

# COINS IN THE ASHES

A FAMILY STORY OF  
GRIEF, GRATITUDE, AND GRACE



JOE McHUGH





COINS  
IN THE  
ASHES

A TALE OF TWO FAMILIES

JOE McHUGH

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*To LUCY,*

*SPARE ME THOSE TIRED MOTHER-IN-LAW JOKES;*

*YOU'RE THE TOPS*

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## PROLOGUE

On a cold winter night in 1931, a lone motorist driving along an isolated stretch of two-lane highway in Sussex County, New Jersey, noticed hungry tongues of yellow flame licking out from under the eaves of a small building next to the road. The building was a hamburger stand called Aunt Kate's, and the motorist, seeing no house nearby, raced down the road until he found a telephone booth where he called in the blaze. By the time the fire engines arrived, however, it was too late; Aunt Kate's was engulfed in flames.

The owners of the ill-fated restaurant were Al and Anna Quinn. When they arrived at the scene of the conflagration, what they found was nothing short of heartbreak: glowing sparks swirling upward in the fire's vortex, the roof caving in, the walls falling away, the despondent firemen in their three-quarter boots rolling up hoses and stowing axes, nothing more to be done.

Nine months earlier, Al and Anna lost their life savings when the bank in the nearby town of Netcong failed. Since then, they had stashed their hard-earned money inside a cigar box tucked behind a sack of Gold Medal baking flour on the bottom shelf of the storeroom at Aunt Kate's. Now the money was burned up, along with the building.

They returned later that morning to survey the wreckage with their daughters: Ruth who was fifteen and Beverly who was nine. The sky was overcast and the forecast called for snow later that evening. Al handed his younger daughter Beverly an empty coffee can and told her to sift through the ashes to see if she could

find any coins. The ashes were still warm and the acrid stench made her eyes smart as she felt about with her little fingers for the hard, round objects. When she found one—the coins were so blackened, she couldn't tell a penny from a dime—she dropped it into the can, where it made a hollow, plinking sound. It was a moment she would remember for the rest of her life: picking through the warm ashes for the meager gathering of coins that was all the money her family had left in the world.

Beverly Quinn was my mother. In 1996, I recorded her stories. I was particularly interested in her memories of her grandparents and her parents and what it was like for her growing up during the Great Depression. Seventy-four and a lifelong smoker, she was recovering from a bout of throat cancer. I had just received funding to produce and host a public radio series called *The Telling Takes Us Home, a Celebration of American Family Stories*. Part of the project required that I travel around the country recording people telling their family stories, not comprehensive family histories, but the anecdotal stories we like to tell at weddings and funerals and family reunions, or perhaps share with close friends and potential spouses. I had made my living as a traditional oral storyteller for more than twenty-five years, but this was my first public radio project and I hoped recording my mother would help me master the use of the high-end recorder and the digital editing software I would be using.

My mother was a delightful woman: witty, well read, and quick to laugh. She was also, like her father, a natural born storyteller, and I thought it likely that I had already heard most of her stories. I was wrong. For two hours and change she regaled me with one engaging tale after another, painting upon the canvas of my imagination a vivid and detailed picture of what life was like for my family in America during the first half of the twentieth century.

\* \* \*

Born in Paterson, New Jersey, in 1922, her father, Al Quinn, was an auto mechanic and part-time driving instructor. He owned his own garage and supplemented that income with a contract from the Ford Motor Company that paid him to pick up newly manufactured cars at the railroad station in Paterson and deliver them to the Ford dealerships in the area. Early in 1929, however, the number of cars being shipped dropped from dozens to just a few per shipment, and this spooked my grandfather. He had a feeling trouble was on the horizon for the automobile industry, so he sold his garage and convinced my grandmother to purchase a small roadside restaurant in northwestern New Jersey, an area of woods and small farms that was also blessed with numerous lakes popular with summer vacationers seeking to escape the heat and congestion of the cities. Aunt Kate's customers included hunters, road construction crews, timber hicks, and the occasional local stopping by for a cup of coffee and a newsy chat. Sadly, however, my grandparents' bright dream of financial success turned into a nightmare when the stock market collapsed that October and credit dried up across the country. Banks failed, businesses closed, and people were thrown out of work. It got so bad, in fact, that my grandfather resorted to selling illegal hard apple cider from a shack behind Aunt Kate's despite the fact that Prohibition was the law of the land.

Then came the fire in 1931 and that really knocked the props out from under my grandparents. Aunt Kate's was uninsured and they had no money to rebuild. But, as my mother liked to brag, her parents were survivors, the kind of people who were dogged in their belief that better times were bound to return. And sure enough, after several desperate months trying to find capital to fix and reopen Aunt Kate's, an old friend from Paterson offered to put up the money in exchange for becoming a silent partner and owning the mortgage. By the time I was born in 1950, Aunt Kate's had expanded into a highly successful restaurant and bar, the pride of Sussex County.

As for my mother, she coped with these worrisome times by escaping into the world of books. Behind their rented house grew an old evergreen whose boughs hung to the ground, like a giant's cloak, creating within a room carpeted with a thick layer of pine needles. It was in this magical hideaway that my mother spent her days reading the novels of Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, and the Brontë sisters, familiarizing herself with the attitudes and customs of the wealthy and powerful as well as the destitute and vulnerable. This love of reading assured her success in school. She graduated at the top of her class first at Stanhope Grammar School and then at the Benedictine Academy in Paterson. She went on to college, the first in her Irish/English immigrant family to do so. After a semester at Wilson College in Pennsylvania, she transferred to Georgian Court College in Lakewood, New Jersey. Originally the 155-acre estate of the son of the railroad robber baron Jay Gould, Georgian Court was the school where many elite Catholic families sent their daughters to be educated and made suitable for marriage. As a student at the Court, my mother served as associate editor of the college newspaper and president of the thespian society. She also became friends with a fellow student named Nancy McHugh, whose family owned several woolen mills in Pittsburgh. Nancy's maternal grandfather, Patrick McGraw, founded the business soon after emigrating from Ireland, and it had grown over the years to become one of the city's top manufacturing concerns. The McHughs lived in a large Tudor-style house with servants in an exclusive section of Pittsburgh called Shadyside. Nancy's older brother Edward studied at Notre Dame.

When the war came in 1941, Ed McHugh joined up, received a commission, and went off to fight with the First Army under Omar Bradley. As a lieutenant and later captain of infantry in an armored battalion, he served in France, Belgium, and Germany. He was wounded three times and received three Purple Hearts. He was awarded the Silver Star for exceptional bravery under

fire and the Bronze Star with three clusters. He returned home soon after VE day and promptly asked for my mother's hand in marriage. They settled down to a comfortable life on a small street called Shady Lane in a hilly wooded suburb of Pittsburgh called Fox Chapel.

In 1947, a year after their first child, Edward Jr., was born, my parents hired an elderly black woman to serve as a live-in cook and maid and to look after young Teddy. Her name was Helen. I was born two and a half years later in 1950, and Helen cared for me as well. This was at a time when formula feeding was in vogue among middle class families and neither Ted nor I were breast-fed. Instead, Helen prepared a bottle for us by heating it on the stove and testing the temperature by sprinkling a drop or two on her wrist. She then cradled us in the crook of her arm as we suckled and she sang to us as we drifted off to sleep. My mother shared in the warming of bottles and cradling as well. She too cooed to us, changed our diapers, and fretted when we were colicky. But as the wife of a successful businessman, she had a slew of other responsibilities. She was expected to attend charity balls and dances at the University Club, play in golf tournaments at the Field Club, and go on fishing trips to Canada with my father, who was an avid outdoorsman. What is more, she entertained a steady parade of friends, family, and business acquaintances at her home. It was a busy life, full of unfamiliar demands on my mother's time and energies, but a life free from the financial anxieties she had known all too well as a child.

In the fall of 1951, when I was a year and a half old, tragedy struck our family. Being the sole male heir, my father was in the process of taking over the family business, but soon after returning home from a trip to Boston to inspect and purchase a shipment of sheep skins from Scotland, he fell ill and was taken to the hospital. Two days later, he was pronounced dead from polio. My mother was four months pregnant with her third child, and she was overpowered by grief and terror that my brother and I had

been exposed to the highly infectious virus. My father was buried on the morning of his thirty-third birthday.

Four months later, my mother gave birth to my brother Patrick, but he was a month premature and only lived for forty-eight hours. This second blow, coming so close on the heels of the first, very nearly destroyed my mother, and she fled to the only safe haven she knew, her books, shutting herself away in her bedroom, reading and trying to make sense of what fate had decreed.

Fortunately for my brother and me, Helen was there. She continued to bathe and clothe us, to prepare our carrots and peas as we slapped our palms on the trays of our highchairs. She played referee when we fought over toys and tucked us in at night with a story or a song. There was deep sadness in our home, but there was also light and love.

Time, it is said, is the great healer, and, after years of wandering amongst the shadows, my mother took up the business of living again. In the aftermath of my father's death, the McGraw Wool Company mills were sold and the money put aside for my grandparents to live on. My mother received a life insurance annuity, but she knew that inflation would devour much of it over time. She had to find a job or another husband to support us.

My mother never remarried. In 1953 when I was three, she moved us from Pittsburgh to New Jersey so she could be near her parents and her sister Ruth. She begged Helen to come with us and Helen agreed. My mother sold the house on Shady Lane and we moved to Andover, a small village in Sussex County not far from Aunt Kate's. My mother found a job teaching at a Catholic elementary school and Helen took care of Ted and me. When I was five, we moved again, this time to a house on East 40<sup>th</sup> Street in Paterson, and soon afterward Helen left us.

Helen was mentioned rarely in the years that followed. There were no letters or visits. It is both sad and true that the Irish handle separation poorly. Our history is marked by the suffering

of too many forced partings. As for my family, I do not remember anyone ever explaining to me why Helen left or where she went. One day she was there at the kitchen table with a glass of milk and Oreos when I got home from school, and then she suddenly vanished without discussion or goodbyes.

I assume the social norms of the time informed our relationship with Helen: she was hired help, fairly paid and sincerely appreciated, but everyone was expected to get on with their lives.

“Do you have any regrets?” I asked mother after we finished our interview and I was packing up the recording gear. This wasn’t a question I had planned to ask, it just sort of popped out of my mouth, and it felt a bit awkward. Regrets are a funny business. There are the relatively small, unavoidable regrets that come with living, a phone call not returned or a hurtful remark made in the heat of an argument. We may feel their sting for a day or a week, but over time they recede into the mists of forgetfulness. Then there are those regrets that pierce us to the core, perhaps not immediately, but in the years that follow. Rather than diminish, these regrets grow in strength with the passage of time and come back to visit us, often in the lonely, still hours of the night. We might recall a smaller regret and be willing to share it with others, but the other kind of regret we prefer to keep locked up in some out-of-the-way chamber of our hearts. I know I do.

So what was I asking? My mother stubbed out her cigarette and I could see through the haze of blue tobacco smoke that her expression had grown uncharacteristically serious.

“I have two regrets,” she said. “One has to do with Joe Walls and the other is about Helen.”

This was far from any answer I might have predicted. Had she said she wished she had remarried or sent me to a military academy when I started to go off the rails in high school, I would have understood. Instead, her regrets centered on Joe Walls and Helen.

\* \* \*

Joe Walls was a black musician who worked at Aunt Kate's for many years. After Prohibition was repealed, my grandparents added a bar to the restaurant, and Joe played piano while my grandfather sang songs to entertain the patrons. My childhood recollection of Joe is of a quiet, kindly man with sorrowful eyes. In 1960, my grandparents decided to retire, and they sold Aunt Kate's and moved to Paterson to live with us in the house on East 40<sup>th</sup> Street.

"There was a lot of discussion about what would happen to Joe," my mother said, "because he was getting old and had no place to go. The new owners didn't really want him, but after some haggling they agreed to keep him on. But I never felt that was the right decision. Joe was devoted to my parents; they were all the family he had. I wanted him to move in with us so we could take care of him. But Mother and Daddy were against the idea. They said Joe would be fine. I was working full time and had you kids to take care of, so I didn't push it. A couple of months later Joe was killed when his cottage behind Aunt Kate's caught fire. I've always felt responsible for what happened."

My mother then talked about Helen.

"I remember Helen standing at the door when I got back from the hospital after your father passed away. She knew what had happened, and I was so desperate that I threw myself into her arms and said, 'Please Helen, don't leave me now.' And Helen said, 'I won't leave you, Mrs. McHugh, until you want me to.'

"Helen was true to her word. She remained with us even after we moved to Andover where she didn't know a soul. But after we moved to Paterson, she went to visit her family and didn't come back. I was kind of angry with her, to tell you the truth, because I really needed the help. But she sent a letter and then another saying she had things to take care of, and I stopped writing back. I didn't send her any money or go to her funeral or anything. Helen

had done a great deal for us, but I let my frustration get the better of me. That was wrong. I should have stayed in touch with her.”

“Do you know how she died? Or when?” I asked.

“No. I lost touch with her.”

I too loved Helen, and even though I have only a few distinct memories of her I have always had a feeling that she is nearby, like a wise and kind guardian angel, watching over me and giving me encouragement as I face my own challenges in life. But when I interviewed my mother, I never thought to ask for Helen’s last name or where she came from. I accepted as fact that Helen had passed away because she was already a grandmother when I was a child, and that was over fifty years ago. So my mother and I reminisced about Helen and that was that.

Three years later in 1999 my mother passed away. We knew the end was near, but the loss, when it came, was hard to bear. She was always interested in our projects and dreams. Perhaps because she had successfully weathered the storms of life, she was the one in the family everyone turned to for advice and to regain their confidence and optimism.

During 2000, I attended several juvenile justice conferences where I gave speeches on how popular culture and the entertainment industry influence young people. Soon after arriving home from one of these conferences, I was in the kitchen doing dishes or making a cup of tea, I can’t remember, but the radio was on. It was tuned to our local public radio station and the host of the program was interviewing an expert on brain development in young children. Given my interest in troubled young people, I found myself paying close attention to what the expert was saying, especially when he mentioned a condition called “sad brain syndrome.” He claimed that a young child develops sad brain syndrome when the mother falls into a prolonged state of melancholy during the first three years of the child’s life.

The developing neural pathways of the child's brain, in effect, "mirror" the emotional state of the mother, so that for the rest of the person's life, he or she will be prone to depression.

That moment was an epiphany for me. If the expert was correct, I reasoned, then the conditions for sad brain syndrome were present in my own life—I was only a year and half old when my father and brother died and my mother fell into a severe depression that lasted several years.

The interview continued but I was miles and years away. Was I temperamentally prone to depression? Did I have a sad brain? I remember my childhood as a happy time. The nuns at St. Therese's Elementary School taught me my lessons and I spent my afternoons and weekends playing with friends. We were the last generation of "free range" children, roaming the backyards and alleyways of our neighborhood without restraint, ours a world apart from the adults with their cigarettes and jokes and alien concerns—until, that is, dinner or darkness drove us inside.

My Uncle George was fond of taking eight-millimeter home movies, and whenever the camera falls on me I am smiling. So I guess I was a happy kid.

However, everything changed during my adolescence. It was as if an invisible hand threw a switch. I lost interest in school and turned my attention instead to folk music, which in the 1960s was finding a new audience among young urbanites like myself. I bought an acoustic guitar and spent my weekends trying to bluff my way past the bouncers at the clubs along Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village, so I could listen to the likes of Dave Van Ronk and Richie Havens. I did graduate high school, but just barely, and the family packed me off to a small Catholic college in New Hampshire hoping that the good fathers would turn this fatherless youth around.

I liked college and was drawn to the natural beauty of New England. Best of all, I was given the opportunity to host a weekly evening show on the college radio station, where I could share

the music I loved with my fellow students; artists like Blood Sweat and Tears, The Jefferson Airplane, and Bob Dylan. And I might have stayed, but the year was 1968 and the world beyond the college's walls was being turned upside down by political assassinations, antiwar rallies, and race riots. There were also outdoor rock concerts, communes with teepees, and roving troupes of actors and musicians, and my youthful, restless soul was powerless to resist these siren calls. So I packed my bags, bid the priests goodbye, and set out to hitchhike around the country, wintering first in Florida and then wandering back and forth across the Midwest. I eventually returned home to Paterson and worked through a summer selling ice cream from the back of a truck with the words Frosty Maid painted on the side. With the money I earned, I purchased a used VW van and drove it across the country to California where I learned how to make custom leather belts, purses, and sandals and sell them on the sidewalk in front of Cody's Bookstore on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley.

Six months later, I moved up the coast to Oregon and traded my van to a farmer for a vintage school bus he once used to transport raspberry pickers. I converted the bus into a traveling leather shop with an old-fashioned wood cook stove and living quarters in the rear. I then drove the bus across the country, stopping for a day or a week in college towns along the way to peddle my leather goods. After some months of this pleasant vagabonding, I wound up in the mountains of West Virginia where, with a loan from the Kanawha Union Bank, I purchased an eighty-acre farm with a house and three barns for six thousand dollars. I also took over the recently closed shoe repair shop in the nearby town of Glenville. The previous owner, an elderly Italian man named Camelo Nocida, sold me his shoe repair equipment and the business for no money down and taught me the trade for free. He became a second father to me.

Next I got into a tussle with the Monongahela Power Company over a twenty-five dollar deposit, and they turned off the electricity

to my farm. Thus, for the next four and a half years I lived without electricity, although I did have power in my shop in town.

Understandably, my mother was seriously distressed by what was happening to her youngest child. It must have seemed as if I had been taken over by aliens, like one of those movies that scared me when I was a youngster: *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, or maybe *Invaders from Mars*.

Yet despite this, my mother never lost faith in me. She was sure I would come around in the end and she even braved the lengthy drive to West Virginia through countless steep hairpin turns just to see how her son was faring.

My brother, by comparison, made his way successfully through college and went on to earn a law degree. All my first cousins graduated from college as well, and each found steady, well-paid jobs. Like my brother, each got married and settled down to the joys and challenges of a middle-class existence.

As for me, from age seventeen until my mid-twenties, I was a long-haired, self-styled mystic, perpetually broke, one of a small group of back-to-the-land urban refugees hiding out in the hollers of the Appalachian Mountains, growing organic vegetables and waiting for society to collapse under the weight of its mindless consumerism, war mongering, and disregard for the environment.

I learned to play the fiddle and the banjo. By luck or the decree of fate, the town of Glenville hosted one of the best old-time music festivals in the country. It took place in June and young folk musicians from all over the country traveled to Glenville to learn the old tunes from a handful of elderly men and women who had received their music, not from the radio or recordings, but from their mothers and fathers, their uncles and aunts. It was authentic American roots music, simple and unadorned, but imbued with a unique and potent mythical energy that reached back to the days when Europeans first made their way up into those ancient, trackless mountains.

I have many fond memories of that period in my life in West Virginia. But there were bad times, too: a pair of romantic disasters, the suicide of a friend and fellow back-to-the-lander, and the tragic murder of another friend. I was also separated from two children I dearly loved.

I have never been suicidal, which is perhaps interesting given my candidacy for having a sad brain, but those stretches of pain, confusion, and self-doubt shook me to my very core and helped me see what was truly important in life. One of those things was traditional music because it gave me the strength and joy to persevere. I was so taken with the music, in fact, that I eventually sold my farm and moved to Scotland, so I could study the fiddle music of the Highlands, while working at a home for mentally disabled adults.

After a time my mother was diagnosed with cervical cancer and I returned to the United States to be near her as she underwent months of treatment until she was cured.

So these were my thoughts more or less that day in 2000 after listening to the brain development expert on the radio. And all mixed up with these reflections was the reality of Helen and the possibility that, during those early, formative years when my mother was emotionally unavailable, Helen had intervened to give me the psychological and spiritual capacity to handle whatever challenges fate threw my way. Helen had, in other words, saved me from having a sad brain. I used the word “possibility,” because I understood very little about the mind, the brain, and the formation of neural pathways in response to cues from one’s caregivers.

All the same, a plan took shape in my mind. I would try to find Helen’s family and thank them for everything that Helen did for my family and me. During the interview, my mother mentioned that Helen raised children of her own before coming to work for us. Where were they now, I wondered? Where were the grandchildren, the nephews and nieces? Would it be possible

to locate them? I imagined myself knocking on their door one day and saying something like: “Hi, I’m Joe McHugh. You don’t know me, but your grandmother Helen saved my life.”

How would they respond? Would they welcome me into their home? Would they tell me stories about Helen, show me pictures of her?

I had only one photograph of Helen. It was glued to a page inside my baby book and showed Helen in a starched white uniform sitting on a couch watching me play with toy cowboys and Indians that are spread out on a coffee table. Underneath, written in my mother’s hand, is “Christmas 1951,” which means I am not quite a year old and my father is still with us. (On the next page under the headings for First discovered his own hands, First sat up, and First dressed alone, my mother wrote, “His nickname, given by Helen, is ‘Pretty Eyed Baby.’”)

There was, however, a problem with my plan. I never thought to ask my mother for Helen’s surname, or where she came from. She had always been just “Helen.”

I called my brother on the phone later that evening and asked him if he knew Helen’s last name.

“No,” he said. “We just called her Helen. Why do you ask?”

I told him about sad brain syndrome and explained that I wanted to find Helen’s family.

“Do you know if she was from Pittsburgh?”

“I don’t think so. She might have come from Maryland, but I don’t know why I think that.”

“I thought I heard she was from South Carolina,” I said.

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Would anyone else in the family know her last name?”

“Try Aunt Nancy. She’ll know if anyone does.”

My father’s sister lives in an upscale retirement community just north of Chicago. Her husband died some years ago, and she is the last of her generation in the family. I got Aunt Nancy on the telephone.

“Aunt Nancy, do you remember Helen who used to work for us in Pittsburgh?”

“Oh yes, I remember her.”

“Do you know her last name?”

She thought for a moment:

“No, I don’t. We had a black woman who worked for us for years. Her name was Lucille.”

“Was Helen from Pittsburgh?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think my parents used an agency to hire her?”

“I don’t think so. It was done mostly through friends. They knew someone who knew someone. I don’t remember how we got Lucille, but I’m sure that’s how we found her.”

“What happened to Lucille?” I realized Aunt Nancy had not mentioned Lucille’s last name either. When Ted and I visited our grandparents in Pittsburgh as children an elderly white lady would come to the house on Devonshire Street to look after us when the adults went out. Her name was Mrs. Kuhns and she sat quietly in the living room reading a book, her hair tied back in a tight bun, while we watched TV upstairs or tore around the basement on tricycles. We always addressed her as “Mrs. Kuhns.” Black servants, on the other hand, were just called “Helen” or “Lucille.”

“We gave Lucille a pension after the children were grown and she was too old to cook and clean,” Aunt Nancy said. “But I can’t tell you anything about Helen.”

I was no more successful in my conversations with my cousins Mike and Janna, two of Aunt Ruth’s children. Mike is seven years older than me, and he remembered Helen quite well because he and Janna often stayed at our house in Andover. Janna, three years my senior, also remembered Helen, but neither cousin could shed light on Helen’s identity or place of origin.

So I reluctantly gave up the idea of finding Helen’s family and turned my attention to other projects, and the years passed.

Then late one night in 2008, my cousin Chris, the youngest of Aunt Ruth's three children, called me on the telephone from his home in Connecticut. He had come across a box of letters among his late mother's belongings. Many of the letters were written by my mother and mailed to Ruth or my grandmother, Nanny. Chris picked a letter out of the bundle at random and read it to me over the phone. We had never discussed my desire to find Helen's family because he was too young to have remembered her. I am also quite sure Mike and Janna never mentioned it to him, nor did my brother.

The letter began with news about a snowstorm in Pittsburgh and a party my mother attended. Then my cousin read this paragraph:

*“On Sunday Helen got a message that her grandson burned to death down in Maryland. He was only nineteen and had a child himself under a year old. She left immediately for home and I got a message later that he burned in her house, so she is staying down there for a week to ten days to collect her insurance.”*

I was stunned and elated at the same time. I asked if there was an envelope with the letter and he said there was. Could he make out the postmark?

“It's faded,” he said. “It's either April 25th or the 28th, 1952. It's hard to tell.”

My thoughts raced. Would it be possible to find Helen's family with just this scrap of information? I still did not know her last name, and, if the young man who died in the fire was her daughter's son, then he would have had a different last name. There was, however, one thing in my favor: Maryland is a small state.

The next morning I spoke with an archivist at the Maryland State Archive, and he told me I had too little information for them to be of any help. He suggested I consult newspapers from 1952 to see if I could find an obituary or a news article

about the house fire that might lead me to Helen's family. He recommended I visit the Library of Congress because the library had microfiche copies of all the Maryland newspapers.

Then a friend who is a college professor suggested I hire an historian in Washington, DC, to conduct the initial research. An academic, he assured me, would have the proper training, and, if he or she came up empty-handed, I would have saved myself the cost of the trip and a great deal of time. Failure was, I had to admit, a real possibility given the subject of my inquiry—a poor, young black man who met his end in some unknown town in Maryland in 1952. All the same, I was loath to outsource the work. As a boy I relished the Hardy Boys detective novels, and now fate had handed me a real mystery, and it was up to me to solve it.

However, I couldn't do anything for several months because I had two audio projects to complete, and as the weeks passed, a desire grew within me to expand the scope of my quest. I wanted very much to find Helen's family, if that was possible, but I also wanted to learn more about my mother's early life, to walk in her footsteps and experience the world, if only slightly, as she did. She had provided me with a wealth of stories the day I interviewed her, which taken together constituted a kind of map. I would begin my journey by visiting Hell's Kitchen in New York City, the rough and tumble neighborhood where my maternal grandfather was born and raised. Then I would visit Paterson, where my mother and grandmother were born, and Sussex County where my mother fell in love with books and picked through the warm ashes to find blackened coins. From there, I would travel to Georgian Court, now a university, and, if possible, talk to some of the elderly nuns who still live on the campus. It was a long shot, but perhaps a nun would remember my mother. I would then head south to Washington, D.C., to see what I could learn at the Library of Congress.

I also wanted to visit Pittsburgh and learn about my father's life before it was cut short by polio. I wanted to visit Shady Lane, the street we lived on in Fox Chapel, and the Field Club where

my father and paternal grandfather played golf and hobnobbed with the upper crust of Pittsburgh society. I also wished to see if the woolen mills were still standing and talk to some of the descendants of the men and women who once worked in the mills and whose sweat and toil enabled an Irish immigrant family to succeed in America.

I knew remarkably little about the Pittsburgh side of my family, even though we visited my grandparents in that smoke-shrouded city at least twice a year up through my teenage years. But no one ever told me stories about my father or the McGraw Wool Company. Perhaps those memories were too painful to share, even decades later.

Of one thing I was sure; I wanted more than raw information: birth certificates, census records, data of that sort. I hungered for the stories that would give meaning to the information, to gather and weave the disparate narrative threads from my family's past into a cloth from which I might make a garment of understanding, like my namesake's coat of many colors. What was it all about, the struggle and yearning, the grand dreams and bitter disappointments? How did my mother and Helen fit into all of it?

I once read that the primary purpose of a legacy is to provide the person who receives it the means to properly say goodbye. This sounds simple, saying goodbye, but of course it seldom is. Sometimes we need to take time off from work to grieve, to visit old haunts, or to patch up a disagreement with a sibling. We might spread ashes on a mountaintop or the surface of a cherished lake. One way or another, our task is to bring the universe back into balance so that each ending leads to a new beginning. A legacy can give us the time and space we need for reflection and the rituals of leave-taking and commemoration. And there was the unfinished business of my mother's regret regarding Helen. With luck, I might be able to complete that circle for her as well.

I decided to trust my intuition and follow the story both physically and psychologically from beginning to end, like reading a novel, no cheating by jumping to the last pages to see if it all works out. Maybe the end needs to be unresolved, a cautionary tale about how culture, class, and race will separate us if we allow it.

But my heart told me that I would find Helen. And not just her descendants, but in some essential way, I would find her, my other mother.

I also hoped I would learn something about myself and how families—perplexing and unpredictable as they often are—can serve as crucibles in which our personalities and very souls are fashioned. I owe these two remarkable women, these two mothers, a great debt. The journey and the writing of this book are but partial payment.

Joe McHugh, 2009, Olympia, Washington