

DAVID

I am 10 or 11 across the hall in Fannie's apartment.

ARCHIVIST

2 apartments on a floor, 3 floors up at 115 Ludlow Street, a lower east side Manhattan tenement.

FANNIE

When I was a girl...

DAVID

Fannie's stories all begin "when I was a girl" or "one time there was."

ARCHIVIST

Fannie Wunderlich is David's mother's mother.

DAVID

Fannie married off 3 daughters so far. Irene, I call auntie Ida, and Pauline or auntie Paulie.

FANNIE

And my oldest, Rosie, Dudie's mother.

DAVID

I'm Dudie. David morphs to Duvidal to Dudelah to Dudie. I'm 16 or 17 when I ask 'em all to please call me David. "Okay, Dudie, I'm sorry", they say, "I mean David."

ARCHIVIST

Fannie lives with her last 2 unmarried daughters Yetta and Ruth and her only son Alfred.

DAVID

And with Hymie, the boarder, who is like family and lives in the Wunderlich household all my life and eventually all of his. 3rd floor apartment doors are always open unless there's a fight. Fannie's as much a part of my young life as my mother and father. More than my father.

ARCHIVIST

Sam Gordon always works 2 jobs, early in the morning till late at night.

DAVID

If there's a fight he slams out the door and disappears into the Turkish bath for a week. Nobody mentions he's gone in fronta the kids. 1 day he's back like it didn't happen.

FANNIE

When I was a girl...

DAVID

How old were you, grandma? Fannie has got me, from my house mysteriously, into hers. She asks for me in Yiddish and my mother says okay, take him. I don't understand all the words but I know it's about me. Fannie hands me a pair of tweezers and locks the door.

FANNIE

You're gonna wanna know something alla time I'm not gonna tell you nothing. Ya see dese hairs on my chin? You pull em out.

DAVID

I don't wanna do that. Why can't mommy do it?

FANNIE

Rosie don't have no time.

DAVID

I don't wanna do it. Don't it hurt?

FANNIE

It don't hurt. Don't be such a scaredy cat.

DAVID

She pokes at the stiff hairs on her chin with my forefinger.

FANNIE

When I was a girl in the old country we lived in a cellar made of rock.

DAVID

She holds a magnifying mirror and watches what I do. Why did you live in a cellar? Were you poor?

FANNIE

We were Jews. We hadda live where we could live. I'm gonna talk or you gonna? A cellar made of rock. My mother-sheshouldrestinpeace and my cousin Eva-sheshould restin-peace and me.

DAVID

That was one breath. She runs out and takes a breath to start again. Where was your father?

ARCHIVIST

Very difficult to find facts about Fannie's father.

FANNIE

Heshouldrestinpeace watch what ya do. Up by the ceiling there was a hole like a window where you could see the people's feet walking. Pull it out. Don't be ascarded.

DAVID

I don't wanna hurt you.

FANNIE

It don't hurt. So, we're all gonna come in America but things start ta fall outta my mother's hand. Over here, pull the ones here. It's cold in the cellar so we hafta put a big rock to close up the window.

DAVID

I am pulling hairs which twang in the tweezers. White thin hairs and black coarse stubborn hairs. She never winces.

FANNIE

This night, dunno why, I don't wanna be by myself, I got a skinny bed unda the window but this night I don't wanna sleep in it so I creep in with my mama and in the middle of the night the rock goes right down and busts the bed. If I'm in it, no more me.

DAVID

The whole story in 1 sentence. The only punctuation is where she takes a breath or blows her nose. She has very big nostrils. Not wide but long.

FANNIE

So when we get off the boat in Kessel Gahden...

DAVID

What's that?

FANNIE

That's where ya get off the boat. Ya see this hair?

DAVID

Yeah. Maybe she means Ellis Island.

ARCHIVIST

NO, she actually means Castle Clinton or Fort Clinton, once known as Castle Garden. It is, perhaps, best remembered as America's first immigration station (predating [Ellis Island](#)), where more than 8 million people arrived in the U.S. from 1855 to 1890.

FANNIE

We get off the boat and a men is coming to my mother and I tell her in Yiddish, mama ya gotta shake his hend so strong so he don't know ya sick or dey'll send us Godforbidback, and my mother who can't hold nothingnomore with her right hend picks it up and shakes his hend so strong I dunno how she did, and dey let us in t'AmeriathankGod.

DAVID

God forbid and thank God. I come from a family of stories. Stories as entertainment. Sentimental revisitings or tales of warning punctuated by God forbid and thank God.

ARCHIVIST

Not logical investigations. Not a prelude to conversation.

DAVID

But what was wrong with your mother's hand? Could she make it work after that?

FANNIE

Ya not lookin what ya doin'.

DAVID

She pinches the flesh on her chin and neck, examines for hairs in the magnifying mirror like she pulls at dead chicken flesh on Fridays.

FANNIE

UndA the Williamsburg Bridge is a cave with live chickens in wood cages.

DAVID

Women choose screaming, pushing Friday chickens. The brown one, the red one, the one over, no, not over there, over yeah. Guy in a bloody white coat reaches in the cage, pulls out a flapping shrieking bird and chops it's head not quite off! Maybe Fannie'n Rosie buy chickens together and I'm with `em. Once in a while they send me myself. "My mother says she wants two good chickens please. But not old ones please and not too big." Did your mother `s hand get better Gramma? Did it?

FANNIE

Over here. Ya see it? Ya not doin' sucha good job.

DAVID

I carry fresh killed chicken home sure they're gonna bleed through the brown paper bag and present `em to my mother. Wait for her judgment as I will once a week, 40 years later, with dying auntie Paulie's Kosher takeout. My mother plucks chicken in the kitchen sink over last weeks Daily News. When it's bald she reaches down the hole where it's neck useta be, or up it's ass, and pulls out the insides for fricassee and she lights the gas stove with a match, a little explosion, and she grabs the neck and feet and holds the chicken like a hammock over the flame searing the ends of feathers till they are black. I smell the burning and she, or my grandmother, pinch the warm dead chicken skin between thumbs and forefingers pulling out the blackened pieces. Ma, howd'ya know if a chicken tastes good when it runs around squawking just like all the other chickens?

ROSE

Don't you have homework? I have no time now.

DAVID

They need to not tell things. Is it laziness? Is it fear? Are they afraid I find out they don't know the answer? It makes everything mysterious. 40 years later I ask: Ma? Why don't we ever talk about anything when I'm a kid? Like, we go to the movies every Sunday and go out to eat after but we never talk about the picture. Did we? I think we don't and what about books? You read all the time but I don't remember you telling me what you're reading. Or asking me what I'm reading.

ROSE

Who had time?

DAVID

You wouldn't let me see *Lost Weekend* with Ray Milland.

ROSE

No movie for children.

DAVID

But I read the book, ma. I got it from the library.

ARCHIVIST

Fabric from India has a tag. "This fabric is handmade," the tag reads, "it may have flaws and it will bleed."

DAVID

My memory is handmade. Full of flaws and bleeding. I feel something when something happens. I feel something else later about the thing and something else a long time after if I remember. Yesterday, last year, twenty years ago. Where was I? Where am I? In my family there was no preparation for birth. No nursery.

ARCHIVIST

In real life on the lower east side who had an extra room for a nursery?.

ROSE

No baby clothes or bottles or blankets. No crib.

DAVID

Bad luck. Sneak the kid in with as little fuss as possible.

ROSE

No fancy maternity clothes. A jumper, a gamp. Words nobody uses anymore.

ARCHIVIST

A single dark garment, navy blue, forest green or maroon, not black, made of gabardine or serge. Wear it daily with a clean something underneath.

ROSE

Two washable blouses, one is on and one is drying and rebutton the tabs around the middle of the jumper to make it bigger.

DAVID

She ties red ribbons to her brassiere to ward off jealous evil eyes. Don't let neighbors know you're happy, or God forbid, healthy. Don't let God think you're confident, Godforbid. God doesn't like confidence. Not our God. The Wunderlich God I grow up with likes fear.

ARCHIVIST

In his thirties David discovers he was almost not the responsible oldest child of parents, with no experience, newly married in their first apartment.

DAVID

There was a baby who was miscarried. Boy or girl? Dunno.

SAM

My luck.

DAVID

My father always says "My luck." An obsessive gambler, he bets the horses. Never wins. My scared parents, 2nd baby around, make reservations in a private hospital with a private doctor and begin a routine they continue for most of their lives. Buying on time.

ROSE

Layaway living room suite. Layaway spring coats. Layaway baby.

DAVID

When I am 6 or 7 Sam runs away to the Marines and sits the war out in Hawaii to avoid the bookies who, my aunt Yetta says, "woulda killed him."

YETTA

They woulda killed him. "Yerr farrtherr" owed so much money to the bookies he was a walking dead man.

DAVID

Third oldest of my mother's sisters, Yetta is the last to marry.

ROSE

We all call her Tettie when Dudie can't say Yettie. Sorry Dudie, I mean David.

DAVID

Auntie Tetty is an authority on everything. She smokes Pall Malls, listens to Tchaikowsy, and wears black crepe and pearls in the forties. Kind of Kay Francis if you're looking at old movie stars. Her sisters all put on weight as they age but Yetta only gets thinner. Her hair gets blacker.

YETTA

Yerr farrtherr had no luck.

SAM

My luck.

DAVID

This is going to be the story of when I was born. They love to tell this story.

SAM

It's the middle of the night. Remember Rosie?

ROSE

The middle of the night. My water broke.

SAM

Her water broke. In the middle of the night.

ROSE

So we called the doctor.

SAM

Go find him. Where is he?

ROSE

It's the middle of the night.

YETTA

Don't say I didn't warrn ya about that docterrr.

SAM

Okay, so we call emergency.

YETTA

Goodbye private docterrr.

ROSE

Goodbye private hospital.

SAM

My luck. The police come with a stretcher.

ROSE

And an ambulance and Gouverneer Hospital.

SAM

Like a charity patient. A goddamned charity patient.

DAVID

Worse than a miscarriage. A shame for the neighbors. The look of poverty. My mother is tied to a stretcher which gets passed down from landing to landing by the police.

SAM

But he weighed 10 pounds. Right Rosie? (TO DAVID) Ya weighed 10 pounds.

YETTA

You were a "hawrrrse." Ya tore yerr poor motherr apart.

ROSE

(LAUGHS) 10! 10 pounds. Everybody in the hospital was coming over to look at you, you were so beautiful.

DAVID

It's 1936 and 10 pounds makes everything okay. A wonderful fat horse of a baby, they count my fingers and my toes to make sure I have enough of 'em and they take me home.

ARCHIVIST

They tie red ribbons on everything in sight to ward off the evil envious eyes of people who love fat babies.

DAVID

In 1962, when my son is born, my parents are in the hospital waiting room. They wait from 11 o'clock at night until 3 the next afternoon and when he finally appears they tell me to count his fingers and his toes and I do.

SAM

But something happens when we get him home.

DAVID

I start dying. Or if I'm not dying, I'm very sick. Something about my ears. I'm dying with mastoid "something" upstairs and the doctors are lined up downstairs in the street. The way my father told it, and told it, hundreds of doctors are lined up downstairs waiting to get a look at me.

SAM

In the snow.

ARCHIVIST

In 1936 the doctor comes to your house. He climbs flights of stairs, however many.

DAVID

He totes a black bag and no matter how sick you feel your mother makes sure you have on clean ironed pajamas.

ROSE

You do not let a doctor see you in dirty pajamas.

ARCHIVIST

Rose hovers just behind Dr. Lew. She pulls at her hands, turns her wedding ring round and round while the doctor examines David.

DAVID

In fairy tales when the heir to the throne is sick the King calls all the wise men for a cure and whoever wins gets to look after the heir forevermore and also make a couple of bucks. One by one the doctors come upstairs to tell my mother and father what to do. My father is keeping everyone away from me including my mother's family and now he insists the doctors wash their hands and wear masks before they can see or touch me. Somewhere in this line up is Doctor Lew.

SAM

Doctor Lew was a "doctor." Not like now.

ROSE

The doctor on Grand street was okay. What was his name?

SAM

The one with psoriasis?

DAVID

My father looks around triumphantly, proud of his memory and the fancy word. Psoriasis is a fancy word.

SAM

But he was no Dr. Lew.

DAVID

Do I remember being a dying baby? No. But I hear the story so often I think I remember it. I don't really know how soon after I'm born I got sick except I'm born in the summer.

ARCHIVIST

If David's story of Sam Gordon's story is to be believed and if it's snowing, David must be about 4 or 5 months old. Or 1 year and 4 or 5 months.

DAVID

I do remember Dr. Lew later. Short bald oval man in a grey suit with a vest. Irridescent pink marks on a thin long nose when he takes off rimless glasses or pince nez. His apartment/office is always darkened. No receptionist. No nurse. Dr. Lew answers the door himself. A long foyer. The smell of something cooking or cooked. Carpeted floor that creaks. Some kind of accent.

DR.LEW

It's dock. Let me turn on tze (gulp) light.

DAVID

He doesn't breathe through his nose. He gulps air. He talks and gulps air.

DR.LEW

Ven I prez yaw tunk down zay (gulp) ah. Goot.

DAVID

My father and mother agree he saved my life. Something about pouring warm oil in each ear every twenty minutes, turning me from side to side, basting me like a turkey. Doctor Lew becomes the man my father trusts. My father does not trust too many men. Or women. 15 years later some other doctor says my mother has a tumor. She must check into the hospital immediately. He wants to operate.

SAM

Call Doctor Lew!

DAVID

Why didn't she go to Doctor Lew in the 1st place? I grow useta not asking. I accept the story on their terms. These are myths. Family myths. Why or how is not important when you speak of the Gods and in my house Dr. Lew had been elevated to a God.

ROSE

What am I supposed ta tell the other doctor?

SAM

Tell him no. (TO DAVID) Ya know what Dr. Lew said? Tell what he said, Rosie.

ROSE

He said he didn't think it was a...

SAM

He said, "tumor shmumor!"

ROSE

That's the truth. That's what he said. Tumor shmumor.

SAM

Go home, he said, and buy a maternity dress.

ROSE

He didn't tell me to buy a dress, Sammie.

SAM

And buy a crib, and a carriage and a pink bow. In 6 months you'll have a beautiful little girl.

ROSE

He did say girl. Isn't that amazing? He knew it was a..

SAM

With that other bastard ya wouldn't have a sister! A beautiful blonde blue eyed sister.

DAVID

They always say that. Even when she is 24 and marries the 35 year old balding accountant, who divorces his wife and abandons his 2 kids. They hate him but they always say that.

SAM

A beautiful blonde blue eyed girl.

DAVID

In 1952, if I'm right, Dr. Lew is a semi retired eye doctor. I want glasses when I'm 16. I'm sure Dr. Lew knows I don't need glasses. His own eyes are now magnified behind thick lenses and double magnified behind a second set of lenses poking out on silver rods.

DR. LEW

Holt yaw hant on yaw lefteye ant reat ze (gulp) letta.

ARCHIVIST

David has 20-20 vision.

ROSE

He don't need glasses but he says he gets headaches when he reads. What do I know?

DAVID

I just wanna take `em off and put `em on at strategic moments like in the movies. Well, I'll tell you, (GLASSES OFF) this scientific formula won't work. (GLASSES ON)

2 years later I am a part time smoker of recessed filtered Parliament cigarettes for the same effect. Well, I'll tell you, (INHALE, EXHALE) This scientific formula won't work.

DR. LEW

Zo, you haf headache ven you reat? (Gulp) Yes?

DAVID

He prescribes rose colored lenses which I love but in the eyeglass store, Rosie, who never shops without at least 1 sister brings fashion authority, auntie Tettie, along who chooses a blue grey slightly metallic frame.

YETTA

A good color for a boy his age.

DAVID

I instantly hate `em.

YETTA

Kids never know what they want. I told ya not ta waste yerrr money.

DAVID

I don't know what became of Dr. Lew. I don't know when he died or did they know? Did they go to a funeral? Nobody ever talks about funerals in fronta kids. Some morning we wake up and everyone's wearing black and hats. Someone takes care of us for a coupla hours and my parents go out and come home with a headache.

ROSE

Sammie, don't light another cigarette. I'm gonna make something to eat.

DAVID

I'M in college when my father's mother dies. My 1st funeral, I see my father cry in public for the 1st time. Next time is at my wedding. At the funeral he wants me to help lift the coffin and I say no.