!"

Sam smiled at her. A happy ending, just as he liked it. "That's amazing," he said. Just then someone called to her. Shoshi was crying, and Leah said,

"Sorry Sam, your new little sister is calling me." Sam watched her pick up Shoshana and leave with her into another room. Susan came over to him, and they decided to investigate the desserts.

That evening all Sam could think about was the Hungarian Jews being burned alive in the synagogue. One thing in his life that especially scared him was a song from an album of otherwise funny songs his father loved. This song was called "The Irish Ballad." Sam knew it was meant to be funny, but he didn't really think it was. The song was about a little girl who kills everyone in her family in gruesome ways. The verse that especially bothered him, was when Tom Leher sang, "She set her sister's

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hair on fire, and as the smoke and flames rose higher, danced around the funeral pyre!" All he could think of were all those people in the synagogue running around with their hair on fire and outside the Nazis laughing and dancing and playing violins. It took years for him to banish this image from his fevered imagination.

The next time Sam was at Eddie Aucoin's house was the following Saturday. Mr. Aucoin's red and white Snap-On-Tools truck was in their driveway, as was Mr. Aucoin, working on his motorcycle. He had curly hair, a brimmed cap worn at a jaunty angle, and nautical tattoos on his arms. Sam thought him incredibly cool looking.

Mrs. Aucoin was another kindly neighborhood Mom of the hard-boiled variety, always smoking, busy with four children, usually head-scarfed, and sarcastic. Once they were in Eddie's room, Sam watched as Eddie worked on his latest Revell model car. Rat Fink in a dragster was shown on the cover, though Eddie was still working on the chassis. The photograph on the cover of the box showed Rat Fink sitting in a dragster looking, well, insane.

"This is the Beatnik Bandit," said Eddie. Sam picked up the box and looked at Rat Fink. He seemed to have lost some of his allure. Somehow he now seemed sadistic to Sam, someone who would set someone's hair on fire without a second thought. Eddie looked up at him and smiled.

"F! I say F-I. F-I-N. F-I-N-K. FINK! F-I-N-K FINK FINK FINK FINK!" They both laughed, and Sam jumped in. "R. I say R-A. R-A-T. R-A-T-T. RAT! R-A-T-T-F-I-N-K, RAT FINK!" he sang. They howled with laughter, and sang the song over and over, louder each time.

Eddie's mother stuck her head in the room. "Stop singing that stupid song!" she yelled. "Jesus Christ Almighty!" They stopped immediately. Her face softened.

"Do you want some bologna sandwiches with mayo?" she asked.