

Every Word of This Is True,
Except for the Parts
I Made Up

by Susan Petrone

The *Heebie-Jeebie Girl* is a true story, except for the parts I made up.

I would venture to say that every writer imbues their work with hints and flashes from their own lives. Characters sometimes resemble real people or events large and small harken back to something that actually happened. We find inspiration in real life. I took things a little further with *The Heebie-Jeebie Girl*. The crux of the story is based on a real life incident that happened in my family. Much of the novel takes place in what was a real neighborhood called Smoky Hollow in Youngstown, Ohio, and it features a number of characters who may or may not resemble some of my actual relatives. What are risks and rewards inherent in basing a novel on real-life events or real-life places or real people?

The Heebie-Jeebie Girl is set in 1977 and is the closest I've come to writing historical fiction. I feel compelled to add that it is terrifying to think that I'm now old enough that something in my lived experience could qualify as historical fiction. The story revolves around a little girl with a talent for picking the daily lottery number. When her grandmother is robbed of her lottery winnings, the little girl and her great uncle decide to try and find the perps themselves. I can tell you that much of the above synopsis is true. My family is from Youngstown—both of my parents grew up there and most of my older siblings were born there. I spent a lot of time in that city all through my childhood and adolescence. Years and years ago, there was a period of several months when one of my Youngstown cousins would correctly pick

the daily three-digit lottery numbers. She was, I think, five or six at the time. As a result, her mother (my aunt) and our mutual grandmother won a lot of money playing the daily number. You might ask “Well, how much is a lot?”

When I was writing the book, I had a wonderful correspondence with my Uncle Ed—my mother’s younger brother. I asked him what he remembered about the lottery numbers. I want to share a little bit of one of his replies with you. Note that N. refers to the younger cousin who was picking the numbers. Also, when he refers to Uncle Ed, he’s referring to his uncle—my grandmother’s brother. You know how certain names get passed down in families? We had a couple of Eds. In the book, Great Uncle Ed became Uncle Joe. Side note: don’t give two characters the same name unless it’s part of the plot or a Russian novel. The reply read in part:

“My Mom and Uncle Ed would log all the winning numbers on a daily basis. Every day, and I mean every day, Uncle Ed would go to the McGuffey Mall on the east side and buy lottery tickets. I don’t think they ever missed a day. If for some reason Uncle Ed couldn’t go they would have a neighbor by the only name I knew him by, Stinky Eddie, buy the tickets. He got his name because he DID stink, never took a bath. If N. gave out a number for the day they would double down on the number...it was crazy. One day N. gave my Mom a number and Uncle Ed and her bet about \$5.00 on one number, I was at the Tennis Club that night and happened to see the drawing on TV...I couldn’t believe it. I called home and they were hysterical. They won about \$2500.00. That solidified her name as the hee-bie-jeebie girl.”

So yeah, that was twenty-five hundred bucks in one pop. Like I said, grandma really did win a lot of money. And two guys pretending to be from the water department really did come to her house and rob her. Those events were the

seed that grew into *The Heebie-Jeebie Girl* the novel, not the heebie-jeebie girl, my cousin.

The actual events happened sometime in the early 1980s. I chose to set the novel in 1977 because that was sort of the tipping point for the city of Youngstown. On September 19, 1977, aka Black Monday, the Youngstown Sheet & Tube closed and threw 5,000 people out of work overnight. If you remember how much the 2019 closing of the Lordstown GM plant decimated the area, multiply that by five and you get an idea of the effect. It wasn't just economic—it did a number on the city's psyche. Plus the winter of 1977-78 was brutal, with the biggest snowstorm in 40 years in January of '78. The blizzard figures fairly prominently in the story—I didn't have to make it up. It's convenient when natural disasters align with the story you're telling. Rather than setting it when these events actually took place, putting it in 1977 offered higher stakes for the characters. And it also got me thinking about the city as a storyteller. More on that later.

The lottery numbers and the ensuing robbery always troubled me and fascinated me. My grandmother was unharmed, but they took all of her money, and not just the money she had won playing the daily number. There was a generation in America who lived through the Great Depression of the 1930s and didn't trust the banks to keep their money. They hid a lot of it at home. My grandmother was one of those people. She wasn't generally trusting of strangers, and God forbid any of her children or grandchildren brought home a date who wasn't Catholic. And Slovak, but more on turning family members into fictional characters later.

The first draft of *The Heebie-Jeebie Girl* pretty much laid out the story as I know it and remember it. I'm sure some of my siblings or cousins or more distant relatives may have a different memory. If they do, they are welcome to write their

own book. That's one of the risks of writing about real life—someone will invariably say “That's not how it happened.” Anyhow, I wrote the story the way it happened and um, it kind of stank. Like Stinky Eddie from the neighborhood stank. The seed of the story is intriguing, but I had to learn the number one rule of turning real life into fiction: Just because it happened in real life, doesn't mean it has to happen in the book. Plus there were big questions that needed to be answered, such as, how did this little kid pick so many winning lottery numbers?

I asked my cousin—the original heebie-jeebie girl who had successfully picked all those three-digit daily numbers—and interestingly enough, she had an answer. In an email she said, in part, “I didn't feel like I was guessing; I felt like I was telling the numbers what they were going to be. Seriously. Maybe now I would say I was tapping in to some other knowledge. But, at 5 or 6 years old, I felt like, “yeah, I could make that happen if you want.” End marvelous quote.

Children's egos are expansive and delightful. When you haven't learned the limitations of the laws of physics, perhaps those laws don't exist. Originally, I had the character tell the numbers to “get in line” in the same way a precocious seven-going-on-eight-year-old might tell her older relatives “Now we're all going to draw pictures of rainbows, and I'll be the judge of which one is the best.” That's what precocious seven-year-olds do. But in a fictional world, that didn't seem to be enough. You can't just have luck. The only thing dramatic about luck is the question of when it will run out. There needs to be something more.

I don't want to talk too much about what happens in the book because I don't want to give out spoilers. Suffice to say I found a solution that added depth to the character and sets up other events in book. No matter if your characters exist in a recognizable time and place or in a completely imaginary landscape, you always need to look at what

works, what raises the stakes for the characters, and what events will transform the characters.

Writing about real places has a long history in literature. Think about James Joyce and Dublin or Mark Twain and the Mississippi River or Amy Tan and San Francisco or John Updike and New England. There is a certain delight in recognizing a place you love in the book you're reading. Dropping in place names—a street, a legendary restaurant, the revolving Schwebel's bread billboard, which is forever etched in my mind—gives the narrative authenticity and flavor. It gives it specificity.

Locations aren't always convenient for where your characters need to go. My first two novels are set in contemporary Cleveland, and while I name drop real places in those books as well, sometimes you need to play a little fast and loose with actual geography in order to, I don't know, give your characters enough time to talk while they're driving to school. Or, conversely, to get them someplace in a time frame that might be unrealistic in real world geography but can completely work in your fictional adaptation of that geography. I used a combination of real landmarks and made up streets and locations.

In an email from my uncle, he mentioned that there was a bar at the end of Audubon St. called the Tip Top that was run by a guy named Angelo. When you have good bar name and a proprietor to go with it, why make it up? The Angelo and Tip Top are in in the book, as is the legendary Mahoning Valley Restaurant, or MVR, which is still in business.

The Heebie-Jeebie Girl is set more than 40 years ago. Things change. Buildings are torn down and new ones take their place. Stores and restaurants change. The house in Youngstown's Smoky Hollow neighborhood where much of the novel takes place is based on my grandmother's house. It's no longer there. It's now part of a parking lot for a Youngstown State University dormitory. In fact, one

could argue that the neighborhood is no longer there. I used a combination of memory and maps—old and new—to piece together the geography of the neighborhood for the world of *The Heebie-Jeebie Girl*.

As I was writing, I kept wondering what the city of Youngstown would have to say about the changes within her borders. I had always structured the book so it was told by three narrative voices. Sometime around the third draft, I gave Youngstown her own narrative. At first, it was a fourth section, and it just didn't work. It felt too much like an add-on, but I really loved the idea of having the city be one of the voices telling this story. Sometimes it's nice to have an omniscient narrator, and cities know all and see all—who could be a better omniscient narrator than the city itself? But I didn't want to rewrite the book with Youngstown telling the whole story because I also loved the first-person voices that I had created and didn't want to lose them. And also I was lazy. When I was writing this, I read Dan Chaon's *Ill Will* and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, both of which play with narrative structure and the way that narrative looks on the page. It got me thinking about a different way to bring in Youngstown as a voice. Now she comments on the action and characters through call-out boxes interspersed throughout the text. (And yes, Youngstown is a she. I imagine her as the funky crone at the end of the bar telling stories while she cadges free drinks and cigarettes off of people.)

Every writer plagiarizes their real life friends and acquaintances for characters. You just do. Maybe it's the way your neighbor saunters outside in slippers and a bathrobe to get the Sunday paper or a co-worker's voice or the random person in line in front of you in the grocery store buying 52 cans of cat food and three frozen dinners, but we pull traits and quirks and bodies and voices and personalities from everywhere. In *The Heebie-Jeebie Girl*, I took it a step

further. It's based on family history, so many of the characters are directly based on family members. At a certain point, there was a little metafictional conundrum—when a novel is based on a real family and you're member of that family, do you include yourself in the book (the way Alfred Hitchcock famously made a cameo appearance in every one of his films)? I didn't include myself, but when Hope, the titular character, refers to her cousins from Cleveland, well, I'm one of those cousins.

The reward and risk of this is the same—someone might ask “Is that me?” My advice to you is to respond “Yes, it's you. Unless you don't want it to be you.” Here is the one essential caveat for basing fictional characters on real people: Never use real names without permission (some people want to turn up in a book, even if the character is a villain. Especially if the character is a villain.) But always ask or disguise them. My Uncle Ed—the one who shared his memories with me—is in the book by name, with his permission.

A smaller, very personal reward to basing characters on real people is revenge. Petty? Yes. Satisfying? Also yes. So if it makes you feel the tiniest bit better or vindicated to give a snotty little girl the first name of your elementary school nemesis, go for it. Nerdy, bookish girls like their revenge served very cold.

One of the central characters in *The Heebie-Jeebie Girl* is based on my great Uncle Ed, who really did live most of the time in the garage. In the book, he became Great Uncle Joe. Great Uncle Ed had a hot plate out there and would create different recipes that would smell up the whole neighborhood. And lest you think that everyone in Smoky Hollow was named Ed or Eddie (let's not forget about Stinky Eddie), my Uncle also wrote to me about other neighborhood characters. For example, “Another neighbor they called Pittsy, (short for Pittsburgh even though he never lived there); he

was married to a lady by the name of Sophie, who was in and out of mental hospitals. Not dangerous, only crime was she would run up and down the street without any clothes.” There’s a part of me that wishes I had included Pittsy and Sophie in the book, but I couldn’t find a way to do it without them being a distraction. Maybe I’ll save them for another novel.

The character of Dolores is based on my maternal grandmother. I didn’t know her or Great Uncle Ed as well as I would have liked. My family visited Youngstown often, but we seemed to spend more time with my father’s side of the family than with my mother’s. My grandmother was sometimes a difficult woman, but life threw her a number of curve balls. Most of the difficulties in Dolores’s life are real difficulties from my grandmother’s life. One of the unexpected rewards of writing about both her and Great Uncle Ed was the opportunity to commune with them in my imagination. It gave me a chance to get to know them in a different way, not in the way you get to know an older relative by listening to the same stories over and over, but by creating new stories for them. When you write about real people, especially those who’ve come before and are now gone, you have the opportunity to create a new mythology for them. They’re both long dead, but I feel like I gave them a chance to live on in *The Heebie-Jeebie Girl*. I’m glad to introduce some of my family to you. Happy reading.

Here are the opening pages to:

The Heebie-Jeebie Girl

Youngstown

I can hear you, you know. I can hear the rumble of cars and trucks, the jumble of notes from your radios and record players and instruments, the constant hum of you walking and talking and yelling and crying. I feel you too, your voices and all the things you've made, the clang and bang and burn of the mills and the trains that feed them. You are in me. I can feel your vibrations — don't think that I don't. I feel your parades and festivals and your fires too. Some cities sing, some play, some are filled with constant motion and tourists and people and fancy food. Me, I'm filled with fire, soot, and melting iron ore.

Sometimes I listen to you and your conversations, your arguments, your long, rambling talks about life and philosophy over a few beers, your quiet talks with your kids right before they fall asleep. Hell, I've probably heard you making love with your sweetie. Think about that next time you hop in the sack.

Some of your conversations are more interesting than others. Some of you are more interesting than others. I'm not God or your mother; I'm allowed to play favorites. I watch you the way you watch television.

I'm not old, not like some cities. I'm no Rome or London, and they'd be the first ones to say so. I'm not saying they're snobs, but they like to pretend that they're a little better than the rest of us. They act like they're only filled with the best and the brightest, like

their streets are whitewashed, like they've never had streams of piss and blood and vomit in their gutters.

I know better.

We all have our secrets and our slums. I may not be ancient, but one hundred seventy-five years is nothing to sneeze at. I'm not some Johnny-come-lately new suburb out in the boondocks or one of those crazy planned retirement communities down in Florida. And I'm not a ghost town. There's real history in me, things worth noticing, worth knowing. Writers and musicians and movie producers and real estate tycoons have called me home. You know the Warner brothers? The ones who started a movie studio and named it after themselves? They were my boys. So was Harry Burt. You say you don't know who Harry Burt was? Have you ever eaten an ice cream bar on a stick from the Good Humor man? Of course you have, and you can thank Harry Burt for that. And for all you young punks, I have two words: Stiv Bators. Also one of mine.

You might say plenty of cities can lay claim to famous sons and daughters. You might say that I'm dirty and worn out and unloved. Maybe. But does your city have magic? Not pretend, not some cheap sleight-of-hand, pay-no-attention-to-the-man-behind-the-curtain crap, but genuine can't-be-explained-by-logic-or-reason magic?

I thought not.

Joe
August 1977

Hope gave the first lottery number to me. We were out in the garage one Saturday while I worked on Ralph Krasniak's '72 Charger, which he needed to get to work on Monday. I had to get it done in one day because my sister, Dolores, is big on keeping holy the Lord's Day and all that. Technically the house belongs to her, and I live there under her good graces, so it's usually her way or the highway.

Those Chargers are so finicky that they can't run right unless it's seventy degrees, dry, and sunny. It had been a humid summer that looked to be a wet fall. Ralph was stalling out left and right, and I was tired of having him stop by every other day asking me to tinker with the choke setting or the float level. I kept doing it for free because he drives three other guys to work. The way things have been going down at the Sheet & Tube, they'll all lose their jobs if the car doesn't run. You never want to see a man lose his job, so I finally decided to rebuild the whole darn carburetor.

Hope is smart as a whip and could name half the parts by the end of the afternoon. At one point, she was holding the hi-lo screws, one in each hand, and moving them up and down like they were soldiers in a parade. Hope had been making little marching noises while she did this, but then she suddenly stopped. I glanced over at her, and she looked

like she was thinking hard about something. We looked at each other for a second, as though we were both trying to figure out what the other one was thinking. Then she asked, "Want to hear a secret, Uncle Joe?"

"Sure," I said, keeping one eye on her and one eye on the bowl in my hand.

"The daily number is going to be two-two-zero." Hope has wispy blond hair that's always hanging in front of her eyes, but as she said this, she tucked her hair behind her ears so she could look at me a little better. "You should go to McGuffey's and play it. It's going to win."

"Since when does a little girl know about playing the lottery?"

"Grandma plays it sometimes."

"My sister wastes her money. She'd be better off putting it in the bank instead of hiding what little she has in a cigar box."

"Why does she hide her money in a cigar box?"

"Because she doesn't trust the bank."

"Why not?"

"Because fifty years ago all the rich guys running the country overspent and the stock market crashed, then everybody pulled all their money out of the banks, so the banks crashed and people lost lots of money."

"That was the Depression, right?"

"Right."

"Grandma talks about it all the time. She said everybody was poor then."

"They were," I replied as I grabbed the venturi.

"Were you poor?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, if you play two-two-zero, you'll win and then you'll have some money," she said, and she sounded so confident and grown up that I almost believed her.

Hope is kind of an unusual kid. Her mother, Ruth, is my niece, and she tells me stories about how Hope says she

once saw the Virgin Mary standing in her room. Ruthie and Dolores say it's true. Ruthie's husband Phil doesn't say anything. I say it's just Hope being a little girl with a big imagination. Kids like to make things up; it's what they do.

I saw it too. It looked just like the statue of Mary they have over at Saint Columba's. Honestly, I don't know who else it could have been.

Hope watched me work a little longer, then she got bored and went inside to bother my sister for a cookie. About ten minutes later, I saw them walking down the street in the direction of McGuffey's.

When I went in for dinner that evening, after Ruthie had picked up Hope, I told Dolores about Hope picking number two-two-zero. Dolores was hunched over the stove, spooning haluski onto my plate. Just as I suspected, she said that Hope had given her the same number. "We went down to McGuffey's to play it," she added. "Just to make Hope happy. And I needed a few things anyway."

Although I don't like to see anyone waste a dollar, it's Dolores's Social Security check, not mine. I didn't say anything else. Later that evening though, I couldn't help but wander into the living room after the six o'clock news. They have a little two-minute program where they pick the daily number, and wouldn't you know it? Two-two-zero came up. "Well I'll be dipped," I said. "Hope got lucky."

"Dipped nothing," Dolores said. "Hope is beloved by God."

Hope was at the house again the next Saturday. She spent some time with me while I repaired the steps to the back porch. The basement has a walkout to the backyard — a couple of four-foot Bilco doors on an angle that lead to the root cellar. It's right next to the porch stairs, and every child that's ever lived in or visited this house wants to walk up and down those doors like they're climbing some great

big mountain. You would have thought Hope was climbing Mount Everest. Then she asked if she could help me hammer, so I started a few old nails into a piece of scrap wood, got a small hammer, and let her have at it.

For a few minutes, Hope was silent. I glanced over at her, and she was holding the hammer in both hands and tap-tap-tapping at the nails. Then she looked up at me and said, "I start school this week. Second grade."

"I think I knew that," I said, not looking up from my work. "Everybody starts school around Labor Day."

"Labor means work, right?" she asked. I nodded. "So why is everybody *off* from work on Labor Day? Why doesn't everybody go to work on Labor Day?"

"Because it's a celebration of the people who work. The

In another life, Joe Steiner probably would have ended up as one of the leaders of the American Communist Party, but the world has a habit of beating notions about equality and fairness out of young men. He started out at the Sheet & Tube, working alongside his best friend, Louis Nagy, who married Dolores back in '28. They both got fired and blackballed for union organizing in '30. Joe went off and became a mechanic, and Louis hopped on a freight train and didn't come back for eight months.

workers. You can thank the unions for that. People work hard, and for a long time the people who owned the factories took advantage of them until people got organized and demanded better treatment. That's why we have a forty-hour workweek and a minimum wage and why a child your age isn't allowed to work."

"Oh," she replied, and went back hammering the scrap wood. Hope is a smart kid, but she's still just a youngster. It's not as though we were going to have an in-depth conversation about the history of the American labor movement.

"Did you play two-two-zero last week, Uncle Joe?" she asked as she took a good whack on the scrap wood.

“No, I didn’t get a chance,” I said.

“It came up,” she said. “Grandma won.”

“So I hear. That was a lucky guess.”

She stopped her hammering. “No, it wasn’t.” I looked up at her sitting on the wrap-around front porch that I should have gotten around to painting this year. She stared right back at me. “It wasn’t a *guess*.”

“Did you know that two-two-zero was going to come up?” I half-expected her to tell me the Virgin Mary showed up in her room again and told her the daily number.

“Not exactly ...” she said. I waited as she looked off in the distance for a second like she was trying to make up her mind whether or not to tell me a secret, but she just said, “All the numbers I gave Mommy and Grandma this week have come up.”

I’ve spent enough time around kids to know that you can’t argue with them and you can’t reason with them. Children are going to believe

I can’t either. You got no idea how hard it is to get you people to shut your traps and listen.

what they’re going to believe. We all learn soon enough that we don’t have magic or superpowers or whatnot, so why go around disappointing them when they’re only seven? I said that was a mighty impressive trick

I agree.

and left it at that. Hope went back to pounding on the piece of scrap wood while I pulled the measuring tape out one more time before I started cutting. “Forty-two ...” I muttered.

“What’s forty-two?” Hope asked.

“Forty-two inches. That’s the width of the step.”

“Know what seven-five-five is?”

“Nope.”

“The number for today. It’s going to come up.”

“Is that a fact?”

“Uh-huh,” she said, and started banging on the piece of scrap wood again. We were happy enough out there until Ruth and Dolores came out on the porch.

“Hope!” Ruthie screamed. You would have thought I’d let the child get run over by a truck. “Put down that hammer this instant.”

“But Uncle Joe said I could use it.”

Ruth scurried over to the corner of the porch where Hope was squatting in front of the scrap wood and took the hammer away from her. “You could hurt yourself.”

“Joseph,” my sister said. “Why are you letting a little girl use a big hammer like that?”

“I’m letting her have fun.”

“What if she hit her finger?”

“Then she’ll learn not to hit it the next time.”

“I like hammering, Mommy,” Hope said.

“You’ve done enough hammering,” Ruthie said and took her by the hand. “Besides, you and Grandma and I have some errands to run.”

“Oh, all right...” Hope said, and she sounded just like her mother when she was a teenager. What goes around comes around, especially for parents.

The three of them bustled off together in Ruthie’s car. My sister has never learned to drive, but two of her kids still live in Youngstown, so Ruthie or Eddie comes and takes her shopping if I don’t have time to do it. They went off to Sparkle to get groceries and I don’t know what else. Nobody mentioned the number, but later that evening, I heard the sound of the television and the daily number drawing. I wandered into the living room just in time to see my sister shoving a few lottery tickets back into the pocket of her blue flowered housecoat. The television screen showed the daily number as seven-five-five.

“Did you win?” I asked casually.

“Never you mind,” my sister replied.

It seemed like a pretty big coincidence that Hope would pick the winning numbers for over a week. I wasn't sure what to make of it. I've never been much for gambling, but every gambler hits a lucky streak once in a while, Joe DiMaggio hits in fifty-six consecutive games, the Miami Dolphins go undefeated for an entire season, and a little girl picks the daily number a few times in a row. Sometimes things like that happen.

I didn't think about the lottery again until Dolores and I went over to Ruthie and Phil's house for a Labor Day picnic. My nephew Eddie and his three kids were there too. Eddie is the youngest of my sister's four kids. The other two live up in Cleveland.

For years, everybody called Eddie "Baby Eddie," until he got married, fathered a few kids, and had his wife leave them all high and dry. Then we re-

Cleveland never lets me forget all the people it's taken from me. I got something to tell Cleveland: bigger ain't always better. At least Mayor Hunter's hair never caught fire. At least the Mahoning River never caught fire, not like in *some* cities I know.

alized he wasn't a baby anymore. Eddie and his kids lived with us for a few years, until the youngest started school and Eddie had saved the down payment for a new house. That's why I moved out to the garage in the first place, to make room for Eddie and the kids, but now the garage feels like home.

Hope ran around with her big cousins while the adults relaxed on the patio. At one point she ran over to the table in between Dolores and Ruthie and took a big gulp of pink lemonade from her cup.

"Hope, sweetie," Ruthie whispered to her. "Do you have a number for Grandma?"

Hope took another slurp of lemonade, said "six-nine-five," and went back to playing freeze tag with the other kids.

“Sorry, Mom,” Ruthie said.

Dolores gave a little *c’est la vie* shrug and said, “Ask her again tomorrow.”

“What’s the matter?” Eddie said. “She gave you a number.”

“Hope’s numbers only come out when they have two of the same digits, like two-two-zero or five-five-two. And you have to play it the same day Hope gives it to you,” Ruth answered.

“You’ve got it down to a science,” I said.

“She’s given us numbers that don’t come out too.” She looked a little defensive, like having Hope give her numbers was some kind of child abuse.

“How many times have you hit the daily now, Mom?” Eddie asked.

Dolores shrugged it off. “Just a few. Hope just likes giving the numbers. It’s fun for her.”

“She’s sure good at it,” Eddie said.

“Kind of gives you heebie-jeebies, doesn’t it?” I said. There was dead silence, then Eddie sort of snorted back half a laugh.

“A little,” he said. “No offense, sis,” he added quickly.

Phil and Ruth looked at each other. Sometimes you can tell a lot about a relationship by how a husband and wife communicate without words. Phil has a wry sense of humor. Ruth takes after my sister and takes everything too seriously.

“We’ve talked about it at length,” Phil said finally. “I do find it a little... unusual. But Hope’s adding to her college fund, so I can handle unusual.” Phil heads up the circulation department for *The Vindicator*. He’s a sensible person, and since there’s kind of a dearth of those in our family, he was a welcome addition to the clan.

“Good planning,” Eddie said. “Make sure you call me the next time Hope gives you a number. At the rate

I'm saving, I might be able to afford to send my three to Youngstown State for about an hour each."

Even Ruthie and Dolores had a good chuckle about that. From the other end of the yard, we heard a low "Woooww ... " from the kiddie contingent. I glanced over and saw Eddie's three kids gathered around Hope, who was squatting on the ground. I couldn't see what they were looking at.

"What's going on over there?" Eddie asked.

"Do it again!" Lou said loud enough for half the block to hear. Whatever it was that Hope had done, she clearly didn't want to do it again because she jumped up, tapped Lou on the arm yelling "Tag! You're it!" and ran away. Edie and Nico scattered in opposite directions. Lou looked startled and then started chasing his sisters and cousin.

Sometimes it's nice to just watch kids playing. It reminds you of what it's like not to have a care in the world. All of us adults fell into a contented silence, just listening to the sounds of birds singing and kids playing. I couldn't imagine anything nicer.

"Hey, I heard the O'Keenes moved," Eddie said. "Is that true?"

I nodded. "The university made offers on all the houses on that block. They're expanding."

"The university is already big enough," Dolores muttered.

"Do you know where they moved to?" Ruthie asked. She used to pal around with the youngest O'Keene girl.

I looked over at Dolores. "Somewhere in Columbus. Helen gave me their new address," she replied. "I'll give it to you next time I see you."

"Please do. I haven't talked to Betsy O'Keene in ages." Knowing Ruthie, she'd actually write a card to her old friend. Me? I'd think about it and never do it. Enough people have come in and out of my life that I know I don't have time to go writing letters to all of them.

Ruthie excused herself to go inside and get dessert ready. And then Phil asked if Eddie had heard any news regarding the Sheet & Tube. "I've heard some rumors about lay-offs, but nothing confirmed," Phil said. "I was just wondering if you had heard anything from any reliable sources."

Eddie's a news producer down at WFMJ, so he generally knows what's going on in the city. "The reliable sources are all back in the old neighborhood," Eddie said, and they both looked over at Dolores and me

"I don't like to think about it," Dolores said and went in to help Ruthie with dessert, leaving the three of us men to sort out all of Youngstown's problems.

"I was working on Ralph Krasniak's car a couple weeks ago," I said. "He's still over at the Campbell Works. He said everybody there is pretty nervous."

"Wow, Ralph Krasniak," Eddie said. "I remember him, He played for Chaney when I was at Ursuline. Hard hitter. I hated playing against him, but he always seemed nice off the field. I didn't know he was still at the Sheet & Tube."

"For the time being," I said. "He said there's a lot of talk about lay-offs."

"That's what they're saying down at the paper," Phil said.

"Here's to all the guys down at the Sheet & Tube," Eddie said, and we raised three bottles of Iron City beer in their honor. Then the three of us were quiet again until the ladies brought out the dessert.

There wasn't a Daily Number drawing that day, and the number the next day wasn't six-nine-five. But on Wednesday, Dolores got a quick phone call from Ruthie and then she hurried down to McGuffey's. That night, when they drew the number, my sister yelled "Holy Jupiter!" She usually only yells that when someone takes her picture and the flash blinds her. The number was three-three-zero. I figured she must have bought a bunch of tickets for her to yell "Holy Jupiter." A few

days a week, there'd be a late morning phone call, a quick trip to McGuffey's, and a "Holy Jupiter!" that evening when they drew the number. Dolores hit the number enough times that I could almost believe Hope really *did* make the number come up. Hope is a sweet girl, but she's a little different, what with the lottery numbers and how grown-up she seems sometimes and the whole thing about seeing the Blessed Mother in her bedroom.

I couldn't figure out how she was coming up with these numbers. None of us could. There was no logical explanation. Hope was picking two or three numbers a week right out of thin air. Either she had a direct line to the lottery commission or she was the luckiest kid I've ever met. I tried talking to Dolores about it one night over supper. I just asked casually "How do you think Hope picks all those numbers?"

Dolores' eyes slanted just a hair. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, how does she do it? You've got to admit, she's picked more winning numbers in the past month than most people pick in a lifetime. It defies the laws of probability." I may only have a tenth-grade education, but I know enough about mathematics to know that the odds of any three-digit number coming up straight are a thousand to one. And Hope was beating those odds on a regular basis.

"She doesn't always win," Dolores said, as though I was the village idiot. "Sometimes she gives Ruthie and me a number that doesn't come out."

"Those are the ones without the double digit. Every time she gives you a number with a double digit, it comes out."

"Well obviously the odds are better when one of the numbers repeats."

I about threw up my hands at that comment. "Look, dear sister, there are ten balls in each hopper numbered zero through nine. The chance of any one of those balls coming up is the same — one in ten for each digit. Multiply

ten by ten by ten, it equals one thousand. It doesn't matter if the three-digit number is five-five-five or one-two-three or zero-zero-zero. The odds are still one in a thousand that the person buying the lottery ticket will pick the winning number — those three digits in that particular order."

"You're forgetting that Hope is a very special girl," Dolores said as though that were the end of the conversation.

"All of your grandchildren are special. You've got a couple of musical prodigies, two mechanical geniuses, I don't know how many artistic prodigies..."

Sometimes I almost feel bad for Dolores Steiner Nagy. There's a small hump on her back that she always said was an injury from bumping around in a roller coaster when she was younger. Something about her spine getting twisted. It's probably that scoliosis. The hump's gotten bigger as she's gotten older. During the Depression, she was on her own with her kids and her parents while her husband rode the rails like so many other unemployed, lost men did. He came home every couple of years and got her pregnant then went back out on the road. He didn't find a steady job or stay home for more than four months at a time until '38. As for the roller coaster injury, the bumping around might have injured her spine, but it couldn't shake the baby out of her. She ended up having to marry Louis Nagy anyway.

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't. Hope is a fine child, but you have thirteen other grandchildren who are just as good." I didn't mean to get annoyed, but Dolores tends to play favorites among her grandkids. When Eddie and his kids lived with us, Dolores used to get mad at the oldest, Edie, because she looks just like Eddie's ex-wife. That isn't the child's fault. I don't like seeing people play favorites, especially not with family.

Dolores primly wiped her mouth with her napkin and put it back in her lap. “Hope is especially beloved by God.”

“Because she said she saw the Blessed Mother in her bedroom and she picks the Daily Number?”

“Yes. You just keep reading all your science books and studying engines. You won’t find an explanation for this. There are some things in this world that you just have to take on faith.”

Sometimes I wish I shared my sister’s faith in God. Life would be a lot simpler if I did. I don’t mean to say that Dolores is simple minded. She isn’t. But the Catholic Church got its hooks into her good and early, and she’s content there. Myself, I have my doubts. Way back in the dark ages, I was an altar boy at St. Cyril and Methodius. Back then, just about everything in our life revolved around the church — school, sports, social life, everything. I spent most of my waking hours there. I remember more than once seeing a couple of the priests drinking up a storm on a Friday afternoon, smoking cigars and cussing when they thought no one could hear them, even though drinking and smoking and cursing were things they kept telling us kids not to do. I don’t fault them for it, but it made me realize that priests are just people like the rest of us. They’re no closer to God than I am.

Putting too much faith in anything will get you into trouble. I’ve seen banks fail, lived through two World Wars and a couple other wars to boot, watched one president and some other good men get shot and another president resign in disgrace. And the day after that conversation with Dolores, I saw a company kill an entire city in one fell swoop. One Monday in mid-September, the first shift showed up for work at the Sheet & Tube Campbell Works and found padlocks on the gates. The Campbell Works was only a few miles down Wilson Avenue from us — half the neighborhood worked there.

We were one of the few families in Smoky Hollow who didn't have someone working at one of the mills. My sister's late husband, Louis, and I both worked at Republic Steel for a short time back when we were arrogant young men. Louis got blackballed for union organizing. I didn't like the heat and the noise, so I quit when he left. I guess it was somewhere between solidarity and getting out while the getting was good. At any rate, that was the family's last excursion into the world of steel mills. Dolores made sure all four of her kids got an education and steered them away from any sort of factory work.

Even if you didn't work in one of the mills, you couldn't escape them. Youngstown is full of steel mills, and the Sheet & Tube was the granddaddy of them all. The blast furnaces and railroad tracks were part of the landscape — you saw the steel and smelled it every day. If you were close enough, you heard it. If you were in there, you felt it. And everybody breathed it. When the wind was right, we'd have to sweep super-fine black steel dust off the front porch. The mill was everything. And then the owners just closed up shop, leaving five thousand workers and their families out in the cold.

You're probably expecting me to say something now, aren't you? Next time someone rips your heart out and tramples in it the dirt, I'll be sure to ask you how you feel.

The Sheet & Tube still had the Brier Hill Works, but it was smaller and way up on the North Side. A handful of guys managed to get transferred over there, even though a fool could see the Brier Hill Works wasn't going to be around much longer. A few transferred to mills in other states, and the whole city protested the closing, but everybody knew the Sheet & Tube wouldn't reopen.

Dolores and I were both on Social Security, and the house was paid for years ago. Plus I still made a little money under the table as a mechanic. We could get by the same

as we always had. But half of our neighbors went on unemployment overnight, and everybody started wondering if it was time to take the university up on the offer to buy their house because nobody else was going to.

A few weeks after they closed the Campbell Works, I spent an afternoon fixing the timing belt and doing a quick tune-up on Joey Vincenza's Dodge and then walked down to McGuffey's to get a bottle of beer.

When John McGuffey rang it up for me, he shook his head. "Gee, Joe, with all the money your sister's won lately, you think she'd at least give you the money for a six-pack."

Dolores' money is Dolores' money. I leave it alone, so when I asked, "Do you know how much she's won?" I honestly wasn't sure.

"I don't know. A lot. She cashes in a bunch of tickets every Saturday. What's her system?" He lowered his voice. "Does she have a line on the Super Lotto? You know, the million-dollar jackpot?"

"Not that I know of. I think this is all just a run of good luck," I said.

"Well, tell her to bring you along instead of Hope next time she cashes in. She shouldn't be carrying around all that dough on her own with just a little kid with her. Not these days."

Granted, it doesn't take a lot of money to impress a cheapskate like John McGuffey, but Dolores had to be winning more than I suspected for him to say something like that. When I asked her if she wanted me to go with her the next time she cashed in her tickets, she shrugged me off.

"I know everybody for eight blocks," she said. "Nobody is going to mug me when I'm walking home from McGuffey's."

She was right. Nobody mugged her. Instead they came to the house.