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Fred Haines was in an assisted living center when I met him in December of 1999. I was a feature writer for the *Shore Record*, the same plain-Jane local daily that had reported my father's accident some thirty years earlier.

I was looking for one of those end-of-the-century, witness-to-history stories. I figured I would go in, scout around, and find the most lucid old-timer. It didn't take long.

The Oceanview was a new facility—a Victorian facsimile of some of the grand, postcardesque homes built a century earlier along the coast. The address was Bradley Beach, but it stood five blocks from the beach and didn't even have an ocean view.

It instead overlooked a briny, stagnant pond edged with swamp grass and cattails called Fletcher Lake, named for a famous Methodist bishop. Bradley Beach was named after James Bradley, a Methodist who founded and built Asbury Park, which he named for another Methodist bishop. Both towns surround Ocean Grove, New Jersey's second summer resort after Cape May, built as a summer tent revival city for Methodists. I tell you this because the Methodists, who connected religious revitalization to God-given salt air and sea breezes, made the Jersey Shore the resort area it is today, though you would never know it.

The three towns once drew drinking water from the lake, but it had long been infiltrated with saltwater, just as the old, all-white Methodist towns were later infiltrated by Irish-Catholics and Jews and Italians, who eventually became rich enough and "white" enough to find their footing on the upward American stepladder. In Asbury Park, which began as a carefully laid out American city, the ethnic whites were soon replaced by blacks during the post-World

War II migration north. The riots of the mid-60s hit the town hard, but in three short decades, the newly emboldened gay community found it a safe haven, and same-sex couples began to restore the beautiful shore town mansions wrecked by urban neglect, and opened restaurants and galleries. The down-and-out town of Bruce Springsteen was turning effete and chic.

Around the Oceanview were blocks of summer rentals—sagging, paint-chipped bungalows trashed by college kids each summer, then pieced back together by landlords each winter; an annual cycle of drunken fun for the lessee and runaway profit for the lessor. Closer to the beach were some new homes, mini-manses of varying styles. It would just be a matter of time before the bungalows would fall to new construction, existing only as mirages of good times in middle-aged memories.

The doors of the Oceanview parted for me and I stepped inside. It was cheery, with pastel hallways and shiny linoleum floors. The handrails were brass, polished to the point where you could see yourself in them. There were mirrors everywhere, reflecting light to make the place even brighter. This surprised me. I thought mirrors would be demoralizing to old folks—constant reminders they had become craggy caricatures of how they best remembered themselves. But that was Oceanview: clean, bright, and optimistic. I was expecting something more dismal, sadder, to match the decrepitude of the people I expected to find inside. I was wrong on both accounts.

In a solarium off from the front desk, a few residents gathered, faces pink, hair blazing white, in clean robes or casual clothes. A few gazed out over the pond, lost in thought or trapped in memory, but most were in engaged in chatter. In a large mirror at one side of the solarium, I saw a gaggle of mostly women whooping it

up in one corner, their laughter dominating the room. Then I saw myself: discount-store drab olive corduroy jacket over a light blue Oxford shirt, brown knit tie, un-creased khakis, and bargain-brand penny loafers. A reporter if there ever was one. I felt a twinge of self-consciousness among people so comfortable in their wrinkled skin.

I'd been in the business my whole life, right out of college, trying to follow in the boot-heel literary footsteps of John Steinbeck, Upton Sinclair, Sinclair Lewis, and Sherwood Anderson. The most sincere way to capture real American life, like Joseph Mitchell, Studs Terkel, and Gay Talese, I thought, was to write about it at the most base level—the daily newspaper.

Early on, I wrote the novelist Bernard Malamud a letter asking writing advice. He sent back a long note on a postcard, punctuated by one memorable sentence.

*Learn who you are and write what you know.*

I knew the Jersey Shore, so I stayed. Colleagues moved on to bigger papers, or television (and later websites), or teaching. Some went to law school, or into real estate sales, or other more lucrative livelihoods. I stayed put.

Of course, I was personally, painfully aware of the forced “paper-thinness” (an expression Fred Haines used) of much newspaper writing, beginning with the perfunctory, unsatisfying report of my father’s accident. I knew I could be more thoughtful and thorough, and tell stories filled with meaningful detail that exposed motivations; stories that made enduring statements about the human character and condition, stories about tragedy, and sudden loss, and how the spirit beats back both.

Armed with this high ambition, I came through the *Shore Record’s* doors with the same romantic notions held by every new

reporter before me. To uncover—be it human drama or municipal corruption—and explain. To find a great story, and tell it well. Wrong, I was.

Like those before me, I was trained to gather scant information in the quickest amount of time and pound it into digestible newspaper stories; stories people would read and soon forget, excreted from their consciousness the minute something more pressing came up. But in 1999, I was still hopeful and was a smart reporter, and I knew the laughter I heard at the Oceanview signaled something special; it was unexpected in a place where death is a weekly visitor.

The old man at the center of the laughter faced away from me in a wheelchair. “OCEANVIEW” was stenciled in white against dark blue, reminding me of one of those Hollywood “DIRECTOR” chairs. The laughter I’d heard was from the people around him. Robust cackling is the best way to describe it. The director, dressed in fresh blue-gray flannel pajamas covered by a clean royal blue robe, was the center of attention, holding court.

I watched for a few minutes, as he gestured with his hands to punctuate a story. His voice was clear and stable and loud, in that hard-of-hearing way. He sat tall in the chair, a head above the people around him. Some of the women were rolled close to him and touched his arm at each punch line.

“Oh, Freddy, you are too much!” one said.

As I moved closer to hear him, I was intercepted by an oval-faced Jamaican nurse in a lemon-lime striped smock.

“May I help you?”

I told her who I was and why I was there, and then asked, “Who is that man?”

“That is Mr. Fred Haines. He was a reporter, like you.”

“Could I meet him?”

A lazy wave said, “Follow me.”

“Mr. Haines!” she shouted, her Jamaican lilt spiced with an official tone I thought was designed to mock me. “Mr. Haines, you have an *important* visitor.”

“A what? Oh, good!” Haines said, wheeling toward me. Now I saw his face; the prominent nose and tightness in the cheek of a lean man, a strong jaw protruding to the same plane as his forehead. A ladies’ man now, and in his day, no doubt.

I introduced myself and gave the reason for my visit.

“A newspaperman! Me, too. Was, anyway. The *New York Daily Mirror*. It’s gone now. Oh, boy, I musta known you were coming, ’cause I was just warming up, telling my friends a few stories from the old days.”

“Oh, Mr. Haines! Why you gonna lie to this man?” the nurse said with a dramatic scoff. “You make it sound like that’s not what you do all day. You and your stories!” Turning to me she said, “He’s our ’round the clock entertainment. You’ll see.”

The old folks around him took the cue, and rose slowly and unsteadily from their arm chairs to shuffle off. A woman patted his arm as she left. “See you at lunch, Freddy.”

Haines wheeled up closer. “Still got it. Ninety-three, and still got it.”

He winked, then reached into his robe pocket and pulled out a pair of industrial black-rimmed glasses. Then he looked up with hugely comic magnified eyes; I could see my own refracted image in the lenses.

“Well, well,” he said. “Let’s see our newspaperman. Why, hell’s bells! You’re just a baby! I thought she said you were a reporter, not the paperboy!”

“I guess I’m older than I look. To you, anyway,” I said, with my best disarming smile, and stuck out my hand. We shook, and the hard veins on the back of his hands wiggled under my fingertips.

“Hah! Good one! A ball-buster, I like that. Reminds me of me. And you’re right; it’s all relative. Just like my lunch dates. Who ever thought I’d be looking forward to eating with an 80-year-old broad! Hah!”

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More than a decade has passed since that day. I am no longer a newspaperman, which I owe mostly to Fred Haines. When he was done telling his story, I knew the paper could never contain it, like so many subjects and stories these days. I filed my perfunctory witness-to-history story before the odometer flipped from 1999 to 2000, but we stayed friends. In the end, he gave me his story, and I gave back something everyone should have near the end of their life: someone to listen to it. When I told him I was going to write his whole story, a book, he suggested I call it *Jersey in the '30s*.

“Lousy alliteration, but I like it!” he said.

Jersey in the '30s was the where and when for four major international news stories: the Lindbergh baby kidnapping, the fire on the ocean liner *Morro Castle*, the *Hindenburg* explosion, and Orson Welles’s “The War of the Worlds” broadcast. Fred Haines covered them all. Jersey was his beat.

“Right place, right time,” he said. “Simple as that. That, and the old Haines luck. Let me tell you something about luck, kid: You make your own. You show up first and stay latest, and that’s how you get the best stories.”

Another title he liked was *Bruno's Confession*, the title of his own unfinished manuscript.

"That'll hook 'em," he would tell me later. "Nobody knows Hauptmann confessed but me. And now you. You can tell the world and lay the controversy to rest."

According to Haines, Bruno Richard Hauptmann confessed to him that he'd killed the Lindbergh baby. The confession came in a jailhouse interview just weeks before Hauptmann went to the electric chair.

In his earlier days as a tabloid guy, Fred Haines would have run from that interview screaming "Stop the presses!" But by the time of the confession, he had changed. Something inside him had broken, and something else was getting fixed. As a newspaperman myself, I understood this. You become a proprietor of others' grief and misfortunes, and it's a disgraceful job at times, yet every now and then it offers a chance for redemption. Fred Haines took that shot at redemption. He kept Hauptmann's confession a secret for almost sixty-five years.

The question, you ask, is "Why?"

The answer—what else? To protect a woman—Mrs. Hauptmann.

And did I believe him?

Yes. Because the day he told me, more than ten years ago, I saw in his face what I had seen in Sister Lucia's: a flash of conscious wrestling behind the eyes, then the resigned look of inevitable confession. Those expressions were quickly followed by the same faraway look Sister Lucia gave me when she patted the chair and said, "Let me tell you a little story."

In Haines's magnified eyes was a watery depth of grayness that made me realize this old man had a story, a real story, to tell. His

eyes were deep pools of experience, Scottish lochs of old secrets waiting to burst through an ancient dam, a flood of emotions racing down a spillway to me: stories of pain, of loss, of confession, just as with Sister Lucia. And he wanted to tell this story not just to anybody, but to someone who could absorb it and learn from it.

Suddenly, I knew there was something Fred Haines *had* to tell *me*. He had a secret of his own.