

‘WHERE WE GOIN’?’

The voice belonged to my first fare of the afternoon. I’d picked him up at one of those big nothing office buildings on Wilshire, just on the edge of Westwood. A fast ride, two miles, to another faceless office building in Century City. I looked him over in my rearview. The guy was around fifty. Bad tan suit. Bulky – around two sixty and, like me, not happy about all the fleshiness he was carrying around with him. A sweaty guy – and not just because the mercury was punching three figures with killer humidity.

‘I asked you: where we goin’?’

His tone was low-level aggressive, a *time-is-money* type who believes that the loudest voice in the room wins.

‘We’re going to the address you gave me,’ I said, thinking: one of the rules of this game is that you frequently pick up people who hate the lives they’re living.

‘But surely you fucking well know that going east on Wilshire at this time on a Friday –’

‘According to my GPS Wilshire Boulevard was supposed to be clear right up to West Pico,’ I said, wondering if an accident had just leapt into our path. ‘Let me see if the GPS is showing me another way out of this.’

‘Fuck your GPS. Don’t you know the city? Have you never read a fucking map? Or did you just recently show up in this town and land this loser job?’

My instinct was to tell Mr Nasty to go have sex with himself. I knew that making such a statement might result in an email against me ... and one which could end my only possible source of income right now. So I sucked down my fury and maintained a polite conversational tone. Saying:

‘I was actually born here, sir. A true Angeleno. I’ve spent much of my life stuck in traffic.’

‘But you still steered us into some serious shithole constipation ...’

‘The reason why there has been this sudden build-up of traffic –’

‘– is because you don’t know how to do your job and because, like every loser behind the wheel, you only listen to where your fucking GPS tells you to go.’

Silence. I found myself tensing after that second ‘loser’ slap across the face; his immediate sense of superiority being his way of telling me: *I may be nowhere in this world, but I am at least three ladder rungs higher from nowhere than you.*

Count to ten.

It’s a strategy I use every day – to keep my own quiet rage in check as I do a job that I don’t want to be doing.

But as my career options have flatlined – and the only other work possibilities are minimum-wage nightmares (like stacking shelves at Walmart or doing an eight-hour buried-alive shift in an Amazon warehouse) – sitting behind the wheel of this car still strikes me as less of a mind-fuck option. Even with a guy like this one in the back seat.

‘Now as you will see on the right, sir, the reason we’ve run into such traffic is because that Triumph chopper went under the wheels of that Jeep Cherokee ... and the driver of the bike looks kind of dead to me.’

Big Boy looked up from his phone and stared out at the body beneath those Detroit-made wheels. He finally said:

‘He’s not getting to wherever he was going.’

‘Time is never on our side,’ I said.

‘So now you’re not just an Uber sad sack, but a philosopher.’

‘What kind of work do you do?’

‘What business is that of yours?’

‘Just making conversation,’ I said.

‘Say I don’t want conversation?’

Silence again. We were crawling by the scene of the crime. Cops everywhere. Two ambulance guys covering the dead biker with a sheet while a third colleague came out with a fold-up metal stretcher. Meanwhile the driver

of that new-model Cherokee – I figured him around twenty, all skinny and tanned with Daddy money behind him – had just finished blowing into the breathalyser held for him by a woman cop. The kid looked like he knew that his future was cooked.

‘Sales,’ the big guy said. ‘I’m in sales.’

Just as I figured.

‘What kind of sales?’

‘Fiber optics.’

‘No kidding,’ I said.

‘No kidding what?’

‘You into optical transport? Baseband video?’

‘How do you know that shit?’

‘Ever heard of Auerbach?’

‘They’re our competitors,’ the guy said, aggression gone from his voice. ‘You know them?’

‘Yeah, I knew them ... for twenty-seven years. Regional sales director for SoCal. Petrochemical production and distribution was my game. Flames sensors. Transducers and transmitters. Custom-engineered electro thermocouples.’

‘That’s fucking weird. ’Cause I cover just about the same territory – only my beat is Nevada, Idaho, Wyoming, Montana.’

‘Who with?’

‘Crandall Industries.’

‘Yeah, you were chasing the same client base as us.’

‘Twenty-seven years you tell me?’ he asked.

‘Twenty-seven years.’

‘Then what happened?’

‘A downturn,’ I said. ‘A bad streak. Three big strikeouts.’

‘And they just let you go?’

I glanced in the rearview. Saw the way that his lips were all scrunched up. I wanted to ask: *is the reason you play the obnoxious shithead because, like me seventeen months ago, you too are having a losing streak?* But I have a ‘never step out of line’ face that I show to the world; a face that parents and priests forced me to wear from a young age. I still wear it for all public transactions. Especially those that take place in my seven-year-old cream-colored Prius. In Uber World once a complaint is made against you then you are in the wrong. Which means: when dark thoughts show up at a moment like this I’ve to keep them locked down inside my throat. Instead saying: ‘Yeah, they just let me go.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said.

Well, how about that? A moment of shared humanity. A moment that arose not from any kind of actual compassion, but his own fear that he too might end up behind the wheel like me.

The traffic began to move.

‘You gonna get me there on time?’ he asked.

‘According to the GPS ... two minutes before your appointment.’

‘You said four minutes before.’

‘Things change,’ I said.

‘Tell me about it.’

He said nothing during those final minutes in my back seat. When he got out he also said nothing. When I later looked back on my app to see if the guy had tipped me ... zilch, zip.

A rule of thumb in my game:

Guys who hate their lives never tip.

PICKUP NUMBER TWO of the afternoon was all talk. She got into the car in mid-conversation. Her telephone spiel was super-clipped, super-fast. An exchange finished within the ten seconds it took her to close the passenger door and me to pull out into traffic. Machine-gun talk: 'We don't make a habit of losing.' End of call. She hit another number. On she went: 'We don't got a gun to our head ... you do.'

A check in the rearview. The talker was in her mid-forties. With a hard face. Jet-black hair with gray streaks. No warmth in the immediate vicinity. Fatigued, disappointed by so much – but still up for a fight. And for saying things like '*Don't got*'.

My dad talked that way. 'I don't got the time for this, sonny boy.' Never the name he gave me: Brendan. Never the 'Brennie' that my mom called me. Sonny boy. That was Dad. Always keeping me at an emotional distance. Always letting me know: *I ain't there*.

Dad. No formal education ... but he prided himself on reading the *LA Times* cover to cover every day. 'Don't got the smarts to do Electrical Engineering like sonny boy here.' But Dad still had smarts – even if his grammar was

a little left field from time to time. The woman in my back seat also had smarts and a far higher degree of education than my father. But the ‘don’t got’ was a hint of origins as no-frills and basic as my own. We’ve all got our way of making it through the day. Hers was ‘no mercy’ repartee.

‘You expect compassion? Really? That’s the word you want to use here: *compassion*? You? Asking for lenience, commiseration? You? Maybe you’d like me to throw in “grace” and “benevolence” as part of the package . . . which, I got to tell you, is going to land on your doorstep on the 12th of Never.’

Did I see in the rearview a flash of a killer smile behind the killer patter? Did that ‘I crush ants like you’ instinct keep down all the loneliness going on inside her?

We were now hitting the intersection of Beverly and Wilshire. Pulling up in front of a big-deal building with about eight high-end law firms occupying all its square footage. I stopped outside its chrome-and-glass frontage. Ms Machine Gun Talk kept doing just that: talking. *Rat-tat-tat*. I braked. I shifted into park. She slid across the seat, her menace monologue still carrying on. She opened the door. She put her legs onto the pavement. She volted herself up, forward motion propelling her toward the corporate doors facing her.

‘Have a nice . . .’ I said just as her left hand remembered to slam the door behind her.

But Ms Machine Gun Talk was gone from the car, gone from my story.

Pickup number three was coming out of the same building. A bookish guy, late thirties. Black jeans. A black T-shirt. Black Adidas sneakers. Too cool for school black glasses. A black leather backpack over one shoulder, an Apple Book under his arm.

‘How’s it going?’ he asked.

A guy doing nice. A climate change from my last two fares.

‘Going okay,’ I said. ‘Just ending my first hour.’

‘With how many more to go?’

But his phone rang. He actually said ‘Excuse me’ and was into a conversation straightaway.

You do my sort of work you eavesdrop. You pick up the details and clues that, put together, start to form a picture of all that is going on in a life outside of this car. You try to work out their story. From what I was hearing, this was a dude under pressure. An agent asking for a rewrite on four episodes. A kid not sleeping. Cash-flow fears. I knew the address that popped up on my screen. Dropped someone off there before. It was a street right off Vermont in Los Feliz. Full of little cottages which went for the low seven figures.

‘It’s going to be okay,’ he was saying. ‘I’m calling UTA right after and Lucy will get me ... Yeah, yeah, I know all about the car payment ...’

Oh man, not just money worries. Badass debt. He'd bought into the system as most of us had done: the mortgaged house, a family, the leased car, the credit card liabilities ... while simultaneously telling himself that he was going to sidestep all the compromises and limitations that big grown-up responsibilities bring to the table. Whereas the truth of the matter was: we buy in because we tell ourselves that *not* to buy in is not to do what we were raised to do – which is to buy in. My story like so many others.

I liked this guy. Someone with the smarts to be paid for writing ... but vulnerable. Especially as, from what I heard, he was a new dad. And when you have kids ... man, are you endlessly vulnerable.

His phone call ended. I heard him do a few breathing exercises – something to calm down the worry within. Then he was dialing another number.

‘Lucy Zimmerman, please ... Zach Godfrey here ... Yeah, I very much am her client ... Sure I can hold ...’

His face scrunched up. Being told to wait showed his lower status on the totem pole. The fact that the receptionist didn't recognize his name ... not good. He kept the phone to his ear, he shut his eyes, he sank back into the seat. Asking me:

‘Could you please put on a little music? KUSC?’

‘You got it, sir.’

I clicked the radio into life. KUSC was number 4 on my presets. The classical station. Something old and violin-heavy came on.

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘Are you always so decent?’

‘Try to be, sir.’

‘You like the work?’

‘It’s ... work,’ I said.

‘I hear you. Working for Uber is working for The Man, right? But don’t think that’s a reproach. We all, on some level, work for The Man these days.’

‘I appreciate your point of view,’ I said, ‘and agree with it. But I need to explain something to you. When it comes to “working for Uber” ...’

Someone was now back in his ear.

‘Hold that thought,’ he told me, then started his phone call.

‘Lucy? ... Yeah, yeah ... So listen ... You know all about that already? And do you think ...?’

I wanted to tune further into his talk but I noticed a big long swathe of red on the GPS – a hint of traffic trouble up ahead on Melrose. Should I leave this jam and zigzag around a lot of twisty back streets – heading down to Beverly, eventually getting to S Western Avenue, then turning north? Following that route would give us the appearance of moving forward and getting somewhere but which would end up taking as much time as

driving into the slowdown up ahead on Melrose – one of the big old-school boulevards that are the real arteries of the city. The guy didn't seem to be in a hurry. I was hoping that he'd finish up his call before we reached his address. Because there was something I wanted to tell him before we parted company in front of 179 Melbourne Ave.

You don't work for Uber.

Nobody works for Uber.

But you do drive for Uber.

You might not be their actual employee ...

But you are their captive.

Because they hold all the cards – and you have to abide by all their rules. You also have to be driving about seventy hours a week to earn some modestly acceptable money – which is about thirty hours too many. Mathematically that works out to an extra six hours on a normal workday to keep yourself just about afloat.

So, again, I don't work for Uber. But I still have to pay lip service to their rules and restrictions. Just as I know: if I didn't take an interest in everyone I pick up, if I didn't play surface detective and try to figure them out in the few minutes that they are with me, the job would be beyond punishing. My life for many hours a day is letting a screen on a smartphone direct me around this crazy sprawl that I call home. Wanting to put together a

storyline, a police dossier, on each of my pickups ... well, it chews up the clock, right?

Mr Writer finished his call with:

‘Surely you can convince them to come up with a little more. What they’re offering now ... Okay, you don’t have to remind me that my stock out here isn’t the highest right now. Still, they can look at that series of mine ... So what if it was back in 2014? ... Fine, fine, understood, other clients ... Yeah, sure, and yeah, know you’ll do your best, and sorry if I ... Right, right ... You too.’

I heard him doing another long intake/outtake of breath, then muttering ‘shit, shit, shit’ to himself. The delay on Melrose still had us only a mile east along the route.

‘Looks like we might be here for a while.’

‘Home is going nowhere. Home can wait for me.’

To which I wanted to say:

‘Don’t I know that one.’

But I said nothing.

three

IT WASN'T ALWAYS like this.

I have a degree in Electrical Engineering. And a career in sales.

Did I ever like the work?

It was a living. It was, for a while, not a bad living.

But did I ever really like the work?

There was a moment ... a summer thirty-four years ago ... when just out of Cal State I spent three months climbing electrical poles in that high country near Sequoia. All those crazy tall redwoods and being at an altitude of 8,000 feet and watching snow white out the horizon in May. Then there was this discovery of oxygen. Pure uncorrupted oxygen. After my twenty-two previous years in Los Angeles – where several hundred thousand internal combustion engines define the daily air quality – I was having my first proper encounter with ozone. And I was out in the wild, far away from city and family: that bungalow-bland corner of North Hollywood which hasn't changed much over the past thirty years. Dad himself grew up in South Central LA. A couple of streets of prole Irish America right near some badass ghettos. Hispanic, black ghettos. A place where being a white guy was

decidedly no-go. And where – as Dad never tired of telling me – if you kept to certain rules you could also sidestep trouble.

Dad liked to play the Paddy card. Though he also loved singing the ‘I was born on Mean Streets’ blues the fact is: no one in his family was ever busted by the cops. All of his three sisters – one of whom became a Carmelite in Nevada (yes, they actually have a convent near Vegas) – were classic ‘good girls’ ... blue-collar shorthand for not getting caught peddling themselves down a dark alleyway. And to the best of my knowledge there were no gang warfare moments where the tough Irish boys got into a rumble – in pure 1950s teen movie style – with the local Hispanic gang on some dirty boulevard.

My parents grew up three streets away from each other. Florence Riordan met Patrick Sheehan at the local high school. They were both the kids of emigrant parents. Their families had arrived from County Limerick and County Louth respectively at the kick-off of the last century. Their grandparents started out on the East Coast, then their parents headed west to the alleged golden land. Mother and Father were both born in Good Samaritan Hospital in South Central. Neither of them ever left this corner of the city. Dad trained as an electrician and got a job as a ‘cable and lights guy’ (his turn of phrase) at Paramount. He stayed in the same job for forty-one years.

Mom stayed at home with her three children. I was the last in the pecking order. We all did what was expected of us. We pushed ourselves into the middle class. There was a brother who was an accountant. He died of cancer ten years back. A quiet, decent man. We were close – even if Sean steered far away from any displays of emotion. But at life’s darker moments we were always in each other’s corner. Our sister, Helen, became a senior ER nurse. She went east for work and now lives in a retirement community on the Delaware shore. Like Sean, like everyone in our family, she too was raised to be respectful, reserved. She has a retired cop husband and no kids. We talk a few times a year on the phone. It’s always a reasonable chat – even if, truth be told, we don’t have much to say to each other.

And then there’s me: the electrical engineer turned salesman.

Why did I study Electrical Engineering? Because my father told me to. He was the guy helping light up stars at Paramount. ‘It’s a good living, kid,’ he told me. ‘But you can make an even better living if you get your college degree.’ That wasn’t a suggestion; that was an order. I was going to college. As a kid I showed some facility for math and taking apart and putting stuff together. As a teenager I had no damn idea what I wanted to do in life – except drive the clapped-out 1970s mustard-yellow Dodge Dart

Swinger that I bought for \$725 after eighteen months of an afterschool job disemboweling old jalopies in a wrecking yard down the street from us. How I loved that idiot car. It took me to and from Cal State every day as I pursued that degree in Electrical Engineering to please Dad. I had no real interest in Electrical Engineering. I had no real interest in anything except the Los Angeles Dodgers and my Dodge Dart. Back then Dad would often complain that I was just Mister Blah. Middling grades. Middling interest in the world around me. Middling curiosity in current affairs or even the issues menacing the 'hood. Mister Blah. Dad's name for me. And one which really got up my nose – because I knew it to be true. I had a minor talent when it came to getting a busted radio to work again and a dad who wanted to brag to his fellow cable and lights guys at the studio that even his less than sparky youngest child was advancing in the world by doing Electrical Engineering at an okay college. I knew Cal State was as middling as my grades – but I didn't have the academic muscle to find some better niche in the U Cal system. Still, Dad was pleased. Naturally he expected me to live at home – and abide, without an argument, by his midnight curfew rule (1 a.m. on the weekends after I turned twenty-one). Just as he informed me from the get-go that if I didn't maintain a minimum B average I was going to be responsible for the \$1275 per annum

that it cost him to send me to Cal State in 1980. I did all that was expected for me – and even managed a B+ average. Only twice in four years did I breach his curfew – and Dad let it ride. Because he knew I was playing the game, buckling down, doing his bidding. Why did I do what was demanded of me? Truth be told I couldn't figure out what else to do with myself.

But then, as I was entering the final semester of my senior year, some Career Guidance dude told me that the State of California was running a program trying to rewire the electrical grid for the Sierra Nevadas – specifically the sparse communities in and around Sequoia National Park. They were looking for young electricians wanting to do a spell up in the mountains. When I said that that sounded rather cool – a chance to run away from everything and everyone for a while and do time in the Great Outdoors – Mr Career Counselor had one question for me:

‘How do you handle heights?’

I came to handle them pretty damn well. What I couldn't handle (initially anyway) was my dad's dismay that I was taking on such a blue-collar job after four years of college. When I explained that I was doing it for the adventure he got even more outraged.

‘Adventure is for the rich boys. For you, for me, life is about advancement and meeting our responsibilities.’

But I had no responsibilities back then. Nor was I looking to accumulate them. So I suffered Dad's sulks. I took the job and discovered that I could scale a forty-foot electrical pole without much in the way of vertigo. Once up there I was able to wield all my equipment and maintain my equilibrium. Of course I was trained into this work by the foreman on the project: a guy who went by the name of Chet and came from Comanche stock and called me 'college boy' and laughed at me being 'the Irish guy trying to get atop the totem pole'. He also let me know that I was the first 'white kid' he'd ever had on his crew, as the majority of 'pole climbers' (as he called us) were Native Americans – 'cause we all have a head for heights and danger'.

I lived in a bunkhouse with 'the rest of the tribe'. I learned how to drink cheap vodka. I developed a liking for Viceroy cigarettes which turned into a habit (and now, thirty-three years on, remains a total dependence). I met a woman who worked in a local bar named Bernadette. She was almost thirty-five; a one-time croupier in Vegas until her guy Wayne (who dealt blackjack) was discovered trying to cheat the house – and got a bullet in the back of the head for his stupidity.

'Rule number one of Vegas croupier life,' Bernadette told me, 'never cheat the house. Because you're cheating the Mob – and the Mob only have one answer for people dumb or crazy enough to try to rip them off.'

Wayne found that out big time. Especially as he denied any wrongdoing. Bernadette herself got roughed up a bit – until she told the Mob that Wacky Wayne (her name for him) had a storage unit around two hundred miles from Vegas in the capital of Nevada, Carson City.

‘Once they discovered much of the money he’d cheated them out of they told me that, as a thank you, they weren’t going to cut my tits off (as they had threatened to do). They also let me know that I had twenty-four hours to get out of Vegas and never come back. As long as I never showed my face in their world again, they were going to let me keep my life. That was ten years ago. I was broke. I was frightened. I needed work. I had a cousin who ran a bar up here in Sequoia. He offered me a job. Time flies when you’ve fled the Mob and you have no idea what to do with your life. Ten years on I’m still pouring shots and living in the same trailer I found the week I arrived from Vegas. Still ... in you walked two weeks ago and I found myself thinking: now that’s a lovely young guy and someone who believes in being nice and decent with me. And treating me not like the potential fast fuck behind the bar, but a person ... which is why you should meet me at my trailer around a half-hour after we close up at one tonight.’

That’s how it started. Because we were in the smallest of communities – and because Bernadette feared she was

going to get severe shit from everyone for taking up with ‘the new boy in town’ (as she sometimes called me) – she wanted to keep ‘us’ quiet. When I pointed out that I was a legal adult she gave me a light kiss on my lips and said: ‘They’re still gonna call me a cradle robber.’

Bernadette would only see me three nights a week – and exclusively in her trailer. Thanks to her not only did I learn much about sex (and how to make it more than just sex), but also about the way that passion stays passionate if you’re not doing the day-to-day thing with the person with whom you think you love. And after just a few days I was certain that I was in love with Bernadette. Just as she was certain that what we had here was nothing more than a very pleasant moment in our lives.

I so loved this ‘moment’ with Bernadette, so loved the pole-climbing work that I extended my initial three-month contract twice over. I was making \$180 a week. I had free room and board on top of that. I spent six bucks a day on smokes and a couple of drinks. I saved the rest. At the end of nine months I had \$5400. Enough to put a down payment on a small house in North Hollywood. Which is what Papa insisted I do. Just as he insisted that I leave my high-altitude work and return to the real world and start my career – and stop acting like life could be fun. Why did I buy into this program? Perhaps because I’ve always felt the pull of authority over me. When I am

having one of those four-in-the-morning moments of looking at myself in the mirror – and wondering how it all turned out this way – I plead guilty to the fact: at those crucial moments in young adult life when I could have broken free, I played the ‘keep Dad quiet’ card. Maybe because I’ve never been brilliant about standing up for what I want. And, in turn, that could be linked to another uncomfortable truth: I’ve never had the big grand passion that fuels a career, a love, a sense of life as an evolving adventure. I knew I was being talked into playing it safe. I allowed myself to be led down that path. Because I really didn’t know what else I should be doing with myself.

Could it be that, like so many of my fellow citizens, I kowtow because I can’t figure out a different storyline? I knew that I never satisfied my very critical father – but I still followed his directives about what I should do with my life. Just as all those years as an altar boy and being told to respect the ultimate authority of the priest – especially as God was always sitting in judgment on us all – did indoctrinate in me the belief that I really did have to do what I was told ... even if today I understand that those telling me how to live my life didn’t have my best interests at heart and really had no idea about the world beyond their narrow, limited experience of it all. Only now – starting to crowd sixty and realizing that time just

isn't on my side – am I beginning to think: why this lack of imagination when it came to dodging risk, danger?

Still, all those years ago, I made the bad call and did what my father demanded. I packed up my life in Sequoia. The wrench of saying goodbye to Bernadette was huge. She knew I was in love with her. She told me on our last night together that the reason I was getting emotional was because I was just seeing her for six hours a week of passion and companionship – and that we had no day-to-day life.

‘When you do start making that day-to-day life with someone you’re going to find out just how boring it can be ... even though everyone’s going to convince you to do the day-to-day. Because they’ve all entrapped themselves ... and why should you escape?’

On the long bus ride back to LA I knew that I was about to let myself be talked into a life I didn't want ... but also didn't know how to sidestep.

Bing. A new fare. Westwood. Fuck. It was now 3.33 p.m. That moment when LA becomes as blocked and coagulated as that artery to my left ventricle that needed a stent ... and which I was able to have taken care of when I still had company health insurance. Silver Lake to Westwood was going to be forty minutes at this time. I wanted a fare somewhat closer. But I saw that the Westwood client was heading south to Van Nuys. A fare

that would be worth \$31. So it was worth the long trek in traffic.

I am a fifty-six-year-old man working sixty- to seventy-hour weeks and making on average eleven dollars an hour. I am expendable. I have a family to support, bills to pay. Eleven dollars an hour is just above minimum wage. Better known as: nothing.

But earning nothing these days is better than earning absolutely nothing.

four

A LUCKY BREAK. Driving down Sunset I got a job picking up a woman at a spa in Silver Lake. The spa was called The Now. Located in a stretch of Sunset where everything smells like tech and television money. Boutiques where a shirt costs \$250. Vintage furniture shops with all this original mid-century stuff at crazed prices. A tattoo parlor which caters to cash-heavy hipsters who think nothing of adding indelible after indelible image to their skin. The usual upscale coffee joints where everyone has a flat white and a piercing and a MacBook with a screenplay they are never going to get produced. And this spa – all white and Zen design – where you can get your muscles de-stressed by paying one hundred dollars for forty-five minutes.

I need a cigarette at least once an hour. This involves stopping and finding some corner of wherever I am at a given moment where I will not be called out as a walking health violation for smoking. Despite the perma-smog, the dense car fumes intermingling with the endless blue above, being seen with a lit cigarette on a sidewalk in LA can land you in a shitstorm of self-righteousness. Lighting up near any sort of outdoor cafe or restaurant is also a

serious no-no. Even smoking across the street from a playground is something akin to a hanging offense.

So I tend to choose side streets and vacant lots in which to suck down my hourly American Spirit (since they stopped making Viceroy's some years ago). I tell myself that this brand is less lethal than the non-organic brands, though my daughter Klara recently sent me links to about six articles saying that American Spirit were as dangerous as any other cigarette. 'It's a dumb habit, Poppa, and I don't want you to die.' Klara. My precious little girl. My tough-minded, super-smart daughter. Twenty-four. Always up front with her opinions. An original take on everything from the moment she started in middle school. Always in trouble with teachers for not playing by the rules – and questioning the system all the time. Always in trouble with her mother for not being the good little convent schoolgirl that she'd groomed her to be. Always knowing she could come to me with her questions, doubts, rages ... and I would not just hear her out, but also didn't take it the wrong way when she exploded in my direction. Maybe because, after a life of jumping out of the way of conflict, disagreement, I was often amazed and simultaneously unnerved by Klara's ability to wade into an argument and fight her corner; her ferocious sense of right versus wrong; her refusal to be cowed by what she called 'the system'. Recently I found myself wondering: did I so