



The Fix

*A Father's Secrets,
A Daughter's Search*

SHARON LEDER





Copyright © 2017 by KiCam Projects

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

The Preface was published as an Opinion in *The Cape Cod Times*, January 8, 2016. The Prologue was published online as “Private Family Business” in *WIPs Journal* (June 2013). Chapter One of Part One, “Shadow Father,” was published as “The Two Fathers” in *Connected: What Remains as We All Change* (Wising Up Press, 2013). Chapter Two of Part Two, “The Lost Father,” was published online as “Letter to Mr. Carney” in *Jewish Fiction* (Spring 2014).

Cover and book design by Mark Sullivan

ISBN 978-0-9977222-5-3 (paperback)

ISBN 978-0-9977222-6-0 (e-book)

Printed in the United States of America

Published by KiCam Projects

www.KiCamProjects.com





For Milton who makes all happen

For Ron and Devorah, devoted siblings

In loving memory of my parents, Harriet and George







CONTENTS

• • • • •

PREFACE ... *ix*

PROLOGUE | 1963 ... *xi*

— THE SHADOW FATHER —

CHAPTER ONE | 1955 ... 3

CHAPTER TWO ... 17

CHAPTER THREE | 1956 ... 28

CHAPTER FOUR | 1957 ... 37

CHAPTER FIVE ... 51

CHAPTER SIX ... 58

CHAPTER SEVEN ... 67

CHAPTER EIGHT | 1957—1958 ... 73

CHAPTER NINE | 1959 ... 82

CHAPTER TEN ... 90

CHAPTER ELEVEN | 1959—1961 ... 102

CHAPTER TWELVE | 1961—1963 ... 115

CHAPTER THIRTEEN | 1963 ... 126

— THE LOST FATHER —

CHAPTER FOURTEEN | 1963 ... 139

CHAPTER FIFTEEN | 1964 ... 156

CHAPTER SIXTEEN ... 171

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN ... 186

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN ... 194

CHAPTER NINETEEN | 1965 ... 199

EPILOGUE | 2016 ... 217

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ... 225





CHAPTER ONE | 1955



“NO. IT’S NOT TRUE! SHOOTING UP heroin? Josef and Spencer? Impossible!” The screams—Sara’s mother’s—came from the kitchen.

What’s “heroin”? Sara wondered. It was a word she had never heard before. *Is Spencer someone bad?* Sara, eight years old, had just arrived home from Public School 16, holding her younger brother’s hand. She settled him down on the rug in the living room, where drawn blinds kept the room dark in the afternoons. She turned up the volume on the TV set and changed the channel to *The Merry Mailman* and rushed into the kitchen. The aroma of stuffed cabbage filled the room. When she saw her mother holding the phone and trembling, she stepped inside the kitchen and shut the swinging kitchen door behind her.

“Why should I believe you?” Helen shouted angrily into the receiver. The ladle she was holding in her hand dropped to the floor. She didn’t bother to pick it up. “My husband’s not an addict! Do you hear me?” Slamming the receiver down, she collapsed into a chair. “No, he wouldn’t do this to me.”

Helen looked more bewildered than ever before, even more upset than when Josef began working on Saturdays.

“Mommy, please,” Sara begged, grabbing her mother’s arm. “What’s wrong? What trouble is Daddy in?”





“No trouble, sweetheart,” Helen answered feebly, stroking her daughter’s hair. “It’s just that this call gave me a bad headache. That’s all.” She stood up, walked to the stove, and turned off the flame under the cabbage.

The phone rang again. With her head in her hands, Helen said, “Let it ring, Sara.”

“But it could be Daddy!” Sara cried, picking up the phone.

“I must tell you, Helen,” the frantic voice on the other end insisted. “If the police find Josef with marks on his arms, he’s finished. They’ll arrest him. But if Josef stops, Spencer will stop, too. Spencer’s always looked up to your Josef.”

“Who is this?” Sara asked, frightened. “Mommy, there’s a lady on the phone talking about the police catching Daddy with marks on his arms.”

“I told you not to answer it!” Helen snatched the phone from Sara. “Mitzi, don’t you ever call here again, or I’ll have the police arrest *you*. How dare you spread your hateful stories to my daughter!”

Helen hung up the phone, lost her balance, and held onto the kitchen table to steady herself. She mumbled words that trailed into what sounded like babble to Sara—words about Josef having given up the clubroom gang and the Moonglow boys before the war, before she and Josef got married.

“None of those Moonglow boys still live in Williamsburg,” she whispered. Sara didn’t understand what her mother was saying. “None of them...” Her lips turned down. “Except for Spencer.”

Sara was curious to know who Spencer and the Moonglow boys were, what heroin was, and what marks on the arm





meant, but seeing her mother so distraught, she was afraid to ask. Helen paced around the room, cursing Spencer and calling him a good-for-nothing. She muttered to herself as if Sara weren't there, saying Spencer worshipped Josef blindly when they were teenagers and then got himself hooked.

Sara hung on every word.

"I could murder Spencer!"

If only Mom would calm down, Sara thought, moving toward her mother. She took her mother's hand and squeezed it.

"I'll be all right, Sara. Where's your brother, honey?"

"Watching *The Merry Mailman*."

Helen walked to the living room. "My angel, give Mommy a hug."

Robbie looked up from the TV screen and ran into her arms.

"You be a good boy," she said, twirling some strands of his blond hair. "Play with your sister after your show is finished. You've got blocks and board games. Mommy has to take a little nap."

Searching first his mother's face, then Sara's, Robbie answered, "OK, Mommy." Helen kept her arms around him for a few moments. Then she walked to her bedroom with Sara, who watched her shut the blinds, take the phone off the hook, and grab a Chesterfield cigarette from her nightstand. Helen checked on Rachel, the baby, who was curled up in the crib beside her bed. "I'll lie down...just for a few minutes. Honey, please play with Robbie."

"What's heroin, Mommy?"

Helen's eyes dropped. She was silent for a moment. "Heroin is a dangerous medicine that can make you sick. Your father's too smart to take it."





“A medicine makes you sick?”

“Sweetheart, go to Robbie, please. Don’t worry your *keppy*.” She kissed Sara on her forehead. “You shouldn’t have to hear these things. Promise me you’ll put them out of your mind.”

The tumult in Sara’s head increased. *Do I have a good father or not?* She couldn’t decide. On one hand, her father didn’t act like the storybook father in *Honey Bunch* or the TV daddy on *Father Knows Best*. He didn’t read the newspaper in the living room or hold Sara on his lap. He never ate breakfast with her and Robbie because he was a butcher who had to be out on the road by 4 a.m. in order to arrive at the 14th Street Market to buy the best meat for Katz and Block Wholesale and Retail Kosher Meats. And he never ate supper with them because he had deliveries to make in Manhattan to important customers.

On the other hand, her daddy was full of smiles when he drove his family in the Oldsmobile to the Bronx Park Zoo and took photos of Sara and Robbie sitting on ponies. He loved visiting Grandma Hannah and Poppy Mo in Little Neck on the weekends and taking the family to see new houses being built on Long Island. She remembered the day when her father pointed to a neat, green ranch house in Levittown and with wide-open eyes talked about the time someday soon when he’d move the family out of Williamsburg and into the suburbs. *Daddy must be a good father. So why did that woman on the telephone say he was taking that dangerous medicine, and why was Mommy so angry after speaking to her?*

In the living room, Robbie wasn’t paying attention to *The Merry Mailman*. He was gliding toy cars and trucks around the edges of the room, wherever the rug didn’t cover the wooden floor. “Was Mommy crying?” he asked Sara.





Sara didn't want to lie to him, but she didn't want to upset him either. "I'm not sure, Robbie."

"Is Daddy going to be late again?" Robbie blinked his eyes nervously. "Maybe that's why Ma's upset. He must be stuck in traffic." Saying this, Robbie moved his toy truck behind the leg of the club chair. "See?"

Sara flopped onto the couch in the living room and thought about her mother's annoyance when her father began coming home later and later from Katz and Block, sometimes not until 10 p.m. Her mother complained that he was falling asleep in the living room club chair, dropping still-lit cigarettes on the floor, and spending his nights in the chair instead of in their bedroom. Sara herself had noticed the burns, like armies of caterpillars, crawling on the carpet and on the living room end table. She remembered how a rash, like a cluster of strawberries, spread over his neck and arms.

"Just hives," her father explained to her mother one night, his eyes half-closed, his speech slurred. "I've been...oh, I've been...in the store freezer...too long."

"What's wrong with Daddy?" Sara had asked her mother then.

"He's been working extra hours, dear, because he's losing customers. All the small kosher butchers are struggling. Don't worry, darling; he'll be OK."

But Helen wasn't as understanding one Saturday morning a few weeks later when Josef told her he needed to work on Saturdays, too. They stood in the kitchen while Sara sat at the table. "What do you mean?" Helen said. "Your children won't ever see you if you work on Saturdays."





Josef's cheeks turned red. "I can't keep borrowing from Mom and Pop to feed the kids. Besides, the other kosher wholesalers are operating on Saturday. Only the Orthodox shops stay closed."

"Sara," her mother had said, "please go to your room. I need to talk to Daddy."

Even as Sara walked away, she remembered, her mother's voice got louder and louder.

On the living room floor, Robbie was now barricading his truck with blocks under the club chair. Sara wondered how he felt about their father being away so much. "Do you think we have a good daddy, Robbie?"

"A good daddy would be like Superman," he said. "His truck could bust out of jams, *kaboom!*" He pushed all the blocks away from the chair and pulled out the toy truck. "A good daddy could fly like Superman." He lifted the truck in the air, making a high arc, and landed it on the top of the TV, where Rin Tin Tin was barking at some thieves running out of a bank. Robbie's fantasy wasn't what Sara expected. But she heard in his words an echo of what she wished for also.

Sara entered her mother's bedroom to see if she was awake. The air was stale from the odor of cigarettes. "Mommy, I'm hungry," Sara whispered as Helen lay in bed, her eyes half open. Helen raised her body up against the headboard. "Come close, darling, so I can kiss your beautiful cheek. Take apples for yourself and Robbie. I'll make supper soon." She inched herself off the bed. "There's a bottle for Rachel sitting in the saucepan on the stove. If you start feeding her, I'll take over in a few minutes."





Sara was perplexed. Her mother had never asked her to feed Rachel before. Was her mother preparing her for some new responsibilities?



When her father returned home, Sara was already in bed. The bedroom she shared with Robbie was just down the hall from the kitchen, and she could hear her mom begin speaking.

“So you’re home early tonight?” Helen’s voice, louder than usual, echoed in the quiet apartment.

“I’m tired, Helen,” Sara heard her father groan. She strained to hear the rest of his words.

“Bad news,” he mumbled. “Manhattan...deliveries...”

“So you have to go out again *tonight*?” The tense ring of her mother’s question frightened Sara.

“Yeah,” he said. There was a pause. “Thought I’d grab a bite first. What’s wrong, Helen? Have you been crying?”

For a moment her mother didn’t answer, and then Sara heard her say in an angry voice, “You promised me you’d stay clean!”

Sara didn’t know what her mother meant. Was her father dirty?

“What are you talking about?” he said.

“You know what I mean. Mitzi told me the truth.”

“Mitzi! You heard from Mitzi? What did she say?”

“The truth, I tell you! The rotten truth.”

“The bitch!”

Someone started banging on the table. *It must be Daddy*, Sara thought. The rustle of maple leaves against her bedroom window began to shut out her parents’ voices. She just had





to hear more clearly what was going on. She rose from her bed, tiptoed barefooted past Robbie, who was still asleep, and closed the door behind her. She slunk down the foyer hallway toward the kitchen and found the swinging door closed. No wonder she had such a hard time hearing their talk. She pushed the door carefully so that it opened just a bit. She saw Josef, his back to her, hovering over Helen near the refrigerator, his arm raised. Then opening the door a little more, standing in the doorway, and rubbing her eyes, she cried, “What’s wrong, Mommy?”

Her father swung around in Sara’s direction, then quickly turned his back on her. Sara began whimpering. Her mother rushed to embrace her and calm her down. She coaxed Sara back to her bedroom. “*Shush*, honey, everything’s OK. Mommy’s OK. Daddy and I are just talking.”

“So loud!” Sara noticed her mother’s swollen eyes.

“We’ll keep our voices down, OK? Go back to bed now.”

Sara didn’t believe that her parents were only talking. She crept out of her bedroom again and quietly made her way to the closed kitchen door where she strained to hear what was happening. Sara pushed the door open a trifle and saw her father crumple into a chair like a balloon losing its air.

“The pressure just kept building up,” he complained. He didn’t look at Helen as he spoke. He was clasping and unclasping his hands on the kitchen table, large butcher hands with butcher fingers, chunky, calloused, bruised.

“What pressure are you talking about?”

“Pop’s pressure. He didn’t trust me to be in business by myself. Instead he pushed Irv on me as a partner. That sissy couldn’t cut meat!”





Why was her father calling Uncle Irv a sissy?

“That was fifteen years ago!”

“It was supposed to be *my* business—don’t you understand?”

Sara saw her father bury his head on the table.

“Look at me!” Helen demanded. “Don’t give me these stories, these *bubbe meises*. Your father thought Irv could share the burdens of a new business with you. Have you forgotten that?”

Josef stood up and began nervously marching in place.

Sara was confused. She thought Daddy loved Poppy. She thought Daddy and Uncle Irv were friends.

“You could have disagreed with your father, made another proposal. Why bring up such excuses?”

Shifting from foot to foot, breathing heavily, he stuttered, “N-n-no time. Too much on my mind then. The war...getting married...torn up...”

“Why are you shuffling like that? Stop it. What’s wrong with you? Millions of men had to go to war, and they didn’t take drugs and wreck their lives like you did.”

“But I couldn’t handle it!” he shouted. “There you have it.” With his arm, he wiped perspiration off his brow.

“*Shush*, not so loud,” Helen said, placing a finger on her lips. She shot a glance at the doorway. Sara quickly pulled the door shut.

“You have no idea what I have to deal with, do you?” Sara heard her father yell. “We lost the Front Stage Deli today. The Front Stage! Our biggest account. Did you hear me?” He stormed out of the kitchen and into the living room. Sara ran into the kitchen, where her mother was looking out the window, folding and unfolding her arms and talking to herself.





“May she rest in peace,” Helen muttered. “I should have listened to my mother. Stupid, stupid me. She warned me about Josef.”

“You’re not stupid, Mommy.”

“What, *mamela*? You’re still up?” Helen turned around. Sara ran to her mother, clung to her sweater, and wouldn’t let go.

“Sara, sweetheart, you shouldn’t be hearing any of this. I want you to cover your ears. Don’t listen! Can you give me your word?” She reached into the broom closet for a tin can that held the rent money and placed a roll of bills into her apron pocket.

Her father came back into the kitchen, ignoring everything in his path, and toppled a chair. “I can stop whenever I want. Whenever I want!”

Sara raced out of the room and hid behind the door again.

“You’re a junkie!” Helen hollered, and burst into tears.

“Helen, don’t you understand? I’m lost without it. Lost.”

“You’re lost *with* it!” Helen yelled back. She paused. “Your parents need to know what’s happened to their ideal son, their perfect Josef! They need to know what I go through.”

“If you dare say a word, you know what I’ll do to you!” There was pounding on the table, then complete silence. The only sound was the hum of the refrigerator. Was her mother OK? Sara opened the kitchen door a notch, peeked in, and saw her father shaking his finger accusingly. “Don’t you involve my mother, do you hear?”

“I must. This problem is too big for me. I can’t handle it on my own.”





“No! My mother’s had enough trouble.” He slammed his fist on the counter. “I’m warning you.” His cheeks looked red-hot. “She’s never recovered from losing Alex.”

“Thank God you feel guilty. You should feel guilty. Maybe your mother can talk sense into you. Me...you’re only giving excuses...excuses.”

Who was Alex? Sara wondered. Her father was now on his knees. He took her mother’s hands. “I’ll quit right now. I promise. I’ll stop. You’ll see. We’ll scrape by. Just don’t tell my mother.”

“Don’t be crazy, Josef. Stand up!” she said, pulling her hands away from his. “You need help.”

He waved his arms wildly. “No one—*no one*—forces Josef Katz to do anything. Not you. Not my mother. I’ll stop when *I’m* good and ready.”

“What will happen to us if you get arrested or if you get sick? Don’t you think of that?”

“I don’t have time to argue with you, Helen. Right now, I need money.” He was hopping from one foot to the other, as if he were jumping rope.

“You need money? Where do you expect me to get it from?”

“The rent money.”

“Are you out of your mind? We owe your parents that money. You want to make it harder on them?” Her face turned as white as a sheet.

“Just give me the money!”

“I’m not going to feed your habit!” Helen shouted. And when she didn’t go to the broom closet to get the money, when Josef saw her back away from him and quickly place her hand in her apron pocket, he lunged at her.





“You’re insane!” she screamed, taking hold of the roll of bills and drawing both arms behind her back.

Her father darted toward her like a ferocious King Kong. Sara had seen the monster movie several times on TV and had nightmares about a large ape terrorizing people.

“No! No! Daddy, stop!” Sara saw her father shove her mother against the wall, twist her arm, and rip her apron. Helen seemed defenseless, reminding Sara of the frightened woman King Kong drew into his clutches on top of the Empire State Building. “Daddy, leave her alone! You’re hurting Mommy.” The small kitchen filled with Sara’s shouts and Helen’s screams. *It’ll be a miracle, Sara thought, if this racket doesn’t wake Robbie and Rachel up. Maybe they are awake and as frightened as I am.*

Sara suddenly hated her father. She wanted to rush out and topple the gorilla, sweep her mother into her arms, and carry her away to safety. But her legs felt like tree trunks. She watched her mother fall to her knees helplessly. Then King Kong landed a blow on her mother’s shoulder, then on her face, forcing her to the floor, causing the bills in her hand to scatter over the linoleum. Sara burst into tears. “Stop it. Stop it, Daddy!”

Her father looked like a crazy person crawling on the floor collecting dollar bills. His movements reminded her of a bum she once saw rummaging through the garbage bin. Josef locked lunatic eyes on Sara and stumbled out of the apartment.

Sara ran to her mother in the kitchen and hugged her. She saw blood dripping from her mother’s nose and mouth and an ugly bruise forming on her chin. “Ma, you’re hurt!”





“Don’t worry, Sara,” Helen said, getting up, grabbing a tissue from her pocket. She blotted her bruises and tried putting her disheveled hair in place.

“But Ma, Daddy hit you!”

“He’s sick, Sara. He’s your father. He didn’t deliberately mean to hurt me.” She drew Sara close to her and stroked her head.

Sara couldn’t understand how her mother could be so kind. *Didn’t Daddy just hit and hurt her? Can this monster be my Daddy, the same Daddy who buys us tutti-frutti ice cream cones and takes us to visit Grandma and Poppy?*

“We need to help Daddy,” her mother said. “Will you help me? Everything will be fine, dear. Go back to bed, honey. It’s our secret, OK?”

As she lay in bed, Sara’s thoughts were as chaotic as the tangled maple branches outside her bedroom window. *Does my daddy turn into a wild animal? Does he stalk and prowl at night when there’s a full moon like those werewolves in scary movies?*

Fear, mingled with hate, welled up inside her. Her mother was in danger, and she must save her. But how? Sara clenched her teeth. She pictured the sharp, gleaming knife that her father kept in the kitchen drawer, the one he used to carve roast beef and turkey. *Just wait until Daddy comes home.* She lay awake imagining the grainy feel of the knife’s wooden handle in her palm. But then she thought: *Do I really want to kill my father?* The father she knew and loved might turn around and say in his jolly voice, “Sara, my Sha-Sha,” and she’d feel ashamed. Flooded by feelings of love, fear, and hate, she fell asleep, exhausted.





That night she dreamt that her father met her and Robbie at school. Smiling broadly, he took them for a stroll along the promenade that overlooked the East River and the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. The sun was shining, the river sparkled.

A strange, masked man appeared just where a set of stone steps led down a steep decline to the expressway. The stranger pulled off his mask. His face was the spitting image of her father's! Totally confused, frightened, she grabbed hold of Robbie.

"I'm your real father," the imposter said, shooting his hand up like a police officer stopping traffic. "You kids have to come with me."

"N-n-no!" the original Josef stammered and stuttered. "Get lost, you f-f-fake!"

Then the bully imposter struck him, and the two of them came to blows. Filled with dread, Sara wanted to root for her stuttering father, but which one of them *was* her real father? She couldn't tell them apart. One father pushed the other down the steps, out of sight. Was he dead? Sara's heart was beating rapidly. Which father was with her now?

