# Grandma's Grocery Store

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I grew up above a grocery store. From the time I was five until I turned fourteen in 1964, I lived with my family in the apartment upstairs from Goldberg's Market. The store was my playground; the employees and customers were my friends.

Goldberg's, at the corner of 19th and Washington Avenue in Lorain, Ohio, was a neighborhood fixture for nearly four decades, serving a blue collar mix of immigrants from Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Russia and Lithuania, their children and grandchildren. They were Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Orthodox, Methodist, Presbyterian. A melting pot, yet my family and I weren't quite melted in. We were the only Jews in our part of town.

Our family did not shop for groceries. Mom sent me or one of my brothers downstairs when she needed a half gallon of milk, a carton of eggs, a head of lettuce, a box of frozen succotash. I did not actually walk through the automatic doors of a supermarket and pay for groceries until we moved into a real house two long miles away from the store.

Before she opened the store in the morning, Grandma slipped on a handmade cotton apron the color of fresh green beans and tied it snugly behind her waist. At the end of the day, she removed it, folded it into a square, and placed it on the store counter. When I helped out in the store, I wore a smaller version of the same apron that she had sewn for me. I felt very important. A business woman.

My father practiced law downtown in the Broadway Building, less than a mile from polluted Lake Erie, but he still worked in the store on Saturday after the Sabbath ended, on Sunday mornings, and on some weekday evenings. "If someone comes in at closing time, you don't rush them," he said. "You still give them good service." The store officially closed at 7:00 PM, and he lobbied hard to get my grandma to lock the door, climb upstairs, and soak her sore feet in Epsom Salts and hot water. Grandma believed in hard work. I don't know why she

worked seven days a week when she no longer had six children to support. I guess she didn't know how to stop.

Grandma stood behind the black, wooden check-out counter wearing stiff, black leather shoes with black shoe laces and chunky, black heels. Old lady shoes. She hobbled around, legs striped with purple varicose veins, feet misshapen by large bunions. I wondered if my legs would turn swollen and purple if I stood on my feet all day. Grandma wore her salt and pepper hair wrapped in a circle, like a cinnamon roll, the strands held together with black wire and brown plastic hair pins. She worked in the store until two weeks before she died. She was seventy-four. An old seventy-four.

After school, after dancing to *America Bandstand* on TV, I ran downstairs, stood next to Grandma and watched her press the keys on the clanging, cash register, count change, and write down the amount owed for groceries in credit books, her numbers wiggly and foreign, if a customer had no money until pay day. One year, when U.S. Steel went on strike, she let people go four months before they paid. I could tell when the strike was over, because the skies turned orange again with smoke, and the air smelled like rotten eggs. The smell of prosperity in Lorain.

I handed Grandma bunches of carrots, Hostess Twinkies, packages of freshly-ground hamburger meat, bags of flour, packs of Kool menthol cigarettes, and she packed them in brown paper bags. "The heavy items on the bottom," she told me. "The perishables on top. *Fershtay*?" she'd ask in Yiddish. "Understand?"

Grandma knew all the customers, the names of their kids, where they worked—usually the steel mill or Ford or Thew Shovel—when they got paid, whose mother was in the hospital, who drank too much. She spoke to them in her broken English, or in Polish or Russian or Lithuanian—she was fluent in all three and could count to twenty in Italian.

She greeted women in cotton housedresses patterned with tiny flowers. Men in khaki or navy or grey work shirts, their names sewn on the pockets. Little girls in crisp, white communion dresses or flowering Easter bonnets on their way home from church. Little boys with scuffed knees and cheeks streaked with bicycle grease.

I remember Miss Dorothy Smith, a school teacher whose doorknob I graced with a surprise May Day basket. Mrs. Domanski from across the street, whose daughter Margie babysat for me and told me about her dates. Ginger Bills, pretty and twenty-eight or twenty-nine,

married—I couldn't understand why—to a fat man with pudgy cheeks. I remember Mrs. McIntyre, whose kids wore our secondhand clothes. Mrs. Czarny, from next door, who pulled out my first loose tooth so I felt no pain at all and presented it to me in a white handkerchief. Mr. Kovach, always smiling, zooming in and out of the store like a fire engine. Mrs. Odieski, tiny and ancient, accompanied by her Pekinese dog, whose Polish name sounded like Poop-Ek. Mrs. De Tillio, her thinning, black, curly hair pulled back with a barrette, who told my grandma with great pride after John F. Kennedy was elected president, "We really needed to win this one. Finally, a Catholic president." I wondered if we'd ever elect a Jewish president. Grandma tossed a few Hershey bars or a pint of chocolate ice cream in their brown paper grocery bags, free of charge. She'd pass out cookies to the kids—ginger snaps or vanilla wafers or fig bars. One of the kids—was it Patty Zelinski?—called her "Mrs. Cookieberg."

When I was seven or eight, a new family moved into a two-story, rundown, white duplex a half block down Washington Avenue. They were hillbillies, some of the neighbors said—a term that my family did not use—people from the hills of West Virginia who had relocated to Lorain, probably to find work. They spoke with a twang and sounded uneducated. Mr. and Mrs. Woodward yelled and screamed and fought with each other. Did a neighbor once call the police? I played with their daughter Vivian sometimes, but her younger brother Tommy kept swearing, and he smelled like he didn't take a bath. I stopped playing with her. Mr. and Mrs. Woodward dropped in the store for cigarettes on Fridays on their way to Campana's Bar across the street. I think my mother was worried that the children were left at home alone.

I had never seen the inside of a bar and longed to peak into Campana's. But I was afraid. Lying awake at night in the double bed I shared with my grandma, I listened to the alien sounds emanating from the bar—high-pitched laughter, guttural growling, slurred speech, shouted dialogues, bottles breaking. Did the men swear in Italian and get into fights? Did they play poker and lose lots of money like the cowboys on *Maverick?* Did they go home drunk and beat their wives? Jewish men, my mother told me, don't beat their wives. My father did not go to bars. My father never drank beer. Only a ritual shot glass of Manischewitz wine on Friday nights and Saturdays for the Sabbath, and that only when reciting a blessing. Good men, I was sure, did not visit bars or drink beer. And certainly not women. But I still wanted to know what happened in Campana's.

Mr. Jarvis, who worked for the railroad, visited the store at least once a week and left a trail of cigarette ashes on the floor. He wore a blue-and-white-striped cap above his red-rimmed eyes and bulbous, red-veined nose. He'd bend down and shake my hand, reaking of whisky, or what I imagined was whisky—a sour, brown smell. A smell my father did not have. My mother said that Mr. Jarvis was one of Campana's best customers.

Was it Grandma who taught me how to select produce? I learned to thump a cantaloupe to check for ripeness, examine the color of tomatoes and peaches, feel the weight of a head of lettuce. And I memorized the rules for food freshness. Always check the expiration date on cottage cheese. Never eat food from a dented can. Throw out chicken if it smells funny. In my memory, I see Grandma checking the produce first thing in the morning. She removed lettuce leaves with brown or soggy edges, trimmed scraggly stalks of celery, threw away overripe bananas and tomatoes with black spots, and arranged apples and peaches and plums in neat rows. "*Zees*," she'd tell me. "Sweet." Only then would she unlock the door and welcome customers.

I developed brand awareness by roaming the aisles of the store. I checked the inventory to see if my favorite items were in stock. Chocolate covered graham crackers in plastic see-through boxes, sixteen for forty-nine cents, not a dollar and "gourmet" like in Starbuck's today. Oreo cookies that I dunked in milk to achieve a sublime sogginess. Yellow and pink Nabisco wafer cookies held together with sweet, white filling. I combed the comic book racks and picked out *Archies, Katy Keenes, Supermans* and *Mary Worths* to take upstairs to read and bring back later. I counted jars of Gerber's baby-strained peaches that I still liked to eat even though I was seven. I removed shiny, silver and blue, five-cent foil bags of Arrow potato chips from metal clips, smashed the contents and ate the teeny pieces very, very slowly, savoring the salt and grease during movies at the Tivoli and Palace and Ohio theatres.

I wondered why all the white, sugary curlicues on top of Hostess chocolate cupcakes with the cream-filled centers weren't identical. Before taking a package upstairs for dessert, I studied all the cupcakes and chose the package with the most uniform, unbroken white design. Early indications of a tendency toward the obsessive-compulsive.

My jobs at the store included sweeping the wood floors and rubber runner by the entrance, dusting the shelves with a lamb's wool rag, and stamping prices on boxes and cans and

jar tops when new merchandise arrived—a case of Bumble Bee Tuna or Alpo dog food, bottles of Heinz ketchup, boxes of Fab detergent. Grandma inked the stamper and pushed the price digits into place until I learned to manipulate the rubber wheels myself, remembering to leave blank spaces where numbers didn't belong.

Blank, blank, one, zero, cent sign—for canned sardines.

Blank, blank, two, nine, cent sign—for a jar of Jif peanut butter.

Stamping required skill and style. I struggled to position the stamper at the ideal angle and press down with precise speed and force so the numbers printed clearly and sharply. Often, they'd smear or only partly show, so I'd stamp the price a second time. In all my years stamping, I never achieved Grandma's level of greatness. Even with arthritic hands, it seemed like she'd plow through an entire case of tuna in seconds, like a Ford assembly line worker, each price mark dark and distinct. I should have learned from this exercise that perfection is rare and should not be expected. But I didn't.

Behind the counter, out of the reach of Bobby Buckosh and David Morton and other bad kids who might steal, were boxes of Milky Ways, Snicker Bars, Hershey Bars, Mars Bars; brown-and-white-paper-wrapped, chewy Tootsie Rolls; candy dots in neon pink, turquoise and lime stuck on paper and sold for a penny a strip; Wrigley's spearmint gum, peppermint gum, Juicy Fruit gum; Bazooka bubble gum with folded comics inside; baseball cards wrapped with flat, pink, rectangular gum. I didn't care about the gum, but hoped to snag the cards of my favorite Cleveland Indian players—Herb Score, Woody Held, Tito Francona, and dreamy Rocky Colavito on whom I had a nine-year-old's crush. I definitely had an edge over the other kids on the block who had to pay for their baseball cards.

When I worked, Grandma paid me in gum and candy. Nestle's bars—milk chocolate in the red and white wrapper, almond in the blue and white wrapper—were my favorites. If we were out of Nestle's, I'd settle for Hershey's, but I strongly preferred the milkier, lighter Nestle's chocolate. I had no idea that my grandma actually controlled the arrival of candy bars by placing orders. I thought their appearance was some random act of benevolence on the part of a candy supplier.

At Christmas time, the front windows of the store were sprayed with fake snow and

adorned with a "Season's Greetings" sign. Strings of lights, boxes of tinsel, and red and blue and green ornaments lined the window, along with gift items—maybe Betsy McCall and Tiny Tears dolls, Tonka toy trucks, Whitman Sampler boxes of candy, inexpensive wristwatches, including an Alice in Wonderland watch with a powder blue leather band that I coveted—in case the neighbors chose to shop for Christmas gifts at Goldberg's. I shook the boxes of tinsel and held the ornaments up to the light, imagining that I was decorating a tree. My family did not celebrate Christmas and considered it sacrilege for a Jewish family to put up a "Chanukah bush."

Even though we were Jewish, the customers sent us Christmas cards. I opened the envelopes and pulled out cards decorated with glittery, white snow; cards with wise men staring at gold stars; cards with Santas in sleighs. I saved the prettiest ones. Some of the cards showed Jesus and crosses which made me feel funny and reminded me that the Jews might have killed him.

I felt proud to be Jewish, but longed to be more like the other kids in the neighborhood, especially during Christmas. Sometimes, I felt sorry for myself. No waiting for Santa. No scotch pine or shiny, aluminum tree surrounded by gifts. No stocking to hang at the fireplace. But we did receive a three-layer box of cookies from Mrs. Scuilli who lived down the alley on 20th Street: chocolate chip, almond, rum balls, chewy fudge, powdered-sugar-dusted snowflakes, and sugar cookies shaped like bells and candles, glazed with butter cream frosting. Even though Christmas was not *our* holiday, we were allowed to eat the cookies.

In the back portion of the store, Mike the butcher was king for twenty-five years. His face, with clefted chin, serious eyes, and a small wart in the middle of his forehead, was as familiar to me as those of my three uncles who lived in Lorain. During baseball season his radio played Cleveland Indians games and he cheered when "the tribe" scored. Mike taught me how to say "Hello, how are you?" in Polish and babysat me, making sure I didn't impale myself on any of his sharp knives or lose a finger in his meat grinder.

Mike's domain smelled of raw meat, blood, sawdust, and Italian salami. In the center sat a butcher block, heavy wood on four sturdy legs, where Mike severed and chopped and pounded. To keep me occupied, Mike let me clean off the butcher block by scrubbing it with a tough wire brush. I'd dig the brush into the block's surface using both my small hands, dislodging ground-in bits of meat and smoothing over blood spots, until a new, clean, dry patina emerged. Mike

brushed up the remnants and tossed them in a garbage can.

When trucks delivered meat to the store, Mike lifted sides of beef high above his head with the strength of Superman and hung them on steel hooks that looked like Captain Hook's fake hand in *Peter Pan.* The beef, red and mottled with sinews and strips of fat, smelled bloody and alive. Was it the remains of Elsie the cow from Borden's commercials? Mike hacked the meat into chops, filets and ribs, all the while chain-smoking Lucky Strike unfiltered cigarettes, ashes falling into the sawdust beneath his feet. He turned the leftover portions into ground beef that spiraled wormlike from the noisy grinder. His apron, a starched, bleached white when he donned it the morning, turned into a canvas of blood splatters, burger bits, fat smears, and brown juice by the end of the day—the art of the butcher.

Mike tended to his customers from behind a refrigerated showcase filled with whole chickens, t-bone steaks, rolled roasts, mounds of ground beef, plump pork chops and lamb chops, slabs of bacon, strings of wieners, snakes of sausage, and piles of lunch meats—bologna, salami, spiced ham, boiled ham, chopped ham and pickled pimento loaf. My family kept kosher, so all the meat from the store—the juiciest cuts of steak, chickens slaughtered without the benefit of rabbinical supervision, and pork products of all kinds were, as my mother said, *verboten*, forbidden. I didn't understand why we could sell *verboten* meat but not eat it.

But Mike's bologna had touched my kosher, little lips, and swirled around my tongue, and slid, cool and garlicky, down my throat. *Traife*, non-kosher bologna. Oscar Mayer or Swift. Not all beef. Not high quality from Guserov's Kosher Meat Market. Run-of-the-mill, bottom-of-the-line, pork by-product bologna. I considered it a delicacy.

I watched Mike cut smooth, pink rolls of bologna into thin, round slices—a half pound, a full pound, two pounds—for Mrs. Vazzano and Mr. Toth and Mrs. Hadkey. I fought an urge to grab a handful and stuff it in my mouth. I knew the rules. I was violating family law and Jewish law. Mike would get into serious trouble if my parents found out. Maybe even get fired. Something bad would happen to me if I ate it. Trichinosis. A tapeworm. Or a zig-zag flash of white lightning would strike me—only me—where I stood on the sawdust-covered floor, behind the meat counter of my grandma's grocery store. I didn't care. I begged Mike to sneak me a slice. Just one slice. Pleeeese. No one had to know. I was willing to take my chances for that cool, smoky, *traife* taste of bologna with pork. Every once in a while I was lucky. Mike looked around to make sure no one was watching, put his pointer finger to his lips, whispered "Shhhh"

and handed me a slice.

Last year, at the advanced age of fifty-four, I found out that my parents knew about my bologna arrangement all along. Mike must have told.

The *back* back room, behind the back room, behind the butcher shop, was home to The Cooler. I'd follow Mike when he carried meat inside for storage. I examined the hind ends of cows up close. Counted the freshly cut chops in piles on shelves. Sniffed at the rolls of salami. Surveyed the one-pound packages of sliced bacon, the cases of milk and cardboard boxes of margarine. "The cooler is not a toy," my mother said. "You could freeze to death in there." I snuck in anyway. At eight, I found the danger scary but thrilling, like riding a roller coaster. It took two hands and all my might to open the cooler door myself. I'd inch in, slice through the tendrils of vapor with my arms, breathe in the air and exhale clouds of chilly smoke. I hoped I'd get a watch for my birthday so I could time myself and see how long I might survive in the cooler before my teeth chattered, before my fingers and toes covered with chipped, pink nail polish turned blue, before my legs below my red Bermuda shorts were covered with goose pimples, before I froze to death.

The neighborhood supplied a continuous series of stock boys for the store. First the Reber brothers—Larry, Dennis, and Keith, each one lasting until his sophomore year of high school and then moving on. Then the Kovach boys—Francis and Sal. Finally, John Marincin, blond with piercing blue eyes, quiet and sullen, a dead ringer for a young Paul Newman. I had a huge crush on John, but he was thirteen, three years older than me, and showed absolutely no interest.

I considered the stock boys my playmates. I followed them through the aisles, engaged them in conversation and, most likely, annoyed the hell out of them. But I was a Goldberg. They tolerated me.

Most of the boys were hard workers, but even I could tell that one of them—I'll call him Junior—was lazy. But he and I had an arrangement. He'd perform tricks with me—lift and twirl me in the air, turn me upside down, balance my feet on his knees—if I played "Operation" with him. These games occurred in the back room, behind Mike's area, next to my Mom's washer and drier, out of sight. I was just six or seven and all I remember about "Operation" is Junior pulling my underpants below my belly button, sometimes tickling me, and acting out pretend medical procedures. When I think about this now, I find it especially odd, because Junior's sister was one

of my best friends in elementary school. When I saw her at my twenty-fifth year high school class reunion, I considered telling her about her brother's game. But Junior was dead by then and I didn't see any point in tampering with his memory.

The summer I turned fourteen, my family—Grandma included—moved from the apartment above the store to a modern, red brick, ranch home on a corner lot. Dad still drove Grandma to the store every day, even though he thought she should retire. I'd already cut way back on the time I spent there; Admiral King High School brought more homework, football and basketball games, marching band, and a raging preoccupation with boys. I still visited with Mike and stood behind the counter to help out Grandma when I wasn't busy, but my playground had grown far wider than the store. Three months later, my grandma's health took a sudden turn for the worst: first pneumonia, then phlebitis, then her heart ceased to do its demanding job. In a matter of weeks, she turned pasty white, her breathing grew labored, and she died. I wonder if she felt wrenched away from her neighborhood, her roots. My father sold the store to Mr. Froman, the new kosher butcher, who needed more space.

Now, when I go back home to visit, I often drive down Washington Avenue, past the corner where I grew up. Grandma's grocery store isn't a grocery, nor the kosher butcher shop that followed, but a Hispanic church. Campana's Bar is now empty office space. The Broadway Building where my father practiced law is the Renaissance Hotel. My high school class held our thirty-year reunion there. I shop in supermarkets mostly, like everyone else. But none of them, with their computerized checkout, antipasto bars and bins of Colombian coffee beans, holds the fascination and wonder of the three aisles of Grandma's store and the neighbors who shopped there.

The voices of the store still call to me: Mrs. DeTillio, Mr. Jarvis, Junior, Mike the butcher, and, most of all, Grandma.