

The Sweet Family of Rhode Island

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I will forever believe that Rudy Beroni's funeral was responsible for the destruction of my family. And the part that really kills me is how avoidable all of it was.

Driving home from the funeral my father expressed his satisfaction with what was turning out to be a real "Rhode Island weather day." It was a meaningless thing to say, like most of his declarations. One year on my birthday my father told me he "loved towels," and that "a real man appreciates a good towel," as if that were advice. The man loved tedium. He lived for logistics. It took me years to realize that "touching base" and "pre-packing" were not cherished pastimes for most families.

My younger sister truly is an imbecile with a loose grasp of the English language that has never really tightened. Just last week she suggested I bring an umbrella to lunch "in lieu of rain." Okay, sure, I'll take it under advisement. But in the car after the funeral she was just twelve and still seemed to think she was some sort of talk-show host. "So," she asked, "what did we think of the funeral?" My father rolled his window slightly down. My mother blushed then told my father to close the window. He complied.

My mother married a Jew and could not be said to be an Anti-Semite, but she was definitely a little Anti-Semitic. But it was not her fault. Or that bad. She had grown up in a small Rhode Island town where the main concern was Catholics. The Jew stuff was off-hand mostly. Except for her Uncle Bill. He called all women, and all men under the age of sixty, "Missy." He was a prison guard with just three fingers on his right hand (thumb, index, and pinky). When he smoked - anytime a child was nearby - the strange shape he formed to hold the long cigarette with three fingers (why not use the left hand?) looked like phallic origami. I remember a day at his house with my mother and many of her relatives. We were all at the kitchen table, and I was sitting next to my great-uncle, I guess you'd call him, but it felt like

I was sitting underneath him. Much cigarette ash had fallen into my mouth. I got up and said I had to go to the bathroom. Great-uncle Bill (if ever a name alone could be Anti-Semitic) nodded and put out his cigarette. When I came back the scene at the table had become operatic - cross-talk, hand waving, crying. No, no, Uncle Bill. Don't say that! You don't mean that, they insisted. I sat back down. He saw me and immediately lit up another cigarette. No, they cried. I'm telling you I could hear opera music playing. No. No! "Do I hate the Jews?" he said. "Yes. Yes I do!"

"It was nice ceremony, but I'll just say, I still don't think I did anything wrong," said my mother.

"What do you mean?" asked my sister.

"I said 'chew down,' not 'Jew down.' I've never even heard of that phrase! I swear to God. Have you ever heard of a caterer that cheap, Alex? Two hundred dollars! For a funeral?"

"I don't know, dear. And, Norah sweetie, I thought it was a very... appropriate ceremony. Somber. Funerals are somber affairs. Are you listening, Simon? A funeral is a somber thing."

"I know, Dad! Obviously." I grunt.

"Can I ask a question?" asked my sister.

"Sure," said my mother.

"What does auto-erotic asphyxiation mean? I know that's how he died, but they never explained what it meant."

I started laughing. My mother threw her water bottle at me. "You didn't ask anyone at the funeral what it meant did you? Did you?"

"No. That's why I'm asking now. Why did you throw that at Simon?"

My mother and father looked at each other. My mother was flushed. Looking back, I think my father might not have entirely understood what auto-erotic asphyxiation was. But my mother looked panicked and that made him nervous so they were both concerned.

Maybe if he had been a little more adventurous with himself he would have been able to gently explain the practice to my sister, who after all was twelve years old - it wasn't like she was five. But no. "Well sweetie," began my mother, "the important thing to know is..." That was it! That was where it all went wrong. I guarantee you she had absolutely no idea what she was going to say next. She could have said anything. Anything!

"You have to be willing to die for some things." My father furrowed his brow. "And if you don't have that kind of commitment you shouldn't get involved in a cause in the first place." A cause? "And you know what? I sometimes question the commitment level of this family. I think it's time we got serious." About bringing the belt and the windpipe closer together? "So I, I mean we, your father and I, have decided to demand that everyone in this family pick a cause. It can be whatever you're passionate about. But you have to commit. And be a leading advocate for that cause. That's the way we've decided to honor Rudy Beroni. Talk is cheap. So we're not going to talk about him anymore. Okay? No more talking. We're going to focus on action! On doing! Right, honey? Remind me, Alex, what cause did you decide on?"

"Right of return," he said. The lack of hesitation seemed to surprise my mother. "It's outrageous." I had never heard my father this emotional. He almost raised his voice.

"Oh, um, okay," said my mother. "And you've thought a lot about this?"

"Of course. That shouldn't come as any surprise."

"Yes. Okay. That's right, honey. Very good." My mother pinched her nose, squinted, and took a breath. "What about you, Norah?"

"I want to be an anti-kidnapping activist."

"Well, um, what would that even mean exactly?"

"Sounds pretty obvious to me," I said.

"You said anything! I hate kidnapping." She muttered to herself again about how much she hated it. Then abruptly raised her voice, "You said anything, mommy!"

“Okay you’re right. You’re right.” Norah and I then asked our mother what her cause was going to be. “The no-mirrors initiative,” she said. What? She made it sound like it was some obvious thing. Like NATO. Once again there was silence. My father locked his neck into place and kept driving with his focus fixed absolutely straight ahead. Eventually we had to change lanes. He glanced at his right mirror for a second but then jerked his head back into place so violently it looked, and in my head may even have sounded, like a typewriter being smacked to a new page. I chose civil rights.

Norah spent the rest of the ride listing some of the, admittedly numerous, negative aspects of kidnapping. She was thorough, I have to say, and included things like missed dentist appointments, Veteran’s Day, and the potential that all your gift cards might expire before you got back. But I still think everything she said was somewhat obvious. And Veteran’s Day? I mean, the day still happens even if you’re in someone else’s custody. That one doesn’t even really make sense. So yes, I did resent the superior tone she had adopted by the end of the car ride as if she were some kind of expert. “It’s not just kids who get kidnapped, you know.” Yes I did know that thank you very much. Everyone knows that. “It’s a misnomer. Like knuckle,” she explained and was even so kind as to point to her knuckles. I could see in the mirror (gasp) my mother flinch a bit when Norah said that. Like knuckle? My mother must have thought, as each of us did a few times a day, “Is Norah an idiot?” What my mother failed to understand was that Norah had overheard but failed to understand (impossible!) a point made during what felt like every baseball broadcast I watched with my father: that a *knuckleball* is a misnomer because you throw it with your fingertips, not your knuckles.

We pulled up to our upper-lower middle class house and my father, truly frightened and delighted to have a new rigid and arbitrary rule to follow, parked the car by feel alone. My mother seemed far more irritated than my father by the inhibition she herself had created. And for what? I cannot stress how obvious it was that Norah had completely forgotten we had just gone to a funeral, let alone the c.o.d. And yet. And yet, for some

reason, my mother *committed* to codifying her filibustering distraction as crucial, serious, and entrenched family policy. You think Medicaid covering nursing homes was a historical accident? But now that I think about it, perhaps all of it was inevitable.

I sat my Jewish-Protestant butt down on my bed and probably was well on my way to forgetting about the funeral myself, and even about the compulsory altruism. I turned on an Oscar Peterson album and tried to make a list in my head of other notable African-American Canadians. Well I guess they wouldn't be African-Americans then. Black Canadians, or African-Canadians, I don't know. But anyway, my progress was interrupted by the sound of my parents bickering. I wouldn't say I ever really heard them "argue." Partially because my father was too passive, but also because they were never on the same plane. I mean that as literally as possible. One of them was always sitting and one of them was always standing. It was weird. And you can't get any momentum that way. In movie arguments both parties are either both standing or both sitting. That's how you get locked in. The Sweet asymmetry made it look like one party had one foot out the door so why dig in? Looking back, perhaps this was a tactic on my father's part. Alex Sweet a tactician? The man for whom a nervous apology was a cadence, a helping verb, a punctuation mark? "Hi, sorry, I'm Alex Sweet, nice to meet you, excuse me I apologize." "I'm sorry, but if you'll excuse me, here's a million dollars for you. Sorry!" Domestic realpolitik? Or really it would have been guerrilla warfare - refusing to confront the enemy in the open.

My mother had an uncle named Eamon. You were not really supposed to ask about Eamon or even say his name, but my Aunt Erin's Protestantism did not stop her from being a yenta. She insisted to me that her uncle Eamon was "one of the few people who knows what really happened to Che Guevara." Who? "Do not tell anyone I told you this. But Uncle Eamon was there the night Che was killed!" In Rhode Island? "No, in Bolivia!" I thought Great Uncle Eamon was from Ireland? "He is, but he was working for the CIA. You know all this Iran-Contra stuff? Uncle Eamon was part of its precursor, this covert program called

Ireland-;Arriba! I really shouldn't be telling you this, but you know how the world works. You must be what eleven by now? I don't have to tell you about power dynamics."

But I did hear my parents having an adversarial conversation. I couldn't hear what they were talking about, nor could I discern who was standing and who was sitting. The sound stopped and I got unpolluted Oscar for a minute. Then my father walked in. I don't remember exactly what he said, but I remember he called me "Son," which I found incredibly unnerving. Something about his demeanor made it seem like whatever he was going to say would end with "Goodbye. I need to be who I am. Take care of your mother." Oh so me and my sister can just go straight to Protestant-Jewish hell I suppose? Along with that deviant Rudy Beroni. That confrontation was avoided, however, because my father was not saying goodbye. In fact, in his own way, he was bringing me closer. Or at least so he thought. So we all thought.

He led me into his "study" in the basement which in truth was a damp, tiny room within our damp, tiny basement. All that was in there was a small table that had previously belonged to my sister and a metal chair. Though the dent was not that large, there was a clear imprint of someone's foot on the back of his chair. Judging from the footprint, the chair-kicking assailant was perhaps the only man or woman alive with wider feet than my father. But oh how my father loved that office. The most civilized place on earth! He bragged (joked?) that every single UN Convention had been signed into law by the President of the Executive Sweet (Get it!), who was also a huge booster of the International Criminal Court. Unlike a certain global superpower. Tsk, tsk! Yes, he had all the rules and conditional sovereignty his heart desired in that office. He also had a thick heat pipe just inches from his chair that hissed at him like it was personal. And it kicked. It sounded like someone was playing a game of dice inside that pipe, just forever rolling massive, aluminum dice. He picked up a large stack of papers from beneath his desk. "Do you know what these are?" he asked. Why of course, father, I do a weekly audit of the papers under your desk. This stack is your collection of portraits of the late exiled King of Afghanistan, Mohammed

Zahir Shah, whom the United States should have done far more to return to throne, at least temporarily. Not an Upper West Side Liberal, admittedly, but certainly better than Mullah Omar! Oh wait, actually that's a different stack. No, this pile I'm not sure about.

"These are the last ten years of our family's receipts." He handed me the top page because who would accept such an explosive claim like that without verification? I inspected it, nodded my head, and gently placed it down on the desk. "The Beroni tragedy got your mother and me thinking. What are we truly committed to? What are we using our energy to fight for?" Why was he continuing with this ridiculous lie? Did he think I had not realized my mother was just bullshitting? Or was she? But what even was "right of return?" And what in God's name was the "no-mirrors initiative"? This stuff was real? I started to sweat, mainly in my armpits and underpants. Why only put deodorant on one sweat center? Stupid. Was I going to have to actually be a civil rights activist? Maybe I had once again underestimated my father.

"We live in Rhode Island." The heat pipe clanked. "And thus that is where our influence lies, however modest that influence may be. And the state regulation of commercial transactions has gone from bad to worse. And I can't pretend not to notice any longer. Between expired gift cards," (Oh my God, was my sister's thing real as well?), "and unjustly denied returns, the average Rhode Islander will be robbed of more than \$19,000 over the course of his or her life." The heat pipe was vibrating by this point. Was there some sort of off-shore drilling going on in there? "I'm sorry but these right of return laws simply must be liberalized. Excuse me for saying this, but you cannot limit the return window to ten days when in nearly every other civilized polity it is fourteen days. I'm sorry but you cannot. I can't sit this one out. I need to mobilize."

I went back to my bedroom and collapsed onto my bed. I still wasn't taking the day's developments seriously. Except Rudy Beroni's death. That was sad. And weird. I felt uncomfortable looking at belts for a while. All of a sudden they had become like loaded guns. He was only a few years older than me. It was the youngest person I had ever heard of

dying. But still, after a few minutes I was basically calm again. Then my mother walked in. She looked exhausted in that way people do before they are technically sleep-deprived - just wearily resigned to the fact they are about to pull an all-nighter. "I'm afraid I have some bad news, darling." First *son*, now *darling*. "Your Great-uncle William has passed away."

My mother had an uncle named William. I only met him twice, and I think he forgot about the first meeting because the second time I saw him he introduced himself and gave me the exact same presentation. His Presentation, as it was euphemistically called, was to be listened to respectfully. I could ask my parents questions about it when I got home. He sat me down in his living room and wheeled in a projector and a large accordion folder. I sat silently and respectfully as Great-uncle William turned off the lights and recited, once again, His Presentation - "Nothing Personal, Just History: Debunking The So-Called Armenian Genocide." It was lengthy and repetitive, even the first time. I remember being unsure if I was supposed to clap when it was over, and I remember him telling me he wished he had the technology to "score" the presentation.

"I know you've already dealt with a lot today, but I might as well as tell you: William's death was also due to auto-erotic asphyxiation." I was starting to panic a little bit. Who was next? "Obviously it's better if we spare your sister the details of his death. We're going to tell her a sort of Armenian Mossad extra-legally assassinated him. My cousin Dina is bringing over his projector tomorrow and we're going to screen 'Munich' for Norah so she has a frame of reference for how these things work." These things? What was the extent of my Great-uncle William's involvement in denying the alleged Armenian genocide? "We're counting on you to go along with us on that. And of course, this just furthers the urgency of our family's activism projects. If we weren't serious about it before, we certainly are now." If? Was my mother being coy? What really was driving all of this and when did it start? And was there any limit to the lengths my mother would go to avoid having a conversation with my sister about auto-erotic asphyxiation? Is it really more disturbing than a convoluted, transnational story of genocide denial and covert assassinations? What about my father's

commitment to transnational legal institutions? “There’s a no-mirrors initiative symposium in two days. I’m gonna make some coffee and get to work. It would mean a lot if you attended and brought some of your friends. Goodnight dear.”

I dreamed of my mother. I’m not sure that had ever happened before. Most of the time I was so angry at her for being my mother that I could not follow through on other emotional inclinations. I don’t even really remember what happened in my dream, but I woke up with more sympathy for her. And I don’t think I’m just infusing my perspective now into the situation. She was an attractive woman, though probably a few inches too tall for her own good. Not that was she even that tall, but she was clumsy. She would have been a ludicrous tambourine player - too much flailing and dancing like she was trying to get water out of her ears. She was selfish for her family which is probably the least bad kind of selfish anyone can be. Was that so unforgivable?

At breakfast my mother seemed to be in a haze. She clearly had not slept. I sat down at the table. My father looked oddly determined. “Son, I think I have decided to lead a march.” My mother twitched then stood up.

“You should call it the Million Man March. Establish the extent of the state’s thievery.” She was not thinking clearly. I have spent hours thinking about that comment (what percentage of obsessive inquiries analyze something that could have been easily answered had someone just spoken up at an earlier date?) and I have concluded that she meant to say Million Dollar March but was only semi-lucid and unintentionally repeated something she had heard on the news. Of course in her later defense, she would claim she had “Never heard of the Million Man March,” let alone its concomitant Anti-Semitism. I do not believe she was trying to rub it in my poor Jewish father’s face, but she probably had *heard* something of the march. After all, she clearly internalized the name. Either way, as I said earlier, the woman was not a big Anti-Semite. Her performative utterance was a mistake, so there is no reason to even mention her Uncle Bobby who, though he did not have a medical degree, was Louis Farrakhan’s ear, nose, and throat *guy* (“Great man!”)

because she did not realize what she was talking about. The problem was that my father was more deferential to suggestions than a jukebox. So my mother's off-hand suggestion was really the decisive naming of the movement.

My father began sketching the poster for his Million Man March. He was silent while he worked and so focused that he looked pathetic for some reason. Like a child. It felt like I was in one of those TV shows where a child has (allegedly) been abused and I was the detective who had rescued her. And now I was standing on the smart side of a one-way mirror with a therapist or a child services woman (Are they also therapists? Or just *good listeners*?) watching the poor child play with crayons in that weird police station play area. Who designs that room? Not a police officer who's seen too much, I hope. For reasons beyond the obvious, those rooms always creeped me out. Like a clothing store in an airport. Or a fully furnished bedroom in a department store. How skillful we are at obliterating the bond between a thing and its context. Not good, but at least in my imagined scenario the therapist goes into the room and sheds some light on what is going on in that kid's head. I had long since realized no one was going to explain my father to me. I still hoped he'd help me understand what the no-mirrors initiative was, but he looked far too tender and content with his work for me to disturb him.

I went upstairs to my sister's room. She was doing push-ups. I'm not sure I had ever seen a woman do a push-up before. "I'm not letting that fear stop me. I'm going for it," she said, "I'm really going for it! I just need to make sure I'm ready." As if it were not stupid enough that Norah thought she was a goddamn talk-show host, she also thought everyone had seen all the prior episodes. Constantly she would just start talking to you as if it were a continuation of some previous conversation. And yet she still never failed to make me feel like an idiot for having to ask obvious clarifying questions. "Arronson," she said with obvious irritation. Who? "Oh my god. I'm partnering with Arron Arronson. I don't care what anyone thinks." Partnering? What kind of new age idiot speak was this from a twelve year old? And what about this star-crossed love affair required her to do push-ups? "He's the

leader of an international anti-kidnapping brigade. They're called 'Entfuhrung? No!'" She finally stopped her exercise and sat on the foot of her bed. "Two hundred - not bad!" Yeah right. "The problem," she paused to catch her breath. Fraud! "The problem is the last five partners he has partnered with have all gone missing. It's really unlucky. But it's created an opening for me and my coalition to co-lead his Kidnapping Awareness Cruise. Mom got all uptight about it, but then I was like didn't you say, from your lips to God's and my's ears, that we had to be willing to die for our cause? And she realized I was right. But it's not like anything could happen anyway. It's a cruise! You can't get kidnapped on a boat, there's nowhere to be hidden." Steerage? "What about you loser? We're all a little disappointed with your lack of progress. Nary commitment." I excused myself from her room in what was probably an overly exasperated huff. But regret, and really any analysis of the past, is useless. What good does it do now to say I would have been warmer towards her had I known it was the last time I'd see my sister for nine years?

I wobbled into my parent's room. This had so clearly gone too far. And for what? My sister was about to set sail with a kidnapping expert. *That* was better than an explanation of an eclectic genre of self-pleasuring? At this point even my mother's Catholic neighbors would have at least considered the possibility that a frank discussion of sexuality was the lesser evil.

This all seemed fairly obvious. Or was all my righteous indignation just a pretext for shirking my responsibility as a civil rights activist? My mother was sitting inches away from her illuminated vanity mirror. Her posture conveyed both bad posture and sadness. I had never seen her so defeated. Seeing your parents afraid just makes you afraid, but something about seeing them sad is a call to action. At least when it was my mother. In retrospect my father might have been consistently sad his entire life.

My mother did not react to my presence until I was directly behind her. And even then did no more than purse her lips. She looked frozen in exhausted shock. I have tried as hard as I possibly can on many occasions to remember my immediate impression of how she

looked at that moment. I really think she looked perfectly beautiful to me. “I don’t think I can beat this. There’s nothing I can do.” She softly pointed to the bridge of her nose. “Is it hideous? It’s okay. You can tell me.” I really don’t think I knew what she was talking about. “I decided to stop covering it with makeup. I wanted to be open about who I was. But I just couldn’t stand the sight of it. What do you do then? I decided to never look at myself in a mirror again, just stop looking at it. I’m sure most people noticed, but no one seemed to mind as much as I did.” The light of her mirror was crass; anything unnatural in her appearance I would assume was just glare. But she forced me to see the discoloration on her nose, explaining when it started and how there was nothing she could do to stop it. “But I was sure I was ugly. So sure. So I kept covering it up. I had realized I was so used to doing it that I didn’t even need the mirror to apply makeup over the discoloration. But then what really was the point of it all?” More defeated than sad - but still sad - her tone made it clear she would not tolerate any attempts to make her feel better.

My father was gone when I went back downstairs. Everyone was going for it. Was confusion a legitimate impediment to action? You could never know everything. Not even about a single, tiny subfield of the most specific, provincial topic. And yet what were you supposed to do - never get in the game? Always read one more book? Or fight and just know somewhere deep down that you might actually be dead wrong? Know that but still fight. Is that courage or reckless? Maybe it’s okay if you think you know comparatively more than whoever would be taking your spot in the argument. Would that mean sitting out with principled humility presumed an activist God? I don’t think I ever actually answered any of those questions. I’m not even sure how many of them were in my head at the time. The phone rang and an angry, sweaty voice asked if my father was home. No one ever called looking for my father. I said no and marched to the library where I took out as many books on African-American history as I could carry back to my father’s “study.”

I read for hours in a state of delirium, for which the thick steam seeping out of the heat pipe was only partially responsible. Gloria Steinem thought it would be interesting for

her memoir if she calculated the longest uninterrupted period of time she had spent at home after college. Eight nights. Over the course of decades of organizing. Hard travel. And never - never! - did she spend more than eight nights in a row in her own bed. And you know what the craziest part of that is? She did not even realize it. She had to sit down years later and count to figure it out. So total was her passion and her devotion to her cause that it just seemed normal, obvious even, to work and travel and work and travel like she did. I had gone my entire life without finding that kind of sustained calling, and for that I could never forgive the women's liberation movement. But it was not just me. No one in my family had ever found anything like that either, with the possible exception of my mother's uncle Muellens who spent his entire adult life in exile trying to break up Medicaid so that the permanently disabled and children would be covered under separate entitlement programs. ("Why should they all be lumped together? Why!") But even his "career," ostensibly devoted to one goal, consisted of scattershot efforts to do things like un-incorporate the Sixth Amendment and strip Cyrus Vance of his citizenship. There is no way to fashion a coherent narrative of his advocacy. Muellens, from what I can understand, was a practitioner of a particularly deranged form of realpolitik. In his defense, however, the man's tick of shouting, occasionally at young children (including my mother), "You will never solve Medicaid until you first solve Pakistan," has proven to be, in a sense, not entirely without merit.

No, I had never had what Gloria had, or really even what Muellens had, or at least thought he had, until I immersed myself in the history of our nation's arguably second or concurrent original sin. Uncovering the criminally ignored story of how the Saint Domingue slave rebellion made the Louisiana Purchase possible nearly caused me to faint, and once again, the heat pipe's vapors and the resultant balmy clime did not cause but rather simply contributed to my sense of disorientation. I cannot at this juncture in good conscience say more about the underreported nexus between Napoleon, slavery, and westward expansion, but I absolutely do have knowledge of it beyond what I have already said, and I would be

completely able to expand upon that subject at a later time. But I realized something in my father's dungeon. Even if I tried to pretend I hadn't.

Bells were ringing when I opened the door which apparently was soundproof. My mother screamed and ran towards me when I came upstairs to the kitchen. "Oh my God darling! Where have you been? Didn't you hear us ringing these bells? How many times did we tell you that if you were ever in any danger we would ring a bell and then you were to extricate yourself from that danger and come home?" I was too confused to argue with her, although I'm fairly certain this bell protocol was never announced. "Oh my darling. We thought they had taken you as collateral. We sent your sister off on her awareness cruise with Arron Arronson early so they would not have a chance to take her as well." That proved to be a mistake. "You didn't get a chance to say goodbye! Oh but it's okay. You're back now. Oh darling. Tell me what did they do to you?"

"Um, mom. How long have you been looking for me?"

"Well let's see, your father was first arrested four days ago. The trial mercifully ended about two hours ago. Oh how we missed you at closing arguments. We could have used your rapiers wit! All told we've probably been searching for a week." A week? Maybe I was Gloria! But trial? Apparently the Anti-Defamation League had gotten wind of my father's Million Man March. "They Capone'd him," explained my mother, "unrelated tax charges. Mercifully he was found not-guilty. Oh the struggle to get that man to even defend himself! He thought it was rude to argue." There had also been additional confusion when my sister mistook the ADL agents for the Armenian Mossad which had allegedly executed her Great-uncle William. And what with me missing and all, she thought she might be next. Again, wouldn't it have been simpler to just....

Thankfully the legal situation had been resolved, the march renamed, and my sister safely ensconced in her life's passion - or so it seemed at the time, but that reckoning came later. The clear and present unresolved danger was the complicity of my family, my own flesh and blood. My father, bless his soul, who though not guilty of the bigotry he was

somewhat indirectly accused of, did perhaps bare his soul on occasions like when we went for a walk and he said he did not like the neighborhood we had entered because “None of the kids around here look like you.” Like a Protestant-Jewish competitive weightlifter? Perhaps, but I cannot accept that as likely. And my mother, who spent years lamenting the “anti-white agenda” of the Catholic high school I attended for purely voucher related reasons. Was it a sublimation of sorts? A rejiggering of her hatred for the Catholics (and of herself for “giving” me to them) that made life slightly less disruptive? That would ensure the only real clashes she or I had with the Jesuits were her annual demands that “MLK day be moved to February so it’s at least all neatly confined to a single month.” If not evidence of anti-Catholic sentiment so unwieldy and convoluted it literally made her insane, my mother’s (and countless other examples of my father’s) behavior probably revealed some level of racial animus. And that is not right.

But I loved them. They had given me everything after all. And were there lives so easy? My mother apparently had a severely discolored nose, although I confess, even after her big reveal, I only noticed it sometimes – mainly in dimly lit rooms with no overhead lighting. My father was Alex Sweet. “Sorry, yes, Alex Sweet, hi, I apologize. Excuse me.” But however minor you think those struggles may have actually been when compared with the plight of Black Canadians, Jews (only included in comparison with my mother, despite ADL confusion), Catholics (only included in comparison with my mother because my father never harbored ill-will towards Catholics. He may even have thought my mother was Catholic for all I know), or First Peoples, the plight of my parents was about to reach new heights.

Arron Arronson was never found guilty of any crime in any courtroom. But there seems little doubt he, on some level, kidnapped my sister Norah. Bringing Norah home and Arron Arronson to justice became the only things my parents cared about for the rest of their lives. And while they died before Norah was found, and while Arron Arronson remains at large, no one dare call them failures. They undeniably destroyed, or at least tarnished,

Arron Arronson's reputation amongst people they knew. Financial support and volunteerism rates for 'Entfuhrung? No!' in Rhode Island have never been lower. My parents achieved all that without my support. For I may not have been Gloria Steinem. I may not even have been Great-uncle Muellens. But I apparently had read about civil rights for weeks without taking a break, without even realizing how long I was at it. Questions still remain as to what exactly happened to me in that cellar and how much fizzy water vapor I inhaled. But I do think I found the subject matter interesting. And besides, what kind of Sweet would I have been if I were the only one to give up on my cause? Then what would Rudy Beroni have died for in the first place?

There is a famous story about a U.S. soldier saying in Vietnam "I have to destroy this village to save it." And while there is apparently no proof it was ever actually said, I understand exactly what it means. Ironically, the best way, the only way, I could honor my family was to sever ties with it completely. To love and to tolerate oppressors.... Well that would have made me part of the problem. Not even the death of my parents could bring me back into the family fold. Not until my Sister Norah was found on a man-made island in the South China Sea did I once again speak to a Sweet. I felt she had earned a racial amnesty of sorts. Only then did I remove the obstruction between my brain and my heart and breathe, allowing the unpredictable air of life back into my fallen body.