

8252 Montlieu Street

Excerpt from the best-selling memoir The Final Season, St. Martin's Press

As a child I imagined my father's boyhood in black-and-white snippets, like scenes from an *Our Gang* movie. I pieced it together from anecdotes and creased photos and a hundred-odd conversations over many years. It is a childhood that, retold, became an endless streak of baseball games, Saturday matinees, and schoolboy adventures and it always sounded more interesting than my own — filled with characters named Lips and Whitey and Teets and Beezie, and born of a pre-Depression neighborhood that bordered an airport, a cemetery, and a forbidden field by the railroad tracks.

Theodore and Anna Stankiewicz, my grandparents, moved there in 1927 with their brood of children. They had left a home of similar size to escape a painful memory: the death of a daughter. Grandma couldn't bear to live where Dorothy Mae, just a year and some months old, had died. So they got a fresh start on Montlieu Street, which cut through the heart of a scrappy, ten-block working-class area, a place where Stankiewiczzes would stay for a half century and be visited by priests, police, and death.

Montlieu was lined with modest two-story wood homes. Most had been built in the mid-1920s by a Mr. Levine, who sold them to factory workers before the stock market crashed and before their jobs disappeared. There were many Poles, to be sure, but also Italians, Germans, Hungarians, Scots, and English — growing families with young children. The homes sat on narrow lots that backed up against alleys. All had porches, some of brick, and front yards small enough to spit a cherry seed over. The houses were so close that when Dad and his brothers peed out the upstairs window they'd hit the Nelsons' place next door.

The Stankiewicz home had a seldom-used front room with two frills: French doors that allowed the space to be shut off — and it was most of the time — and a square-foot window of stained glass that had been imbedded high in the wall, casting a church-like solemnity on sunny days. Grandma, who went to daily mass, appreciated this feature and complemented it with a framed felt portrait of Christ created by her firstborn, Clem. The portrait, a graduation requirement and a testament to his desire to finish grade school, hung for decades, becoming a quaint embarrassment to Clem when he started keeping company with the aspiring intellectuals, atheists, artists, and writers who called him by his middle name, Max.

The French doors opened into the dining room, where a large oak table dominated the floor space, and a hand-carved cabinet taller than any of the boys stretched toward the high ceiling. But the focus was the radio, often tuned to WWJ and Ty Tyson's broadcasts of Tigers games. A photo of Grandma's parents, the Tuchewicz, ruled one wall, a reminder of their very real presence in day-to-day life. Theirs was a serious pose: he with his big walrus mustache and she with her hair pulled tight into a bun, and not a hint of joy on their faces. They lived in Detroit and my grandma was their oldest child of eight. Off the Stankiewicz dining room, a small hallway led to the toilet and two bedrooms. One was occupied by daughters Irene and Bernice, the other by Grandma and Grandpa and whichever child qualified for the crib. As the boys grew, they ascended to the gabled room upstairs where Clem, Bucky, Teddy, and Joey — my dad — slept.

As in many large families, the kitchen served as the center of activity. It was at the back of the house and looked out on a rose and vegetable garden and the alley beyond. It hosted card games and the petty arguments that sometimes resulted amid pipe tobacco and yeasty beer. All meals were made and eaten in the kitchen. In good times that might mean boiled pork chops, roasts, and kishka, a blood sausage. Other times it would be vegetable soups and stews, potato pancakes, eggs scrambled with bologna, or pan-fried sandwiches made with thick welfare bread and doctored with whatever you had: bacon grease, onions, tomatoes, ketchup and cheese, or even mustard by itself. The kitchen had yellow walls and a spotty brown linoleum floor that Grandma scrubbed daily before 5 a.m. Dangling ominously from a hook by the stairs to the second story was a strap with four leather whipping tongues.

Grandma's canned chili sauce, preserves, pickles, and tomatoes were stored in the basement near a tub of apple butter and the beer and root beer that Grandpa bottled. As a teen, Bucky, the second son, used the pantry door for knife-throwing. Bucky had excellent aim and persuaded his agreeable brother Joey, six years his junior, to stand against the door while he threw blades around Joey's torso, as he'd seen done at the circus. The pantry later doubled as Bucky's photo darkroom. A coal-burning furnace, with arms like an octopus, consumed much of the basement, which also held Grandpa's workbench, where he fixed shoes for neighbors.

In the backyard beside the alley, Grandpa — they called him Pa — planted rose switches that he charmed from local ladies. He nurtured dozens of varieties, but the one that drew the most praise was the Hoover Rose, named for the Republican president. When visitors inquired about its yellow-and-orange petals, Pa, a Democrat, would lie: "Oh, that's the Paderewski Rose." On that block many knew Ignace Jann Paderewski as a

Polish hero, a pianist and statesman who had helped his nation gain independence after the World War — a man, in Pa's mind, worthy of the flower's beauty.

By the summer of 1932 the Great Depression had settled over the country. Fifteen million were unemployed, and Detroit, which had boomed through much of the 1920s, became paralyzed. Auto plants closed. Banks failed. Attendance at Tigers games plummeted to about 5,000 — less than half of what it had been three years earlier. On Montlieu Street, as everywhere, families struggled to keep their homes and to find food. Pa was laid off from his job at Chrysler and Bucky quit school to work at a box factory and contribute to the family. Clem worked, too, but saved his money for New York.

Anna Mae was the ninth Stankiewicz child, a spunky kid with curly blonde hair. Like Dorothy Mae before her, she had been given her middle name in honor of the silent-screen actress Mae Busch, one of her ma's favorites. Anna Mae treasured Bucky, her doting seventeen-year-old brother. Nightly she refused to eat dinner until he returned from work, and then she'd treat him to her abbreviated rendition of "Somebody Loves You," changing the "you" to "me."

That year Anna Mae became ill and the brightness in her eyes dimmed. As always, Ma turned to God (and Dr. Osinski). "Pray to Saint Theresa of the Little Flower," she told her toddling daughter. "Offer your suffering up to Saint Theresa." As the spinal meningitis took hold of Anna Mae, Ma sent Bucky to ask a priest to pray that her daughter be relieved of the pain. Ann Mae died at 2 a.m. on a Sunday morning, shortly after Bucky returned from a downtown movie house.

The little casket, lined in pink, was set in the front room beyond the French doors. Light from outside streamed through the stained-glass window, touching the casket with hues of red, blue, and gold. Aunties and uncles, cousins and friends came to the home on Montlieu. A wreath of sorrow hung on the front door. On Ma's dresser was a small crucifix. Anna Mae had liked to remove the nails that held the statue of Christ in place but she could never manage all of them. For weeks after the burial the statue dangled from one nail, just as she had left it.