



Uncle George and his violin.

CHAPTER 2

UNCLES

My grandmother bemoaned the fact that Uncle George had gone to medical school and quit before he finished because he didn't have enough time for his music. Then he went to law school, passed the bar and decided to go on the road on concert tours with the quartet he formed, and gave up the law too. My grandmother was sure he would starve. When he tired of traveling and sleeping in different hotels, he became a violin teacher downtown at the Fine Arts Building, started making money, and moved out. He supported my grandmother while she lived, and kept contributing to the rent on our apartment.

Uncle George, everyone else knew him as George Perlman, left a legacy of music, composing and publishing beautiful pieces for the violin. Over the years he became acquainted with many famous violinists, such as Yehudi Menuhin and Mischa Elman. Even Jack Benny was a friend of his.

He always had an anecdote to tell at family dinners. My favorite was the story about a student who was playing one of his compositions at her home in Los Angeles and looked out the window to see a little white-haired man -- his hair wild about his

head -- standing outside her window as she played. She went out to see what he wanted and he said he also played the violin and asked her what music she was playing. She told him and gave him my uncle's address. And that was how Uncle George befriended Albert Einstein.

Uncle George was the kind of man who was always inquiring into other worlds, other disciplines. Music and the violin remained his first priority but I remember when he became intrigued with spiritualism. The occult captured him and he began going to séances. At one of them he met Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, better known as the author of the Sherlock Holmes books, but also an authority on the spirit world.

At one dinner Uncle George regaled us with an account of a disembodied trumpet that played at the request of someone's dead relative. The trumpet traveled around the séance unassisted, tootling away. He was amazed by this and insulted when the family nodded politely and snickered behind their napkins. He was always trying to carry us along on his latest enthusiasm.

I, having heard of Sherlock Holmes by then (I was almost eight and reading everything I could find), was more interested in the author aspect of Conan Doyle than the ghost factor, although I must admit, I was a little intrigued. Like Uncle George, I believed everything was possible until it was proven wrong or mistaken.

Then he persuaded my parents to go with him to a séance so my mother could talk to their long-dead father. I begged and pleaded to go along but my parents refused to take me.

I couldn't wait to hear a report from my mother the next day. She debunked the whole event, said it was a big fake. She could see the people behind the door running the séance and thought it was terrible that they were taking advantage of the gullibility of strangers.

I was very disappointed and the next time I saw Uncle George, when he came over to visit my grandmother, I asked him. He smiled and said, "It was quite interesting, you know. I'm sorry your parents wouldn't let you come along. You would have enjoyed meeting Sir Conan Doyle. He's a fascinating man, but

now he's gone back to England, having completed his studies of the occult in this country."

I asked again about the séance, whether he had spoken with my grandfather.

"Unfortunately the circumstances weren't quite right for our little experiment. The medium was not feeling well and her powers were weak. I felt badly that I had dragged your mother and father out to see a failed event. But maybe we can arrange it again." My mother refused the offer.

At another dinner he told us about his meeting and subsequent friendship with Harry Houdini, the famous magician and escape artist. Uncle George was endlessly fascinated by people who he felt were stretching the envelope of the world we knew and the world we didn't know.

By the time Uncle George met Houdini, he had decided that the practitioners of the occult were charlatans and their claims of reaching dead loved ones were fake, all fake. Houdini was one of their chief critics, another reason Uncle George and he became friends. Houdini said the ruses they used to fool people were nothing more than magic tricks, not even good magic tricks.

None of this made Uncle George think any less of the possibility of a spirit world, another dimension, a place we could not reach while alive. And since no one could prove or disprove it, I agreed with him that we should keep our options open. But then, I usually agreed with him.

Uncle George was sure he knew the real reason Houdini had died and it wasn't because of a failed escape, as many thought. He was sure none of Houdini's tricks had done him in. He never said what he thought had killed him, though Houdini had hinted that he was ill, suffering from mysterious stomach pains. Much later I found out that Houdini had died of peritonitis from a burst appendix. Not glamorous or mysterious, but at least he was human.

After Uncle George had moved out of our apartment - to my great regret - my father finally was able to listen to the Cubs base-

ball broadcasts on Sunday. My father would never put his wishes before anyone else's in the house.

Uncle George knew nothing about the Cubs. Music was his world and he loved living in it. He taught the violin until a month before he died, at the age of 103 in the year 2000, his life touching three centuries, hard for me to imagine.

My younger uncle, Sammy, was a dentist, so my grandmother didn't worry about him. She had too much to do worrying about everyone else. As it turned out, he was the one she should have worried about most. First, he had tuberculosis and then, later, cancer.

Uncle Sammy left his own legacy, crocheting colorful wool afghans for everyone in the family, to keep his fingers limber, he said. My healthy teeth came, I'm sure, from the special care he gave me when I was small. He was so gentle and soft-spoken, his voice never rose above a whisper.

He would tell me stories about the people who came to get their teeth fixed, how he was able to take care of them so they weren't hurt or uncomfortable. He talked about their children and their lives, ordinary lives, but I was always interested, his voice was so soft, his manner so gentle. And I knew he spoke the truth about not hurting anyone, since he had never hurt me, even when he was drilling a deep cavity. I had very few of those.

He married but then had to go to a tuberculosis sanatorium and shortly afterward his wife divorced him. He didn't know he had cancer. After they declared him free of TB, he moved in with us again and went back to his dental practice. His patients returned because he was so good at his work and didn't charge much. But his stomach kept hurting and he kept ignoring the pain and dosing himself with strong painkillers. Then it was too late and he faded quietly from our lives.

I was not allowed to go to his funeral. I was never allowed to go to any funeral of anyone I knew who died. To save me from the grief, my mother said. As if it did.

ELAINE MARGOLIS

While Uncle Sammy lived with us, he slept on a cot in the dining room. Aunt Bernice had moved into the sleeping porch after Uncle George left, and I eventually joined her there, some years later.



Uncle Sammy