

BILL CHERNIN

## William

THERE IS A PHOTOGRAPH OF a very old man, my great-grandfather, and in it he is wearing a very old coat and a very old hat and some very old pants that hang on him the way old men's do. His clothing might have been precious to his family after he died, as a memento of him, for their scent and feel, but now, nearly thirty years after his passing, not a stitch of them remains.

In the photo his coat is fastened with a very large safety pin, attached across the area of his sternum; the buttons had apparently all fallen off. There was, from what I know of my grandparents' lives (with whom he lived when this picture was taken), no shortage of money to buy new buttons. I know they were not wealthy—they had struggled as the coal-mining people of their town did, but they had never known the poverty of their parents' generation: my great-grandfather knew the poverty of Dickensian England, a poverty and hopelessness so severe that it made him cross the ocean to seek shelter here.

Possibly he wore the big safety pin out of nostalgia, or peculiarity, or because after a lifetime filled with thrift he saw little sense in wasting money on buttons, or buttons on his coat, when his safety pin would do the job perfectly well. Maybe he'd started using it the day his last button dropped off and he'd never gotten around to replacing it, until eventually, it held a place in his routine, and comfort forbade it being removed.

The waistband of his old pants is not visible but I can imagine them being held up with rope, which would be consistent with the rest of his attire. His hat looks to be tweed, but I can't see it clearly enough to be certain, although I can tell that it was well worn. It's certainly cloth and it's certainly unshaped, and it falls about its brim like the ancestor of the baseball hat, in the style worn by chimney sweeps, labourers, and almost all other working-class men at the time of the First World War.

It was at that time that my great-grandfather had been a young man, after the Titanic had sunk, at the time of the Halifax explosion, before penicillin was discovered. It was at that time that my great-grandfather actually stopped being young and proceeded into middle age, and like all men of that age, he bade his last regard for fashion goodbye, and wore the style of those days for the rest of his life, as he was doing on the day this picture was taken.

He is holding a pipe in one of his hands and it looks very comfortable there. It seems his hand and the sinews of his arms knew it very well. I think it held a place as a favourite item. I'm sure he reached for it when he took a break or paused in mid-mornings and afternoons, and during any moments when he was comfortable and alone. Filling it and lighting it were probably as sacred as lighting Sabbath candles and watching little babies sleep.

He is standing in the doorway of a little shed, outside the doorway actually, on a single step that he or my grandfather must have built. Inside the shed I can make out a cardboard box with a logo that I'm sure has vanished from the faces of both the earth and commerce. The door opens to the yard and reveals a double Z design that was the spine of all simple wooden doors in those days. The base of the shed is ringed with some sort of tarpaper or shingle which has a pattern of red bricks painted on it. The pattern is not uniform and betrays at a glance that the bricks are not real, but it was a valiant effort at improving appearances.

In my great-grandfather's other palm he is holding the hand of a small boy, my brother. My brother is perhaps three and he is looking unhappy. He is wearing a hooded sweatshirt with the hood up and the bottom tucked into his little jeans; sprigs of blond hair are sticking out from beneath his hood and he looks like a denim starfish or a sturdy cotton projectile. I am standing at the opposite end of the stair, deliberately apart, defiant. I am wearing rubber boots and a thick baby-blue cotton sweater. I am slightly taller than my brother and slightly older, my head is bare. All of us are looking into the camera but only my great-grandfather seems to be conscious of the moment. Nobody is smiling.

This is all that the photo reveals but there is much more that I remember. I remember the coal shed next to my great-grandfather's shed, where we are all standing, and the shed next to that, and the garage next to that where my grandfather's precious red car resided. And I remember the blooming tree that towered above that corner of the yard, and the flowers and picket fences and wooden ornaments, and grass and gravel. I remember the single-story green house in which they lived, and the tall black shadow

of the coal elevator which stood in the distance marking the entrance to the mine where my grandfather and great grandfather toiled, doing honest labour but for the coal dust they smuggled out unwittingly in their pure pink lungs. I also remember the dam filled with cold blue water pumped out of that same mine, and from which I was warned to stay away and in which many unwanted pets, I was told, were drowned.

As I look into this photo today, just weeks after my own father passed away, I see what my great-grandfather was doing that day as we were having our picture taken. I had never before noticed there was anything to notice.

He was staring into the lens as if he was peering into eternity, trying to defy space and time and the great gully of emptiness that stood between us as children, and him as an old man. He was willing us to remember him, awaiting this day of recognition, even then.

I believe he knew that his days were numbered and that soon the little cords of time we use to measure our lives would be cut off, his from ours, and our knot undone. I believe he understood that having his picture taken with us that day was a moment, a precious moment not to come again. The moment meant a great deal to him and he must have known it meant very little to us, but that in time it would, when we were old enough to recognize it. So he stared hard into the camera that day, allowing himself to be captured on film, as he was, filled with solemnity, wanting to meet us. And as I stand here today in grief, in the doorway of my middle age, I too am filled with solemnity, staring back from the other end of his intention, wishing I could meet him too.

