

## Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

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**The Wrong Napkin**

MY MATERNAL GRANDFATHER WAS A JEWISH MOBSTER at the turn of the 20th century. My sisters and I never knew him. He was murdered before we were born. Rubbed out in his prime. At least, that's what we'd heard. He was killed by the Jewish mob. 'Rubbed out' because our people didn't run around "whacking" their adversaries (we were a civil people, after all. We simply rubbed them out. You know, like the way mom rubbed out stains on my old blue jeans).

Many years later, when my beloved sister Marion and I yet again grew curious about the dark side of our family history, we did some research. I obtained a copy of our grandfather's death certificate. I'd made arrangements for the certificate to be mailed directly from the U.S. government to my sister's house. A few weeks later, my phone rang. 'Are you sitting down,' my sister asked? I sat. 'According to his death certificate, Nana's husband was killed by a fruit cart. A runaway fruit cart.' But how can that be, we asked each other? We always heard he was a mobster. 'No, it's simple,' I reasoned with my sister, 'that must just must have been how the Jews did it back then.' Subtle. No vulgar gunshots or stabbings. Instead, it would be handled delicately. Perhaps some undetectable poison in one's chicken soup. Or a piano cleverly dropped from the fifth floor at the precise moment one's adversary is passing on the sidewalk. Or ... or ... a runaway cart laden with heavy, deadly, precisely aimed fruit. Passion fruit, no doubt.

Still, it made no sense to us. The quiet secret family story, told in hushed tones so that children wouldn't hear - though of course we always did - was that grandfather was a member of the underworld (I wasn't sure exactly where the underworld was located on a map, but I imagined a vast underground network of tunnels somewhere under the earth's crust).

And then there was grandfather's wife, our beloved Nana, Frances. Oh, how I adored her! She was a loving grandmother but every bit the mobster's glamorous moll. Tall, pretty, a ballroom dancer with a shock of jet black hair and an elegant bearing. She was poised, graceful, and stylish. She drove a flashy silver Camaro. And she thought I was the bee's knees. That of course drove my mother crazy, just as it made me adore Nana even more. Nana took me everywhere with her. I loved staying over at her place and loved going places with her in her zippy Camaro. I was sure it had been a gift from someone named Bugsy or Fingers or such. One summer morning, she took me to her doctor's office, stopping on the way to get ice cream sugar cones. It was August, quite hot, and as we sat in her doctor's waiting room our chocolate ice cream cones started to drip. The waiting room was chockablock full, mostly of older women, with their fancy broaches and colorful dresses, and even older men in natty hound's-tooth sport coats with shiny black dress shoes. Back then, one dressed up to see the doctor. I certainly didn't want Nana's ice cream to drip on her pretty dress. 'I'll get some napkins,' I told her, as I jumped up and bounded across the large waiting room to the bathroom on the other side. In the bathroom there was a large rectangular metal box affixed to the wall. It had a brushed silver metal crank handle on front, a large open area in

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bottom front, and a little sign on it, which read, 'Feminine Napkins.' As I turned the handle, my heart soared as if I were Arthur having just pulled the sword from its stone. Soon I would be my Nana's savior! I would hurriedly bring her a napkin in the nick of time, sparing her from the terrible embarrassment of dripping chocolate ice cream on her white cotton pencil dress with blue polka dots. I literally burst forth from the bathroom door, my heart leaping from my chest, as I heroically waved the napkin with my outstretched arm as high as I could reach, while hollering triumphantly to Nana across the waiting room, 'Nana, Nana, I've got you a napkin!' After her examination, we drove to my parent's house in her mobster coupe in stone cold silence.



Later that afternoon, I helped my father tend to his backyard garden. As he watered the plump red tomato plants, he said, 'Son, we have to talk. A man and a woman are like, well, tomato plants.' I looked at the wet tomatoes, glistening in the summer sun, and I knew instantly that my father must have completely gone off his rocker. 'You see, son, a woman can't make a tomato without some parts from a man. The parts combine and then a new tomato is born. Do you think you understand? I know you wanted to bring your Nana a napkin to be helpful. But son, it was the wrong napkin. You're a good boy. I'm glad we had the talk. Now everything should be clear. Run along now and play.' The world of mobsters and their molls and tomatoes seemed so strange to me, then, as it does now. I was confused. What did tomatoes have to do with napkins, anyway? Oh well, I said, and ran off to play with my friend, Wolfgang. The only thing I knew with clarity and certainty is that someday I would grow up to be Batman. And then no one would dare to mess with my Nana's tomatoes.