



## THE LADY GANGSTER

### Chapter 4

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#### The Broken Radio – July 1967

For me the story of the *Fuller* began in 1967 when my father pressed me into service. “You’ll have to drive,” was all he said. He assumed I would understand. My father was like that—he gave orders. I obeyed—reluctantly.

From my view we weren’t a particularly tight-knit father and son duo. Our brand of closeness was peculiar to ourselves; nothing like the Waltons. Our expressions of affection were stoic and rare. Always near the surface, love was ready to erupt; spasmodic and somehow beautiful yet frightening due to its unanticipated appearances. We seldom hugged, never kissed. I was almost fully grown before I really knew my father, and if our car radio hadn’t broken, I may have missed learning about him entirely.

My father’s third bout with a bad heart was the reason he informed me I would be piloting the family sedan eleven hundred miles from Florida to Illinois.

“We’re leaving for Blue Island tonight,” he added.

It was an announcement, not a request, and definitely not negotiable. I had been drafted for chauffeur duty. My job was to deliver him to Blue Island, Illinois, and our old home which sat two blocks outside of Chicago’s city limits. A buyer had finally appeared, and some fix-ups were needed before the sale could be completed. I was also drafted as the repairman. I was not thrilled by either job.

“Can we fix the radio?” was my plea.

“I’ve barely got gas money,” was his reply.

I said nothing in return. My expression said it all. With money so tight, fixing the car’s radio was another luxury we’d live without. Sandwiches and warm sodas I could stand. *But no music?*

It was going to be a long trip, a silent marathon. Not a journey, nor an adventure. It was a sentence. Without music, we may be forced to actually talk to each other.

## A Sailor's Memoir

Dad's taste in music leaned toward the classical. He was a self-taught violinist. Classic rock was more my thing. I had taught myself the guitar. Our natures were similar, our expressions worlds apart. On the surface we were different, but our cores were the same. We were equally anxious about the trip. He had his reasons; I had mine.

At fifty, my father's world was rapidly changing. He was trying to keep the pieces from falling apart. At sixteen, my world was forming. I was trying to put something together.

As the middle son I saw myself not as the favorite, so I cut my own path. As a self-made prodigal I was often away from home and almost always alone—I kept my distance. If it had been our choice, my father and I never would have connected. If our bonding was ever to happen, it would require considerable outside influences.

In conducting our affairs, we had begun to bump into each other. We had avoided conflict by avoiding each other. But now we sensed more than just the potential for disagreement during the trip.

We were too alike. We made believe there was nothing to deal with: Everything was fine. I can't say how he actually felt, but thinking about the trip was driving me mad. I was desperate. *Eleven hundred miles and no radio?* I entered the zone beyond desperation and dreaded a music-free cross-country trip with my father more than death itself.

For a brief time two years before, it had looked as if illness might bring us together. Dad's second heart attack required an extended hospital stay for him, and my diagnosis of leukemia landed me on the same floor at the same time. As fellow patients facing serious medical challenges, we were forced to begin to know each other. But we were not comfortable with our forced closeness. We got near one another and then backed off. I knew we made up excuses and remained distant.

Those times were tough for our family of six children and parents. Two of us in the hospital put a strain on finances and relationships. For a while it looked as if both of us were not coming home soon from the hospital, if at all. Eventually we were released on the same day: more circumstantial togetherness. Dad's prognosis was "guarded", meaning his physical activities would be severely limited for quite some time. But my outlook was not as good.

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At one point I was given a six-week life expectancy. That was about the time I accidentally overheard the doctors explaining my condition to my parents. In those days, teenagers were not well informed about their situations; special wards and patient advocates came later to healthcare delivery. I became more lab rat than patient, and after being poked, prodded, and jabbed for weeks by less than kind and gentle strangers, I took the medical team's view as a challenge. Being a contrarian paid off—I went into remission.

So two years later, there we were, a pair of unlike men facing different slopes of life. Neither of us suspected that this trip would place us on the level ground that would bring us together.

The first few miles of our trip were unbearable. I recall that we each fiddled with the radio a dozen times. Our taking turns with the knobs showed how similar we were in expressing discomfort with the silence. Finally, Dad spoke. "Anything you want to talk about?"

"Nope."

That was it.

There was more silence and then another tit-for-tat session with the knobs on the useless radio. We were in the same car but miles apart. Maybe it was my desperation that prompted me to change things. Perhaps it was simply that our likeness could divide us no longer. Maybe I finally realized that I really did not know my father and it was time I should.

I asked myself, *who is he?*

I knew the basic information about his life. The tough Depression years had been especially hard for his family. His father's sudden death in 1927 had left my grandmother with four children and five dollars. My father, only nine at the time, was the eldest and became a steady provider. When not in school he worked his childhood away at a variety of jobs. How he found time to learn to play the violin was beyond me. All I knew was that somehow he taught himself.

After high school he passed on a scholarship that would have provided a college education and a teaching career in order to support his mother and siblings. When Dad was twenty, he announced to his family, "I've worked hard and I want some time off." He then spent the

following year reading all the books in the local library and practicing his violin. He dedicated the year for self-improvement, took it, and then returned to work. He certainly was different; as much the contrarian as I would later become. Everyone loved him. Under pressure I would have admitted I that did, too.

As I drove I took stock of what I did know for certain. I had heard all the family tales—especially the ones about how he had assumed the role as head of the family when my grandfather died. But there was a large gap in his life—five years during the early 1940s that cast a shadow of secrecy over him. Five years is a lot of time to leave blank. My father's wartime activities were a mystery to me. Maybe if I asked about those years he would begin to fill the void between us. I stared at the silent radio and thought some more.

Like most of the kids in our neighborhood, I was keenly aware that I was the child of a World War II veteran. When I was growing up, it seemed that everyone's father, uncle, or older cousin had served in "the big one," as it was called. No one referred to the men around us as the greatest generation. Why state the obvious? We knew it, or, at the very least, sensed that they had done something special. The war was too big and too recent to ignore.

In the fifties and early sixties you could not have gone long without knowing a lot about World War II. It was everywhere. Movies and television content were full of war stories. Fourth of July parades always had ample veteran contingents, and "What did you do in the war?" was often heard when men of a certain age met for the first time. After that common ice-breaker was uttered, men would share facts about branches, units, and combat theaters.

Veterans and their families were understandably proud of their service records. Sharing information about the war was a common practice. However, I seldom heard my father speak specifically about his wartime experiences.

I knew my father had been in the Navy and that he and my uncle served on the same ship. But I knew little else. Dad had been tight lipped. *Was he hiding something?* He usually remained mute when it came to recounting anything personal. I considered this peculiar since

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he was in fairly constant contact with his war buddies. I grew up knowing that he and a group of Navy vets from the Chicago area met on a regular basis. *What did they share? Why did I not know more?*

For years after our memorable auto trip, I researched the exploits of my father's ship, the USS *Fuller*. An account in the local newspaper shed some light on his silence. The 1944 article was meant to boost the morale of war-weary citizens. My father was home for the first time in two-and-a-half years, and the homefolks were justifiably proud.

The headline of the *Blue Island Sun Standard* read:

"IN NAVY 3 YEARS – IRVIN STAECKER ON FURLOUGH."

However, the reporter must have been sorely disappointed when he only could write, "Irvin doesn't talk for publication about his experiences—he has seen too much to talk. He knows the value of silence."

A broken radio and eleven hundred miles of highway provided the key to unlock those five years of his life. But only because I stopped staring at the radio and ventured to ask, "Dad, will you tell me what you did in the war?"

I cannot say with any certainty what I expected to hear from my father. At first he said nothing. I assumed he was going to keep silent. As we continued driving north toward Illinois, I glumly stared at the bugs decorating our windshield. I was miserable and was certain my father knew it. I thought he was going to ignore my question, remaining distant in his silence, but my father surprised me.

After what seemed an eternity, he began to talk. He spoke softly, in a conversational tone and manner new to me. Occasionally I asked a question, but for the better part of the next eighteen hours my father shared the exploits of the ship known as *The Gangster*.