

hand, I politely asked Mort a few questions. "If you want to ask me out for a drink, just say so," he chuckled, "Let's go." We went.

In the midst of a serious discussion on the circumcision ritual, I dared transgress. I started asking Mort about his family and his life in Indianapolis. I was prepared to record his comments on the cocktail napkins if necessary. Mort snapped, "Look you, you're out with Morty Garribine and his dad. Don't ask too many questions. We'll start thinking you're from the F.B.I." I shut up and listened. Later Morty asked me why I didn't seem to say much. I explained that I thought I was catching something from the breeze blowing directly on my upper person. I didn't designate the draft as the storm from his mouth.

I was able to remember a bit of what Morty included in his soliloquy. "Welp girlie, pawn is a good business. We get the stuff from people who need the money fast. Say the wife's pregnant and the insurance ran out with the last missed payment or something. Anyway--hey, did I tell you about the shrimp, my kid? Larry is quite a guy. Here's a picture with his mom." We looked at photos half of the evening. I contributed a snapshot of my cat, licking her furry ear with a paw. Morty and his father threw in pictures of aunts, uncles, and the nephew's bar mitzvah.

Morty explained, "When a boy becomes a man. That is, at the end of his thirteenth year, we have a celebration. You should be Jewish. Do you like Polish sausage? Shapiros sells the best in town, you know."

My stomach ached from the alcoholic tonic of pine trees. "Morty Garribine," I said finally, "Do you feel mistreated or pressured by people who aren't Jewish."

"Come on, " he started before I had finished, "People is people, they say. Not everybody can be Jewish. God help us all. Some people just weren't cut out for it. Like Jake O'Henry who comes in the store most every day. He's not the Jewish type. But I like the guy. I like almost everybody. Some people are a little hard to take, sure. But I get along. I've got a beautiful wife, kids, and a great dad--hear that Dad--and a good life. Is that what you want. Drink up."

The handsome man and his father stood up and directed me to follow. As we were leaving, Sam invited me to Morty's house for New Year's day. Morty said he would be most happy to have me come for a visit but his family would be gone. If I robbed the place, he would know who to contact, he said. I told him not to fear. I would bring the stolen goods to his shop for quick cash. Morty and his father exchanged glances and walked away. I thought I understood the productive power of pawn when I left that evening. I knew only a small portion of the whole story.

On January 27, I received a clipping from a friend in Indianapolis. The news article featured a local hock joint that had been temporarily closed for further investigation. My eyes shot to the names in the lead, Sam and Mortimor Garribine. It seemed the two had been picked up for receiving stolen property. The question was, were they aware of their receipts? Somehow I know, but I won't say.

Although it is difficult to believe, I did have the opportunity to question Morty briefly on my ten basic inquiries. He mulled over each query, then exploded into endless commentary. I recorded his reactions over the telephone, the only means by which I could limit his love for tangents.

1. WHAT IS GOOD ABOUT THE WORLD TODAY?

"Don't ask me, ask the Trick. He's where the action is! No, seriously this world of ours ain't all bad as places go. There's a lot to improve but a perfect set is impossible to achieve. People aren't born bad. They just pick up the habit as they go along. My own kids get meaner every day. Picked that up from their old dad, huh? ha ha."

2. WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY?

"Simple. My wife. The kids. Friends. I got a lot of friends. Not so many wives and kids but I'm satisfied. ha ha. Simple things make me happy--like money. ha ha."

3. WHAT'S BAD ABOUT THE WORLD TODAY?

"The business going on television isn't my idea of fun and games. There's murder and rape and all that crap. That's why I turn the news off at night. Somebody's going to dream up a machine that will rub out the earth in one blow. I'm not joking now. Things are gettin' scary out there. I'm afraid to walk the streets of Indianapolis at night. Some damned long-nosed creep might come up behind me and blow his sauerkraut breath in my face. ha ha."

4. WHAT SMALL THING HAVE YOU DONE TO MAKE THIS WORLD A BETTER PLACE?

"I take out the trash on Mondays...that's three days before the garbage men even come."

I pay my taxes. I don't beat my wife, unless she deserves it. I make people laugh. So laugh."

5. WHO IS YOUR HERO?

"Mickey Mantle. Mickey Lolich. Mickey Mouse. I like a lot of people, you know that. Sometimes I'm my own hero when I'm feeling good and I just made a big deal. I admire George Washington. Not the President, that guy that comes in with the colors TV's. He's a Zenith man. ha ha."

6. IS THE WORLD DOING ENOUGH FOR YOU?

"You mean this? O.K. I'll play your silly game. Hey, how's your meter workin'? The world gave me health and a home and happiness. So there. You got all that? I've been turned a good hand, I think."

7. ARE YOU DOING ENOUGH FOR THE WORLD?

"By the look of my taxes this year, I do more than enough. If I knew what more I could do, I'd try. Maybe shine the Trick's shoes? I keep out of people's ways. That's one hell of a favor. I do good in the business. I make people happy both ways."

8. IF YOU WERE TO TRAVEL BACK IN TIME, WHAT WARNING WOULD YOU HAVE FOR THE PEOPLE BEFORE YOU?

"A Jewish pilgrim-prophet. Cute idea. I'd say, look let's clean it up. The air is getting bad, smog is getting in people's eyes and noses and dirtin' up their nice clean duds. Pollution measures are important now. Maybe if the guys before us had thought ahead, we would be enjoying a cleaner atmosphere today."

9. SUPPOSE BEINGS FROM ANOTHER PLANET VISITED YOU AND WISHED TO KNOW OF LIFE ON EARTH. HOW WOULD YOU SUMMARIZE THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY OF YOUR WORLD?

"The value system. You're bad because you're Black or White or a Jew. You're not a man if you haven't got one leg or one arm and an eye. You're not whole. You don't meet the requirements for a complete person. I see men come into the shop every day who have had one problem or another. Some of them are missing vital parts. That is the truth. I have blind men, deaf guys, guys with one hand and four fingers. I get 'em all. They're o.k. We don't need to ask any more, 'Are you prejudiced?' Why don't we just ask, 'How many Black men do you hate? or How many Jews aren't good enough? How much dirt have you kicked in the faces of your own folks?' I'd send those Martians back home to start making their own mistakes. Earth might be a great training ground for doing the right thing wrong or versa vica. Maybe on Mars or Venus or Pluto everyone is the same--a bunch of weird little purple dudes with pink pointed heads and twelve toes. That may just be ugly to us because we're used to what we see in our own home or our own towns. Maybe if everyone looked the same for a while, we'd start hearing less about racial equality. How the hell can you say your purple, pink pointed head neighbor is an ugly S.O.B. when you look exactly the same? We'd soon start laughing at our neighbors and realize we were laughing at ourselves. That's the way it is now if anybody'd care to notice."

10. WHAT IS LIFE?

"A bowl of cherries. A bed of roses. A pawn shop full of goodies. Life is living every single day until you die. I mean really getting down to the brass tacks of having a good time and doing the right thing. Doin' your own thing, I hear. That takes a lot of guts and not too many people really live each day like they could. Imagine you're goin' die tomorrow. Things would change so fast. That last day of life would be so short, so damned short. I think about that a lot. That's why I try living each day to the fullest. Just get out there and knock 'em over, man. Live. That's the key to life. Live."

GEORGE GENTILE

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I never expected to meet a man I would love in a retirement village. My image of a retreat for the elderly had long consisted of one dorm-like structure featuring endless euchre hands and a special hour devoted to sipping warm Serutan. The souls within the isolated haven appeared to me in nightmares as wrinkling, shrinking, barely breathing bodies begging God for one less hour of life. I had no desire to share the misery of the elderly.

However, as duties were distributed for the summer of 1972, I discovered that I had drawn the responsibility of working days, babysitting nights, traveling weekends and accompanying my less-than-aged parents to sunny Mid Florida Lakes retirement village. This mobile home hamlet prospered in tiny Leesburg, Florida--a site, I was certain, designed to rob unsuspecting folks from their bank accounts with promises of a retirement Shangri-La. I went along as a self-appointed body guard and executive decision maker.

Many months following my negative first thoughts, I decided that Mid Florida Lakes was a dream, and one I knew would come equipped with a happy ending.

It was in this tropical paradise that I met George Gentile, Emma Anzslovar and her husband Jack Anzslovar, a threesome who amassed 217 years of life between them but who could have enamoured a troll with their wise adolescence.

George Gentile is a man whose name I shall never be able to say with just two words. He demands explanation.

It is evident still that George was once a comely cuss.

He possesses the prominent nose of what he calls a "healthy Jew." His skin is taut and tan; his hair is a beautiful snowy cap. He walks like a Hollywood gangster, carefully calculating each step as if the cameras were catching him in the act. It has been more than three decades since George Gentile operated a squash racket in Brooklyn, New York, but he is as physically fit at age seventy-five as a young tennis instructor. His muscles flex with an impressive firmness when he demonstrates the techniques he mastered as a professional masseur in New York City for forty-three years. George is currently works part time in an athletic club in Brooklyn. Remembering is his full time occupation.

I was only with George Gentile for three days in Leesburg but I am certain I saw him pluck the same crumbling photo from his fine leather billfold at least twenty times..He called the lady in the picture "my darling Annie Marie" and he always wiped away a tear when he said it. His wife had passed away in 1970; two years later on a summer day I could never forget he told me that if he was the one chosen to keep her memory alive, he could never die. He said it as if to offer the memory to me for keeping. It was then that I began to love that silly old man with the proud and polished stride.

Although I was the sole representative of a younger generation in the retirement villa, I honestly cannot recall a more enivigorating and enlightening experience. On the first day of our visit, George and sister Emma, a lean but lovely lady, joined me--an oddity by age--in a German beer fest. We all admitted our distaste for beer as if confessing before the crime.

Three hours and thirty beers later, we were all singing and dancing like children at their first birthday party. We disrupted a bingo game and threw a shoe to the resident crocodile who craved marshmallows. I told George and the Anzslovars they were beautiful people. George said my eyes sparkled like broken glass in front of a headlight on the freeway. I read poetry aloud; George recited a stanza from William Wordsworth striking work, Ode to the Intimations of Immortality. He muttered softly while forming the words on a tongue obviously thickened to the point of near muteness.

George said, "What though the radiance which was once so bright be now forever taken from my sight--though nothing can bring back the hour of splendour in the grass, glory in the flower, we must grieve not--rather find strength in what remains behind."

Jack told me that George Gentile has put a sign outside his apartment door for many Christmas's. The sign always reads, "Happy Birthday Jesus. That has been his only decoration since he stored the boxes of tinsel away after his wife's last holiday.

The four of us guzzled orange juice and discussed the Florida Kennel Club over black coffee. Jack Anzslovar, a Clark Gable look-alike, described his debts to the dog track while George licked his right index finger and slapped it into his opened palm. The gesture became ritual and sometime between midnight and morning he began a history of the motion. I learned that during the years as a masseur, George and his fellow "fingermen" (a title, he said, bestowed by members of the Mafia) silently informed each other of a customer's tipping potential by either pulling the left ear lobe or slapping the right index finger in one's palm.

The latter signal indicated a promise in the pocket. Out of the business, George used the sign as an inaudible "good" or "yes."

Seven days before Christmas of 1972, I received a phone call from New York. "Hello Sweetheart" roared the voice. I paused and then screeched like an astonished hoot owl, "George! George! It's really you!" Following my terribly original greeting, I proceeded to spill six months news on my Eastern chum. I explained details already outlined in letters. I rambled. I exclaimed. Then I started my round of questions. But no one was there to answer. The line was dead.

Three days later George called from a hospital bed to tell me that his heart had been misbehaving. He said, "They tell me my machinery is running down. I told 'em to go bug some old man, that I'd just had a tune-up some 10,000 miles ago." Then I heard him gulp and whisper, "Will you remember old George always?" Promise. He could not see as I slapped my right index finger into an opened palm.

A week following our telephone conversation, I received a letter. It was scribbled but not entirely illegible. I found an old familiar phrase amidst the pleasantries, "Linda, you're a knockout." I saw the little Jewish man in my mind, racing me to the swimming pool and winning.

If I never learn what has become of George Gentile, I will not grieve for the worst. I will remember him always . . . and what he left behind.

THE EYES HAVE IT

Lucy Billie. Ben and Beatrice Strauss. The Strauss
springers. Donitta James. Will and Beth Henson. Morty John
Garribine. Pat Moodley. Emma and Jack Anzslovar and a little
Jewish man named George Gentile. Names without faces to the
man who sees them only as letter combinations on paper; excerpts
from a telephone directory of names and addresses that cannot
smile, frown, or respond until personal contact is made.

But to one who has looked and seen; to one who has listened
and heard; to one fortunate enough to touch even the fringes of
their minds and souls, these names represent life itself.

An endeavor in the art of New Journalism seems to hold the
rare opportunity for an ethical role playing, outside the analyst's
leather couch. From my experiences with even these few characters
of whom I write, I have developed a need, a concern, a fresh fas-
cination for the individual.

I have vowed to never again be guilty of by-passing a
chance for a warm human contact. Perhaps when I allow my eyes
to open wide, I might see fully for the first time.

Hurried and worried until
we're buried, and there's no
curtain call.
Life's a funny proposition, after
all.

George Michael Cohan