

Chapter 5

TRANSITIONS: 1932-1935

*“Time goes by, time brings changes, you change, too....
Never see it coming, the world caves in on you.”*

Our Town - Randy Newman

i - Goodbye, Grandpap

In 1932, when I was in the fifth grade, the first shock of my life occurred. Walking up the hill to school after lunch at Grandma Wallace’s, I met my cousin Ruth Lee who excitedly informed me, “Billy, your grandfather is dead!” I knew she meant my great-grandfather, Lorenzo D. Rohrer, “Grandpap.”

“He is not!” I contradicted. I knew he had had an operation two weeks before and was doing all right...“You’re wrong! Grandpap’s *not* dead! He’s *not*!”

After school, as I approached the house I saw Jeanette on the front porch cleaning the glass panel of the front door. Just then, Mrs. Koon, the doctor’s wife, yelled from across the street, “How’s Mr. Rohrer getting along?”

“He’s dead!” Jeanette yelled back frantically.

I ran past her into the house, buried my head in a pillow and cried inconsolably. I had never experienced a death before but I knew it meant...the end, burial in the ground, gone forever. I wouldn’t have my sweet Grandpap any more.

At first, I did not want to look at him in his casket in the front room. When eventually I did, I asked why the black lump that I used to see on the back of his right hand was gone and someone told me the doctor had cut it off when Grandpap was asleep for the operation on his stomach. (The death certificate says he died of

inflammation of the gall bladder and “senile decay.”)

Pershing and I got to ride in the 75-mile funeral trip to Keedysville (Washington County), Maryland, where Lorenzo Dow Rohrer had lived and two miles from the farm where he had been born 86 years earlier. After the burial, relatives, whom I met for the first time, hosted a marvelous dinner. The wound was soothed but Grandpap’s memory would remain precious.

ii - So Long, 216 Baltimore Avenue

Not long after Grandpap’s death, Ma, Jeanette, Mother and I moved several blocks up the street on Baltimore Avenue to an ample apartment at number 422. My father had moved elsewhere and my grandfather, Will, was still living out of town. It was fun moving to a new environment, even though I no longer had a big yard to play in. However, the few blocks’ distance didn’t keep me from going to Alan Trevaskis’s to play after school and on Saturdays and no one seemed to care if we played in my old yard at 216.

But then came the day when workmen began razing our big house. It had been taken over by the city to make way for a connecting roadway. I don’t remember feeling sad. In a way it was exciting! After the building was demolished, it was fun to climb around in the rubble and go down into the pit that had been the cellar - until I *fell* into the pit one day, escaping, luckily, with only scrapes and bruises. But what a finale to my first home, the opening chapter of my life.

iii - Mother

Katherine Anna, as my mother was baptized in 1901, was the fourth of the Wallace children. (She would eventually adopt the “Kathryn” spelling.) By the time she was ten, there were already nine persons in the household. All hands had to pitch in, so early on Kathryn learned what it meant to work. In the summer, when she wasn’t doing her chores at home, she went door to door selling vegetables from her grandparents’ garden. She loved to tell this story on herself:

I went to this house for the first time and knocked on the door and the lady came and said she didn’t want any vegetables. Then I went around the corner and

thinking it was another house, knocked on the door and a lady came and said: 'I just told you around front I didn't want any of your vegetables and I still don't. Now git!'

Kathryn was a shy, sensitive little girl. This rebuff must have jolted her or at least made a strong impression, for it remained at the top of her list of childhood stories.

Kathryn went to Saints Peter and Paul's School and received her first communion in 1911 when in the fifth grade and at the age of 10, the usual age then for that ceremony.

When she was 14, she went to work at Footer's Dye Works, saying she was "16 but small for my age." As an ironer she had to stand on a box to reach the ironing table. In later years, Mother bragged about that first job: *Footer's was famous! Why, people from all over the world sent expensive garments to be cleaned, like velvet robes from aristocrats in England.*

In 1920, Kathryn married Charlie Rohrer and the following year I was born. Some aspects of our early family life have already been recounted in these pages.

Lasky's Clothing Store, that early-Twenties workplace of my mother, was situated next to the railroad subway entrance on Baltimore Street, a short walk from home. She was a salesperson, and how she qualified for that type of work I don't know. It could well be that she was hired on the basis of her good looks and appearance - pictures of her from about age 21 on generally show her to be a pert little lady, stylishly coiffed and dressed. Later she worked at the Star Clothing Company, a men's store, as a *bookkeeper*. I don't know how this was possible, given Mother's brief schooling.



Kathryn Wallace at age 14

In 1933, Mother and I moved in with her parents at 529 Fayette Street. I lived there until I was in my nineteenth year. And before I write another word, let me say that I am ever-grateful to my grandfather and grandmother Wallace for taking my mother and me in. Oh, I was not anxious to move. In the apartment at 422 Baltimore Avenue we had a large bedroom, while at Wallaces' we brought to nine the number of persons occupying one small house.

In “taking us in,” my grandparents were following a precedent: In about 1920 they had given a temporary home to their eldest child, Marie and her two-year-old daughter Ruth Lee when Marie’s husband, John Hoffman, died. I often heard Grandma say: *The door is always open to our children. This is their home.* And this was not a new idea to Theodore and Mary Wallace: When they were first married in 1894, they lived for a few years with Grandma’s parents, the Geatzes.

Mother had not discussed the reason for our move, but I assumed that it had to do with my father. Trouble had started back at 216, possibly as early as 1925, the year my parents and I transferred from the third floor quarters. Not long after our move to Fayette Street, I overheard my mother and one of her sisters whispering and I discerned “divorce.” My heart sank, but I was too timid to mention it to Mother. A few months later, the divorce was confirmed by a newspaper notice which the proprietor of the corner store brought to my attention, with gross insensitivity, in the presence of two of my playmates.

Mother never did mention the divorce. Never. I believe she feared that because her marriage had failed, she had failed *me* and simply could not face up to talking to me about the matter. Or, her silence might have been an act of loving kindness toward me: a frank explanation of the divorce might have meant revealing facts about my father that I would not have understood or if I did understand, would have turned me against him. Whatever the reason, the divorce did not seem to make any difference. Mother was not about to remarry, because to do so would violate her Catholic beliefs. She just went on working to support me and taking care of me when she was not working.

Actually, Mother tended to do too much for me. I believe she suffered from a sort of guilt complex, a compulsion to insure against my being a burden on anyone else in the household. As I grew older, I felt babied and I resented it. My resentment sometimes came out as angry outbursts against Mother which brought her to tears; then I felt bad and cried, too, and we would hug and make up.

Mother was so sensitive about our dependency on her parents that she tended to make me share that sensitivity. If I said or did anything that offended Grandma, Pop or one of the girls, Mother would later, in private, say something like: *You mustn’t say things like that. Remember, Honey, this is not our home, we only live here.* But I knew Grandma did not feel that way and I don’t believe Pop did either.

When I was twelve or thirteen, I began to wish that my mother was not the pretty young thing that she was but, rather, a typical (I thought) *Mom* like Mickey Rooney’s in the movies and like most other kids had. I gradually outgrew that attitude, especially in high school when some of my girl classmates who got to know Mother in her workplace commented on my “attractive, friendly mom.” Of course,

Mother was pleased when I carried such compliments back to her. (If my friends had actually said “mom,” I doubt if I repeated it, for Mother had long ago trained me to call her “Mother.”)

In spite of tensions between my mother and me, I liked her and generally enjoyed being around her. I would often sit in the wild cherry tree in Henderson’s lot across the street from our house and wait for her to come home in the evening. When I saw that trim, blond-haired lady walking at her snappy pace up Fayette Street, I would wave and call to her and she would give me a big *Hi, Honey. Now don’t fall! Come on down and wash your hands for supper.* Then I would climb down and go in and see if she had brought me anything from town.

About 1933, Hunter D. Fox entered the life of Kathryn Wallace Rohrer. As a traveling salesman from Richmond, Virginia, he came to Cumberland periodically to sell brake shoes to automobile dealers and parts stores. He somehow met Kathryn and, taken by her attractiveness and her sweet, somewhat reserved manner, began dating her. Foxie, probably in his late forties, was tall, slender, with thinning black hair and pointed features, not handsome but immaculately dressed and groomed. He apparently made good money. He often came to see Mother and they would talk in the living room or go to dinner or a movie. Occasionally he took her with him on business trips. The Wallaces liked him. He had good Southern manners and a certain charm. Once in a while Grandma invited him for dinner, to his great delight, for he genuinely appreciated good home cooking. Even Pop seemed to approve of “Fox,” as he called him, in spite of the fact that his daughter Kathryn was still a married woman in the eyes of the Catholic church. I resented Foxie at first but eventually warmed up to him and looked forward to his Cumberland visits. He gave me several nice gifts. Sometime after my father died, in August 1935, Foxie gave Mother a diamond ring. It was never clear to me whether it was an engagement ring or not, but his intentions were apparently serious for he took Mother to Richmond to meet his mother.

Returning to Kathryn’s career: After Star Clothing, in about 1936, she went to Public Service on the other side of Baltimore Street. This was the big new-concept (self-service) department store that had been brought to Cumberland not long before by two enterprising businessmen (Mr. Sachs and Mr. Ossip) from Johnstown, Pennsylvania. Kathryn’s job was in cigars, cigarettes and sundries. One of the sundries was bay rum (an after-shave lotion) which, contrary to conscience, Mother had to sell to destitute bums who somehow extracted its alcoholic content, or drank it straight for all I know. Remember, these were the hard-time Thirties, when there were thousands of unemployed men who had simply “gone to the dogs” and often tried to benumb their brains with cheap booze. Some environment for meek little Kathryn! It was a job, though.

iv - Gains and Losses

Backtracking again: When I moved to Fayette Street in 1933, I acquired three new pals: Jimmy Murray, a classmate who lived next door, and Sonny (Arthur, Jr.) Young and his brother Billy who lived in the next block. Jimmy had heart trouble so his physical activities were severely limited. His mother invited the Youngs and me to play cards with Jimmy. Our sessions, always embellished with refreshments, were very pleasant. Jimmy always won. We suspected it was because he spent his daily enforced rest periods mastering the games, working out odds, etc. I already knew, from being in the same class at school with him, that he was a mathematical whiz.

Sonny and Billy and I did some things by ourselves, too. Like going to a secluded (we thought) part of nearby Wills Creek to skinny dip. We called it "B.A.B." (Bare-ass Beach). One day the bushes on the bank parted and there stood MR. YOUNG, my friends' father! All he said was, "Get home!" That was our last swim at B.A.B. I never did learn how we were found out.

That same summer I stayed at a hotel for the first time. Fokie took me with him on his business visit to Parkersburg, West Virginia, where we stayed overnight at the Chancellor Hotel. I sent a hotel postcard to Mother on which was printed *Rooms with shower bath, two persons, \$3.50 to \$4.00.*

In December 1933, Saint Peter and Paul's inaugurated a weekly evening service, a so-called "perpetual novena" for the supplication of Saint Anthony of Padua. This type of Catholic devotional service was highly popular in that era. Father Leander, a young, wiry, joke-telling, slightly wacky priest was given the task of recruiting and training a boys' choir which would lead the singing of the hymns, some of which had been specially written for the new service. Billy Young and I were his first and, if I remember correctly, his only recruits. Our opening hymn was always "Si quaeris miracula" - "If miracles you seek..." and for the climactical Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament we led the people in "Tantum Ergo" and "O Salutaris Hostia," although the congregation needed no supporting choir for those songs of ancient Catholic tradition.

Father Leander's boys' choir continued into 1934 for a while, by which time I found it boring. I begged off: *I can't sing that high any more - my voice is changing.* Feeling my Adam's apple, Father Leander questioned my claim, but I

had made up my mind. Anyway, my pal and fellow boy soprano, Billy Young, was going to join his brother in the seminary in September. I wasn't going to do *this dumb choir thing* by myself!

When the Young boys came home from the seminary during the summer vacation of 1935, our friendship picked up where it had left off.

Along came Brother Patrick - George W. Dull. Pat was a young man who had come to Saints Peter and Paul's monastery to become a Capuchin brother - an unordained monk who would serve the religious community in duties not restricted to priests. During free times, he would walk the short distance down Fayette Street to Youngs' or Wallaces' and sit for hours on the front porch talking to us boys on religious subjects. He was gentle, soft-spoken. We never questioned his motives, as one well might in today's climate.

Then tragedy blighted my summer.

In the summer of 1934 my father had been diagnosed as having tuberculosis of the lungs and was admitted to the Maryland State Sanatorium at Sabillasville, Maryland. Presumably he was progressing satisfactorily. For a while he edited a patients' newsletter at the sanatorium. He came home once for a visit, and I went to Ma and Jeanette's apartment to see him. He was gaunt and looked much older than I remembered him. In December he sent me a Christmas card. Eight months later, on August 6, 1935, he developed uremia, brought on by chronic nephritis, or Bright's disease, and he died on August 13. He was 40.

Though distanced from my father for years, I hurt badly.

My father's body was brought to Cumberland, then taken to Keedysville, Maryland, for burial in the Rohrer lot at Fairview Cemetery. I refused to go to the gravesite and stood by the car in the distance and cried. Daddy received military honors. The United States flag was removed, folded and brought to me. Then the family went to the home of relatives for a meal before the motor trip back to Cumberland.

My father had never talked to me about his service in the United States Army during World War I, except to tell me once that he had been a corporal. Ma, Jeanette and Florence used to remark: *Charlie was gassed and had pneumonia in the war. His lungs were weak and that's probably why he picked up tuberculosis.* That was the extent of my knowledge, until much later, in 1992, I did some research and found out what a traumatic experience the war had been for my father.¹¹

¹¹Charles William Rohrer, monograph: *Charles Webster Rohrer, Army Service in World War I*, February 14, 1993.

Brother Patrick consoled me and gave me this verse by Anthony Klinker:

*God fashions the heart in sorrow,
He fashions the heart in pain,
God heals the ache when hearts would break
So they will be happy again.*

Not long thereafter, he left the monastery, we knew not why, disappearing from our lives as quietly as he had entered it.

Sonny and Billy returned to Saint Fidelis Seminary.

Summer was over.