

# Annals by Elizabeth Benedict

## *Murder One: Mad Dog Taborsky & Me*

The city's celebrities had little in common but a taste for the westbound train. Katherine Hepburn left in 1928. Mark Twain came for twenty-one years and departed. Harriet Beecher Stowe came and went several times, spending twenty-four years in a house across the lawn from Twain's. Sophie Tucker went west but returned to be buried in the Emanuel Synagogue Cemetery in nearby Wethersfield, on the same hill as my father's parents. John Gregory Dunne and Dominick Dunne grew up in West Hartford. Norman Lear and my father attended Weaver High School together. The exception is Wallace Stevens, who arrived in 1916, to work for the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, and never left.

Even with all this talent, the city has never become the object of a literary obsession. It's not Joyce's Dublin, Philip

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Roth's Newark, or Walker Percy's New Orleans, not only because no writer has made it so but because it is, as the local saying has it, a "land of steady habits," steeped in reliable dullness and New England equanimity. The men in their gray flannel suits have helped keep a lid on local temperaments, it seems, since the insurance industry began there in 1794. Few words have been written about it by its most celebrated scribes and none for which the writers are known.

Those of us who left – I was three in 1958 when my Hartford-born parents moved away – don't rage against the city or feel spellbound by it. Most are content to say simply: *Lucky me, I got out*. But in my quiet obsession with my abandoned hometown, I sometimes wonder who I might have become if my father hadn't taken us to settle eventually, when I was eight, in the city of ambition, to a posh new building he could not afford on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. And who might my deracinated mother have been allowed to be if she hadn't been forced into the role of sophisticate, with a negative bank balance and a mean, alcoholic husband?

It may only be that I am haunted by Hartford, by which I also mean West Hartford. Although we left when I was three, I am not a stranger there. We visit-

ed often when I was a kid, and as an adult, I am there frequently to see many of the same relatives and family friends. In recent years, I have passed through every few months, traveling between the two cities where I live, New York and Boston. Even if I have no plans to stop, when there is traffic on I-84, I sometimes take a shortcut across town to another interstate entrance and feel strangely soothed as I pass by shopping centers, cemeteries, familiar streets. Nothing spectacular, only an unaccustomed feeling of belonging. I have an identity there based on who my parents were and my grandparents, who came there a hundred years ago, give or take a decade, from Odessa, Lithuania, Palestine, and Perth Amboy, New Jersey.

I wonder about what might have been had we stayed, and about a shattering event that happened two months before my parents' wedding in 1950: my mother's brother, Louis Wolfson, was shot to death in a botched holdup in the liquor store he owned. He died two days later, leaving a wife, two young daughters, my heartbroken mother on the verge of her wedding, and a large, largely immigrant family. Joseph "Mad Dog" Taborsky, the man who killed Lou, went on to kill many more people and, in 1960, became the last man executed in the state, in all of New England, for forty-five years, until 2005. At the end of 2007, New Jersey became the fourteenth state in the country to abolish the death penalty, but prosecutors in the land of steady habits are seeking it again for two men accused of a brutal triple murder in a suburb of New Haven in the summer of 2007.

My parents first told me the story of Mad Dog Taborsky when I was eight or nine, but that pared-down child's version was the only one I knew until recently, until both my parents were dead and I returned to Hartford to learn the

adult version. I had a feeling that once I knew it, I would be able to understand more about having grown up in our haunted house, in the shadow of the murder and the full glare of my parents' rage and sorrow.

It was mostly his rage and her sorrow. He was angry about the murder and its ghastly aftermath, and about much else, including my mother's misery. When I tally up what she had to mourn by the time we moved to New York in 1962, when she was thirty-eight, my heart breaks for her: Her increasingly unhappy marriage to my father. The death of her twenty-year-old nephew, Kenny, in 1961, her sister's only child. Another nephew, born with muscular dystrophy, who lived all his short life in a wheelchair. A brother, dropped on his head as an infant, who spent his life in an institution. Her inheritance of \$1,000 from her father in 1960, while her remaining brother got \$60,000. Her artistic talent swallowed up by family life and family loss. Her natural gift for painting and drawing earned her a scholarship to the Hartford Art School, during the war she worked in advertising as a graphic artist, and now she was a housewife. And always pressing on her nervous system must have been the brother she missed, the warm, funny father figure who was so unlike her real father, the aged temperamental Orthodox rabbi who killed chickens in the backyard to make them kosher, and brought feathers and blood-spattered clothes wherever he went.

My mother's face lit up when she told stories of being at Lou's apartment, her second home, with his wife and girls. He told jokes and they horsed around – an expression you don't hear anymore – and they took car trips, my mother sitting in the backseat with her two adoring nieces. Where could they have gone

in 1948, 1949? Nowhere grand, I'm sure, nowhere fancy. The ride had to have been the thrill, the coziness of the car, the jokes, the horsing around. "He was such a *mensch*, he thought the gun that killed him was a toy," she bragged to my sister and me. All of that goodness and good humor vanished in an instant, and days after my mother's wedding, the devastated widow took her two girls to live with her relatives in Brooklyn, out by Coney Island, a bullet right through the heart of their happy family.

At eight years old, I could see the anguish of Lou's being there for her and then not being there, though it's impossible to say what it looked like or how it was conveyed. I knew that there were a lot of missing people in my mother's life and that, at some level, my father wanted to be one of them. As I grew up, desperate that my life not be like hers, I did, too.

When Google came into our lives, I searched the name of Lou's murderer several times but found no entries that drew me further into the story. I knew there had to be old newspaper articles, and I eventually found out that they were archived in the main branch of Hartford's public library. For years I didn't have the time or psychic room I needed to open the Pandora's box of family pain, but one August afternoon in 2005, I drove to Hartford, in search of our buried history, hidden all these years in plain sight, on reels of microfilm. I was fifty years old and knew no more about my uncle's murder than I had in fourth grade.

I was relieved when both my parents died in the last five years. They were long divorced, and each very sick and suffering, my father with lung cancer and my mother with Alzheimer's. I had spent much of my adult life trying to summon

affection for them that consisted of more than pity and guilt. They were not bad people but horribly wounded, brought down by hardship and penury. From the time I was in college, I thought of myself as someone without a family, and proceeded to create and collect surrogate families, until I had family of my own, including a stepson and then a stepdaughter. I would not wish on anyone the uneasy distance from their parents that I had almost always felt toward mine. But for all of this alienation, there was nothing that quite prepared me for the ways my parents came to life when I entered the library's reference room and began to open the old wooden card catalogs.

When we left in 1958, Hartford was the only place where my father's family had a presence, where people could spell our unusual last name – Neiditz – and where it stood for anything. My father's three uncles and Ivy-educated first cousins were part of the city's burgeoning Jewish bourgeoisie. My mother's father, Rabbi Jacob Wolfson, has a listing in *Hartford Jews* (Connecticut Historical Society, 1970), and is described as "Dean of Orthodox rabbis," though I know this was not an official title connected to a school. I grew up believing that if my father hadn't been the black sheep of the family, we would have stayed. If he hadn't been the ambitious, alcoholic malcontent who wanted to thumb his nose at all that small-town respectability, I would have grown up surrounded by dozens of solid families with lifelong connections to ours.

In one fantasy, this might have diluted the effects of my father's toxic behavior on my sister and me. In another, being in her hometown might have given my mother the gumption and the support to leave him early on, instead of once so

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much damage had been done. In any case, I would have grown up as “one of the Neiditzes,” whose name was plastered everywhere: on buildings owned and managed by my cousins and on the family’s furniture store on Farmington Avenue. Two of my father’s first cousins were state representatives. Others became lawyers, doctors, civic-minded businessmen.

It was as though my father had sprung from another family. He was restless, rough around the edges, often crude and rude, and wildly ambitious, desperate to make money. He studied electrical engineering for a year or two at Wentworth Institute in Boston but dropped out. Like his father the traveling salesman, like Willy Loman, he was a peddler at heart. He learned to sell insurance in Hartford, and when he told his company he wanted to move to New York, they sent him, in 1958, to Columbus, Ohio, to pay his dues. A year later, as they prepared to transfer him to New York, my mother’s nephew Kenny was diagnosed with terminal cancer, and instead of going straight to Manhattan, my parents moved to Westchester, to be near my aunt, uncle, and cousin, who died in 1961. His bereft parents fled New York for Florida, desperate to escape their memories. Bereft herself, my mother fell into a depression that lasted for months.

I was eight in 1962 when we arrived in the city of Frank Sinatra’s song: if my father could make it there, selling insurance and pension plans, he could make it anywhere. “How do you like my little island here?” he’d challenge visitors from Hartford, to whom our life seemed impossibly glamorous. We had doormen. Chet Huntley lived in a brownstone across the street from our luxury apartment. Our friends in the building included a fashion model, a CBS executive, and a former foreign correspondent

for *Newsweek*. If he had stayed in Hartford, my father could have been a big fish in a small pond, but he didn’t want that. He wanted money the way a child wants a huge pile of toys, and it only mattered if he could have it in New York.

He sort of succeeded for a while, the way many people could in New York in the 1960s, when the rising tide lifted a lot of boats, when you could rent a swell apartment for a few hundred dollars a month and borrow money on occasion from relatives in Hartford, whom you otherwise scorned. In the ten years we lived there as a family, our lives were impossibly glamorous. One summer, my father’s friends lent him their 1959 black Silver Cloud Rolls Royce, which, because we had no car, was a great luxury, aside from being a jaw-dropping conversation piece everywhere we traveled. Our neighbors assumed we had hit the jackpot. The joke was that we were especially broke that summer. On weekend trips to New England, we sometimes stopped at McDonald’s in East Chester for a lunch we could afford.

Early on, our exotic New York neighbors offered hints of what I would later know to be the bittersweet, evanescent world of John Cheever’s early stories. As a child, I found it much easier to appreciate the city as the setting for certain sophisticated movies of the period: *Come Blow Your Horn*, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, *The World of Henry Orient*, and Broadway plays with titles that told me how bold our new life would be, titles like *Stop the World, I Want to Get Off* and *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. Department stores delivered small purchases; the signs posted all over B. Altman’s seem now as quaint and poetic as quill pens: “The Packages You Take With You Get Home First.” Perhaps what I really understood was that we were not in Hartford anymore and that

my father was right: we'd escaped our dinky hometown and our small-minded relatives, who could barely fathom the grandeur of all they were missing.

As time went on, darker movies caught my attention, projecting more disturbing narratives of our life on the outer edges of the Upper East Side: *Days of Wine and Roses*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *Butterfield 8*. At home things were difficult and dramatic in the way of alcoholic families: too much fighting, too many hangovers, a tendency toward reversals of fortune. Half a dozen times I found summonses on the front door, notices that we would be evicted for not paying the rent. Stop the world, we wanted to get off.

The hairdresser is blow-drying my hair. I'm in a place on Broadway I've never been, just back from Florida, too spent to do much. Tears are trickling down my cheeks. Not many, but enough so that he notices, and he's startled.

"Are you all right?"

I nod. "My father died."

He says that he's sorry. He's not one of the friends who says, when I make the announcement, "I'm not sure I knew your father was still alive." He left my mother in my last year of high school and moved suddenly to Florida a year later, broke, broken, about to become a man who lives with rich women. For the rest of his life, I probably saw him fifteen or twenty times, and none of them was comfortable, none easy.

What makes me sad about his death is that I'm not sadder. What makes me sad is his sad life. At his own mother's funeral, on the hill where Sophie Tucker is buried, he stood off alone; no cousins came near to comfort him because he had alienated them with bitterness. When he died, people were not afraid to come near me, but I wasn't sure that I

wanted them to. And if I had wanted them to, I'm not sure I would have known how to indicate it.

I could write the names of twenty people whose deaths would cause me to weep like a child, and I understand that's because I'm not conflicted about loving them. Before she died, when she was as sick as she was, I often wondered if my mother was on this list of twenty. She was kindly, loving, had many friends. In the way of the powerless who are emotionally abused, when she lived with my father, she had the capacity to maintain her equilibrium for long periods, until she exploded in a shrill rage. She loved him abjectly for many years, but when she was willing to give up that desperate, clingy role, she saw the future clearly: if they split up, he would not take care of us, and so she stayed much longer than she should have. By the time it ended, she had been working full-time as a secretary, and she did that until she began to lose her mind, sometimes able to make time to pursue her art but never in the way that her talent deserved.

I was at best, I think, a dutiful daughter. I felt too sorry for her to want to be close to her; if I kept my distance, I wouldn't become such a person myself. And if I took this feeling to an extreme, which I did, if I did not become a mother myself, there would be no one to witness, up close, whoever I became, the way I had to witness the woman she became during a lifetime of deprivation and struggle. I endured the service we held the day after she died by reminding myself what a gifted artist she had been, instead of what a difficult life she had lived. When she moved into the nursing home with Alzheimer's, we went one day to the art room, where several women painted stick figures of people and flowers. I put out a basket of dried flowers, and with a few pastels, in thirty or

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forty strokes, my mother – who sometimes put her underwear on her head – transformed the page. The crowd was dazzled. “Look at that!” they cried. “A real artist!”

The nurses were surprised one morning to see a drawing on her bathroom wall. Soon, there were more, made with colored pencil, watercolor, and pastel. Soon, the walls were covered. The images were colorful, intricate, somewhat distorted and bizarre. It seemed she would get up in the middle of the night and do them silently, and no one would look in on her. I was touched that the nursing home left the walls that way for many months, even after she moved upstairs to the unit for people who could not do anything for themselves.

In the first reel of microfilm, on March 27, 1950, the story is front-page news, right beneath the name of the paper in Old English lettering, as though Louis Wolfson were an important man, instead of just an unlucky one:

Wolfson Dies of Wound  
In Store Holdup Shooting

Beneath the headline is a photograph of him, and I realize I have never seen one, except in group shots when he was a child. He could be my mother’s twin. In seconds, I am overcome. Until now, his death had only been a prominent entry in our encyclopedia of family tragedies, someone else’s pain, not my own.

For every listing in the old wooden catalogs, there turn out to be five or ten newspaper articles on microfilm in *The Courant* and the defunct *Hartford Times*. The story is always front-page news, above the fold, photographs and grisly headlines sandwiched between cold war revelations and Supreme Court rulings, the chilling phrases sometimes in seventy-two-point type splashed across eight

columns. I read and copy all of them, blown back by the banner headlines and pulled forward as I squint at the faint print projected onto the screen, and I keep forgetting to breathe.

How is it that my ordinary family’s extraordinary tragedy is what propels these sensational headlines? Can it be that we’re famous for our suffering, our victimhood?

The stories go on for nearly a decade: 1950 to 1957. These were the newspapers my parents read at breakfast as newlyweds and for all the years until we left Hartford in 1958. The effect is dizzying, kaleidoscopic, as I superimpose the astonishing legal twists and turns over our family timeline.

Taborsky Gets Chair After Guilty Verdict  
Execution Scheduled for Nov. – June 8,  
1951

My parents had been married for a year when Joseph Taborsky was sentenced to death in June 1951, for the first time, for killing Lou – a crime he repeatedly denied having committed. But he wasn’t executed on schedule. He was still on death row when I was born three years later, in December 1954. Eight months later, he was granted a new trial on the original murder charge. His attorney argued that the only evidence against him, the testimony of his brother Albert, should be ‘nolled,’ or dropped, because Albert had a psychotic break soon after his confession. Albert admitted that the two men set out in their car to hold up some local merchants on the night of March 23, 1950. Albert, the more passive brother, drove the getaway car, while Joseph, the ringleader, by all accounts a textbook sociopath, confronted his victim in the liquor store he owned. Lou Wolfson didn’t believe the gun was real, didn’t believe the holdup was real,

and as he came toward Taborsky, perhaps to indicate he knew it was a joke, Taborsky panicked and shot him in the face. Taborsky fled to the waiting car. Lou lived for two days, conscious enough at one point to tell the police he'd thought the gun was a toy.

Once Albert Taborsky had his breakdown, his brother's lawyer saw this as an opportunity to get his testimony dismissed – the unreliability of the word of a madman, the only evidence the state had. This thread of the drama took years to resolve. After Taborsky had spent four years on death row, the State Supreme Court agreed with Taborsky's lawyer.

This heading is from the *Hartford Courant Magazine*, January 31, 1954:

**The coming Taborsky decision – a fateful hour in the drama of . . .**

The 'Cain and Abel' Case in which a convicted murderer is pitted against his mad brother – with death or freedom at stake . . .

From the daily paper, August 4, 1955:

**New Trial Granted Taborsky In Murder – High Court Action May Free Convict – Finds Principal Witness Insane**

In October 1955, when I was ten months old, Joseph Taborsky was released from his death row cell and freed from jail, without so much as parole. His brother, in the state hospital for the criminally insane, had received a life sentence in exchange for his testimony.

From inside *The Courant*, December 14, 1955:

**Taborsky Tells of Death Row Ordeal In Magazine Story on Sale Thursday**

The story of Joseph L. Taborsky's experiences during four and a half years in

State Prison 'death row' is the featured article in this month's *Headquarter Detective* magazine which will go on sale at Hartford newsstands Thursday.

"I was sentenced to die for a murder I did not commit. I prayed to God to help me and he did. Today I'm free," said Taborsky in the story written for him by Reporter Gerald J. Demeusy of *The Courant*.

Shortly after my second birthday, Taborsky began killing again, with an accomplice named Arthur Culombe. But Taborsky was not suspected until many were dead; police were certain he had moved to New York City. At the height of the spree, with no clues to go on, the press dubbed the men "The Mad Dog Killers." In early 1957, they shot six people to death in greater Hartford and left a dozen more for dead, always emptying their almost-empty cash registers. The victims were shopkeepers, gas station attendants, shoe-store customers, people like my uncle who had next to nothing and whose deaths left their families with less. In March 1957, after the men were captured, Taborsky was persuaded to confess after a visit "by his devoted mother," says a front-page headline on March 2.

The same day, further down the page, I hit pay dirt, two articles about my family: "Also Admits Killing of Wolfson in 1950" and "Murdered Man's Widow is Stunned by Confession," which is filled with people I know, including my mother, Mrs. Lester Neiditz:

Reached at her Brooklyn N.Y. home, Mrs. Ethel Wolfson was stunned by the news that Joseph Taborsky had admitted the murder of her husband in his package store March 23, 1950.

"It's ironic that they ever let that man go. How they ever gave that man a new trial, I don't know," the embittered widow said.

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“This has hit me like a ton of bricks.” . . .  
“Believe me, it’s a terrible ordeal to go through. I went to two sessions of his trial. I couldn’t take any more. It was too much,” she said. “I’m glad he’s finally caught.”

Mrs. Wolfson, whose husband died several days after the shooting, spoke bitterly of the long legal fight to free Taborsky after his brother, Albert, the state’s only witness, became insane at the State Prison.

“By the time Taborsky got out the whole Wolfson family felt like criminals. I loved Hartford but the people talking about us left a bad taste in my mouth,” she said.

“I wonder how those people feel now?” she asked.

“After a thing like that, your life can never be the same, whether you’re young or old. Your mind just becomes bitter, you can’t be sweet,” she said. Mrs. Wolfson now lives with a sister in the Seagate section of Brooklyn.

In Hartford, Saul Wolfson, brother of the murdered man, said he was glad Taborsky had confessed.

“This takes away every shadow of a doubt. When they let Taborsky out I was boiling mad. They had him for a holdup, why didn’t they try him for that?”

Mrs. Lester Neiditz, a sister of the murdered package store operator, commented:

“I never heard of anything so gruesome. We were talking tonight about whether we would ever know if my brother’s killer would be caught. We wanted to know that he wasn’t just walking the streets.”

“I feel sorry for all those other families that have to go through what we did,” she said. “It just about broke our hearts when Taborsky was set free.”

Reading this piece of microfilm just about breaks mine. Now I see that the story – the violence, the terror, the injus-

tice – went on for years. Lou’s death was never allowed to die. The family’s mourning kept getting interrupted with more death, more mourning, and the outrage of Taborsky’s release from jail. *Boiling mad.* I had known a tiny fragment of this information but not the wingspan of the dates, the way the story echoed over a decade. Now I understood why, when my parents first told me about it in the early 1960s, it had seemed like such a fresh wound. And perhaps I had a new understanding of why my father had wanted to leave Hartford. I had always thought it was to escape family pressure. But how could he not have wanted to run from the endless crimes, the remorseless criminals, the blaring headlines, and the burden of my mother’s shattered family? In Hartford there seemed to be only one story, but in the naked city where he yearned to be, there were eight million stories, more than enough to drown out the years of anguished cries.

“Death Penalty Given Taborsky,  
Culombe” – June 28, 1957.

We leave Hartford – July 1958.

“State Puts Taborsky To Death – Mass  
Killer Calm to Last” – May 18, 1960.

My cousin Kenny dies – July 1961.

We move to Manhattan – October 1962.

It takes three trips to go through all the microfilm. On the last of the trips, my father’s wealthy cousin and his wife invite me to dinner at one of the splashy, stylish restaurants that now pervade West Hartford, and I realize that I love being with them, my stable, prosperous relatives. I might even belong with them. It was my father who was the odd man out, the misfit, not me. When he died, these relatives sent me the briefest, most awkward condolence letter, suggesting that they could not find a kind word to say about him. Midway through dinner,

my enchantment flickers, and I remember what my father did. He spared us growing up there. His taking us to New York was his finest move, insane though it was: no money, drinking, debting, philandering, living beyond his means, flaming out and having to leave for Florida penniless in 1973. It didn't turn out the way he had planned, but he knew that there was something in the bright lights and tall buildings that truly mattered; something on Wall Street and Broadway and at Carnegie Hall and the Carnegie Deli; something in our proximity to all that talent, ambition, raw nerve, and very refined nerve; and of course he was right.

That night I drive back to Boston drenched in Hartford, light-years closer to my parents' memories of their time as newlyweds and young married people. Soon after, I return to look for the liquor store, the scene of the crime. The building is no longer there, the store with the apartment above it where my Aunt Fanny had lived. She was the oldest sibling among the rabbi's six children – my mother the youngest – and it was she who went downstairs for the newspaper and found her brother on his back with a hole in his face. Lou's eleven-year-old daughter, Brenda, visiting while her father worked, was the next one down the stairs. "We had a very happy family before my father died," Brenda told me recently. "My mother said that he had a wicked sense of humor, but I don't remember it."

For months as I struggle to write what I think is the story, I'm transfixed by old photographs, microfilm copies, a beautiful colored-pencil drawing my mother did of herself when she was seventeen and radiantly happy. I find a self-published true crime book about Taborsky that came out in 2002: *Ten Weeks of Terror: A Chronicle in the Making of a Killer*, by

Gerald Demeusy, who covered the case for the *Courant*. It tells the story of Lou's murder – and all the others – from Taborsky's point of view. It describes his brother's psychosis, and the character of the accomplice, Arthur Culombe, who had an IQ of 51 and could not read or tell time.

When I talk to people about what I'm trying to write, I come to enjoy the flicker of shock on their faces when I say, "My mother's brother was murdered two months before my parents got married." There has to be a story there, in all that violence and grief, all those headlines that made us famous for our suffering, doesn't there? For months, I gnaw at the story and the story gnaws at me. I read Wallace Stevens poems, looking for insights into Hartford. I write the story from every angle, every point of view, obsessed but uncertain how to tell it. The material swirls around me like sludge, looking for a way out. I remember a single line my mother told me when I was in my twenties, when she was trying to understand her marriage: "I didn't postpone the wedding after Lou's death because I wanted your father to comfort me." Where does this go? I would like it to go away and not burden me with its heartache and its not fitting neatly into the narrative, whose through line is already complicated enough.

But with every failed draft I write, there is a miniscule shift, a slight diminishment of my own unbearable grief, hauled around for a lifetime, attached to a story whose impact I felt but whose details I barely knew, and for that I feel grateful, lighter every day. Yet I am still the cat chasing its tail, and I decide, after dozens of drafts, to give up, to walk away. Faces haunt me: Lou's, Brenda's at eleven, the acquaintances at cocktail parties who are intrigued by the story of the murder.

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The gun was a .22 caliber handgun. Small. Quiet. Brenda, upstairs with Aunt Fanny, told me recently that they didn't hear the shots. Lou had thought the holdup was a prank, so Lou approached him, as though to say, *Hey, cut it out*, which probably cost him his life. He was forty-one years old, a high school graduate, half-owner in the liquor store with a brother-in-law. Kind, exuberant, crazy about his wife and kids, and about his baby sister, the adoring girl who would become my mother. I know what the laughter must have sounded like, the horsing around, the days as sweet as summer afternoons.

After the murder, my parents went ahead with their wedding, went ahead with their unhappy marriage. It would have been a relief to learn in the reels of microfilm, reading between the lines and the headlines, that the murder had played a role in their misery, that had it not been for madness of Mad Dog Taborsky, they would have been happy and prosperous in Hartford. But I don't think that was in the cards, though maybe this is: that I'm so drawn to this story because the grief in it is easy to explain; it's a stand-in for all the other grief that is not easy to explain. Without the murder, there is nothing simple to say about my family, no bright, breezy stories, and none I like to tell, except about the Rolls Royce. About how the server one day at McDonald's saw the car and made a snide remark when my sister asked for extra ketchup, a crack about how rich people like us always got whatever we wanted. The Rolls brought us together, because we knew it was an elaborate charade when everyone else thought it was for real, thought we had become as rich as my father always wanted to be. For once, it was us against the world instead of us against one another.

When I return to my manuscript and my frustrations, I wonder if I have been playing solitaire with these cards too long. Have I let myself – and the story – be defined more by my mother's sadness than by her art? And by my father's bitterness and failure than by his ambition and nerve? It was my father, after all, who took us with him when he fled the land of steady habits, taking his cues from Katherine Hepburn, Norman Lear, and the Dunne brothers, my father who had the audacity to take us in a horse-drawn carriage through Central Park, on our way to breakfast at Tiffany's.