

Preface

The following is a work of fiction.
The stories of the lives of Harry and Lucy are true.

Prologue

Do you think there's a reason why certain people come together? Why do you like the sound of one person's voice but wince at the tone of another's? Why do some people smell good and others kind of go the other way? Several women have told me they know from the moment they meet a man whether or not they will go to bed with him. Sex at first sight? Why? Why do men view some guys as rivals or enemies and others as life-long buddies and brothers? Why do some people fall in love? I mean really in love. Forever. For always. For better or worse. Until death do they part?

Why do we go on living after those we love die? Or do we? Certainly, the moment someone leaves us, the second they pass, we are no longer living in quite the same way as before. Yeah, the sun rises, we go to work, and sleep comes; although, perhaps, not quite as gently on all counts. The world still bursts with color. Reds, blues, greens, and yellows persist in making their vivid statements. But like all colors, they are subject to shades of individual perception and interpretation. We believe these colors are real, even though they are perceived differently by each person.

Our world is blurred by the passing of our present into our past, but we remain ever resolute that what we recognize as real is nonetheless so; that the table in the kitchen remains the table in the kitchen, not just a bunch of atoms spinning wildly with divine precision to create an illusion we can all grasp and hold on to. The beliefs we all share, a chair is a chair, continue, but our lives change when someone so familiar, so taken for granted, so loved, is lost. The person who ate at the table and sat on that chair is awkwardly absent from the scene; a scene not quite as familiar or comforting as it had been the day before. The person we once held, who touched our hair and called our name is gone...just out of reach.

Memories linger, then languish until they are gone or transformed into memories of themselves. When can you no longer hear his voice or feel her fingers? When does the sound of their laughter fade? When do their scents disappear from the clothing we keep in their memory? The lives we knew when we were with them are over, or perhaps they are never really at an end. Nothing is less solid and more temporary than what we define as 'reality'. It can change in the blink of an eye, a baby's first cry or a darling's last breath. I don't know the answers...but at least now I know what I believe.

This is a love story.

Chapter 1

Beemans gum. That's how it all started, with a stick of Beemans gum. A penny a stick; a hefty price back then.

Hunger, humiliation, and death had been part of Harry Piasecki's life from a very young age. It was the Great Depression, and he and his friends had to crawl over barbed wire on the top of fences to steal coal from the railroad yard to keep their families from freezing in the judgmental and unjust Michigan winter. Anyone caught was beaten senseless by the railroad guard who was usually, actually always, drunk and often invited his boozed-up buddies to join in the fun. The guard and his pals would laugh and swear in Polish, as they kicked with heavy leather boots and swung their nightsticks with all their might. None of the victims would go to a hospital. Hospitals were for rich people. These boys either crawled home and recovered or didn't and were forgotten.

Back then, Hamtramck, Michigan was predominately Polish—a famished Eastern European ghetto girdled entirely by the City of Detroit. It was filled with people from places like Lublin, Znin, Trzchianka, Szadek, Szczebrzesyn, Krakow, and Warsaw. All had come in search of full bellies and better lives in that land of milk and money—America. Living in Hamtramck, they either kept their dreams or lost all hope.

Harry had seen his six-month-old brother, Mikey, die from diphtheria. He was buried in the family's tiny backyard near the fence bordering the stone-covered alley. Funerals were also for rich people. A sister, who never had a name, died shortly after being born at home. His parents had no money for a doctor, and the neighbor lady who had promised to help with the delivery was visiting a friend that day. Harry's mother almost bled to death while holding her dead daughter in her arms. After that, she started to pray a lot and to drink even more.

Food was scarce, and malnutrition was a given for many. Harry knew what it felt like to go to bed hungry and with the knowledge that the next night would be the same. But when sleep finally overcame the gnawing in his belly, Harry would dream of getting fat. He would dream of being warm. He would dream of being happy. He would dream of finding his love.

Harry never told his dad about those dreams, in fact, he tried to talk to him as little as possible. His father most often dealt with his kids from one end of a heavy, brown, worn-leather, shaving strap made for sharpening straight razors. The kids would feel the sting from the other end on their buttocks, backs, arms, wherever the swing happened to hit. All six of Harry's surviving brothers and sisters had felt it to the point of familiarity. They had learned how to duck and turn in a way that would have the strap land in places less painful or humiliating.

Any violation of Felix Piasecki's rules would result in a beating. If one of the girls stayed out until after dark, she would be greeted by the strap as soon as she walked in the front door. If one of the boys ever lost a fight, the beating at home would be far worse than any injury inflicted on the street. That's how Felix had been raised by his father back in Poland. He continued the tradition so that his girls would learn to listen, and his boys would grow tough. It made Harry keep his mouth shut. It also made him angry.

Felix Piasecki hadn't had a dream he could remember in 20 years.

If Felix ever found out about the Beemans gum, that his son was 'throwing good money away' and keeping food off the table, because of some girl, Harry knew he would get the beating of his life...or maybe of his death. But to 16-year-old Harry Piasecki, that Beemans gum was worth every penny and any risk. He would walk twenty and a half blocks every day to buy a stick of that gum from a 14-year-old girl named Lucy Buraczynski. Her father owned a one-room candy/animal feed/beer store on the east side of Hamtramck. That's where Harry and Lucy fell in love. That was a long time ago.

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“I wish I could go with you,” Lucy Piasecki said softly into the ‘bad’ phone that was beside her couch in the assisted living apartment. The ‘good’ phone was in the bedroom, but getting up from her corner of the sofa and using the walker to reach it before voicemail picked up was a race she could no longer hope to win. The broken hip saw to that.

“God, I haven’t been to Petoskey in 30 years at least. Last time was with Uncle Louie, when Mary died.”

Lucy’s son, Jerry, shifted the phone restlessly from his right ear to his left. He knew that telling his mom his plans to travel to Petoskey, Michigan, a place the Piaseckis had visited many times as a young family was not going to be an easy conversation. “I know, Mom. I can’t wait to see it again. I wonder if it’s changed much.”

“Are you driving all the way from New York by yourself?”

“No, remember Rob, Mom?”

”He plays guitar,” Lucy said recalling how Jerry’s friend, Rob, had once played Glen Miller’s song ‘*String of Pearls*’ for her, on his guitar, in the hospital when she was recovering from her hip surgery. She didn’t think he played it very well, but she appreciated the effort.

“Yeah, that’s him. Well, Rob is going to be coming with me for company.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re not making the drive alone. Still I wish I could go with you. The last time I was there was when Mary died. I drove up with Uncle Louie.”

Jerry first met his friend Rob when he took a job at a radio station in White Plains, New York. WFAS prided itself on being the ‘Voice of Westchester’, which for many years it was, particularly on snowy mornings when it seemed as though every student in the county would call to ask if their school was closed. Jerry was an aggressive reporter; Rob a laid back engineer.

The two became almost instant friends for life, although neither one was sure why. Maybe Jerry motivated Rob, and Rob slowed Jerry down. Maybe it was none of those things, but the friendship stuck and the two men actually shared an apartment for a year near the station, and later, a house in Mt

Kisco, New York until Jerry moved back to Detroit to work at a bigger station in a much bigger radio market.

Before moving in with Rob, Jerry had stayed with his sister Anne, who lived in Ridgefield, Connecticut which is just across the state line from northern Westchester County New York. Anne had married successfully and had given up a promising stage career decades earlier. She was happy with her choices. Jerry's past marriages and choices had been somewhat less successful.

When Anne and Jerry were children, they would spend summers in Petoskey with their mom and dad, Harry and Lucy.

Petoskey, a city of around 6,000 permanent residents and at least three or four times that many visitors in the summer and winter, sits on the pinkie side of the ring finger in the mitten that is the lower peninsula of Michigan. Anyone from the state will happily point to their hometowns by lifting a hand and pointing to the exact spot on the mitten where they were raised.

Driving in from the south on Rt. 131, Petoskey comes into view as you crest a hill and look down at the shimmering waters of Lake Michigan's Little Traverse Bay. It is a magical sight, millions of tiny sparkling loose diamonds dancing in the sunlight on soft turquoise waves, welcoming you to a world not ruled by what we perceive, but by what exists when we blink. Petoskey is an Odawa nation word for 'where the light shines through the clouds'.

Fifty years ago when Jerry was only seven years old and Anne 11, there were fewer people and a lot fewer hotels, but the awe-inspiring vision, when coming over the hill, was always the same.

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Lucy broke her hip while making stuffed peppers. One step back in her narrow kitchen, one loose rug, one fall; one life forever changed. We all have a moment when the end begins. That was hers.

Lucy lived in the small, two-bedroom apartment in Ridgefield, Connecticut, for about five years. Jerry's move to New York had pulled her from the comfort of her life-long home in Detroit. (Below the outside of the thumb and about an

inch or so above the wrist) The apartment was the first place where she had ever lived alone. It was *her* apartment, Lucy's place, and she loved it.

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While Jerry and Rob often didn't see each other for years after the WFAS days, each time they did manage to get together it seemed like only a day had passed. It was that kind of friendship. Both were now divorced; Rob from a Russian lawyer named Tatiana, and Jerry from an American lesbian named Lydia. Jerry didn't know of his wife's orientation until six years and one child had been shared between them. Rob knew from the start that his bride was both Russian and a lawyer, but he said "I do" anyway. Opposing the will of Tatiana would have taken just too much energy and didn't seem worth the trouble of it all.

Jerry lived in Michigan while raising his daughter until she moved off to college. In her junior year, he headed back east after being hired to try to 'turn United Nations Radio into a more professional broadcast operation'. Jerry liked to describe the job as 'mission impossible' in all six official UN languages. Rob, meanwhile, now taught and did radio engineering at Westchester Community College just north of New York City.

When they were younger, both men had talked about taking road trips together. Back then, they had only managed one such adventure to Maine. Now, with more time and fewer wives, they were pretty much free to travel as they liked.

One day Jerry called his friend. "Hey, man, road trip?"

"Sure, I have some vacation time saved up. Where to, Jer?"

Jerry hadn't planned a destination when he made the call. But when Rob asked his question, Jerry immediately answered, "How about Petoskey?"

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"Will you see your Aunt Mary while you're in Petoskey?"

Jerry held his breath for a second. Lucy's dementia had been getting worse by the week, if not by the day. He didn't know what to say.

“Mom, Mary died a long time ago, remember? You went to the funeral with Louie.”

“Of course I remember,” Lucy always tried to cover what she called her ‘lapses’. In her 30s, she had joked about hoping to either ‘die quickly or decompose with dignity’. Neither wish had been granted.

“I know you do, Mom. You must have meant Mary’s kids, remember Bobby and Billy?”

Everyone always tried to support Lucy in these moments. The conscious goal was to help her avoid embarrassment. Sometimes it worked, other times it was patronizing.

“I bet they still live in that old house on Mitchell Street,” Jerry said in a voice too cheery and with a smile too broad. “I’ll take a picture if it’s still there.”

“Jerry, of course I remember Bobby and Billy,” Lucy said, her voice dropped to a whisper. “But actually, for what it’s worth, I really did mean Mary.”

“Mom, please.”

“You never know about Petoskey,” Lucy said softly.

“What do you mean?” Jerry asked.

Lucy looked at Harry’s army picture on her TV set. She thought of something he had told her many years ago, something that happened in the bar just outside of Petoskey where he worked for a summer to see what it would be like to live Up North. Harry wanted to jump at the chance to move. He dreamed of owning The Hub Bar on Crooked Lake. Lucy didn’t share his dream, so they stayed in Detroit.

“It’s better for the kids in Detroit,” she had told Harry. “Anne has all of her friends there, and Jerry has football. And your doctors are all there.”

Harry listened to Lucy’s arguments, knowing that what she wasn’t saying was that she would miss her brothers and her friends. More than once that summer, Lucy had also expressed dread at being snowed under from November to early April.

Once Lucy completed her arguments, all Harry said was “Okay, sweetheart. Whatever you say.”

It broke his heart to give up The Hub; it would have killed him to disappoint his darling Lucy. After that summer, Harry drove his family back to Detroit where he bought his second

bar on 7 Mile Road. His first bar had simply been named 'Harry's'. He renamed the second one 'The 7 Mile Hub'.

What Harry had whispered to Lucy in bed after coming home from work at 3 a.m. in the soothing chill of an early Petoskey morning, had sounded crazy. Lucy knew her husband was anything but. She had never told anyone what Harry had said. He had made her swear she never would. The very thought of his words still made her shiver.

"Mom," Jerry said after several seconds of silence. "What did you mean; you never know about Petoskey?"

"I should never have brought it up," Lucy said quickly into the telephone, "Forget it."

Jerry heard the telephone fall against the coffee table. Now from a distance, he heard his mom shout, "Damn it. Hang on, Jerry, I dropped the phone."

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From the day they met in that candy/feed/beer store on Conant Street, a few blocks south of Caniff on the east side of Hamtramck, Lucy never forgot the unique pungent minty scent of Beemans gum on Harry's breath. In her mind, she could always envision the moment that this skinny redheaded teenager with a tough-guy stare and angelic smile had walked into the store for the first time.

Harry had been stopped in his tracks the instant he had stepped through the door of that store by what he later told his brother Reds (Joseph) was 'the most beautiful girl in the world'.

"She won't even look at you," Reds had said. "You're from different sides of the tracks. Plus, you're ugly like a son of a bitch, and you smell like shit."

The second half of Reds' statement was part of an on-going joke between brothers. The part about 'the tracks' was true.

"She'll look at me alright," Harry said with a mischievous grin. "She'll not only look at me, she'll marry me."

"You're not only ugly and shitty, you're also fucking nuts."

"We'll see," Harry laughed. "Asshole."

Every day, except for Sunday when the store was closed and Lucy was in St. Florian church with her parents, Harry

would show up at one point or another. He would casually look around at the various candies, pretending he was trying to decide which one to buy. He'd then put the penny he had earned, borrowed, found, or pilfered from his father's pocket, on the counter and order a stick of gum. Exactly when he got that penny determined what time Harry could head to the store. But he always made sure he did get it because that penny was his excuse and his ticket to talk to the 'most beautiful girl in the world'.

The ritual became a daily routine with talking turning to flirtation and flirtation to infatuation.

Harry would laugh about his having the 'Sweetest breath in Hamtramck' before blowing her a kiss.

Lucy would turn red with embarrassment and secretly take in the scent. To her, he didn't just have the sweetest breath in Hamtramck; he had the sweetest breath in the world.

Many years later, she smelled the cherished fragrance one final time when Harry took his last breath.

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"So when will you and Rob be going?" Lucy's voice came back strong and steady over the phone. It was now tinged with a bit of annoyance. "I sure wish I could go with you. I haven't been to Petoskey in 30 years at least. Last time I went was with Uncle Louie, when Mary died."

"I know, Mom," Jerry said sadly. "We're going to drive out on Tuesday."

"That's the tenth, right?"

"Yeah, I think so, why?"

"And you're going to stay for a week?"

"Yeah, that's the plan."

"So, you'll be there on the 14th."

"Yeah, but I don't understand, Mom. What's the big deal about the 14th?"

"You'll see."

"See what, Mom? You're kind of freaking me out."

"Just forget it. I'm just getting old. Sometimes, I really don't know what I'm talking about."

This was not one of those times.

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Harry Piasecki was only 56 years old when he died in the suburban Detroit nursing home where he was sent after his third major stroke, the one that had put him in a coma and made it impossible for Lucy to take care of him at home. She wrote on a piece of scrap paper from the nursing station on the day he was admitted: *'Doctors hold no hope. Harry unable to move at all—not even fingers or toes.'*

One of the home's doctors told Lucy that he was 'brain dead'. Another, a man who happened to also be a long-time close family friend said: "Lucy, it's really not Harry anymore."

The strokes were caused by a congenital brain tumor that was activated when his head slammed onto the floor of the B29 bomber he served on as a gunner in World War II. The Japanese Zero that caused the bomber pilot to bank swiftly to the right never fired a shot. With today's technology, Harry's condition could be dealt with through relatively routine laser surgery. Back then, it was a death sentence.

For exactly three months, Lucy would go to that nursing home every day to hold her husband's hand.

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Eighteen year old Harry gently held Lucy's hand as they slowly skated around the roller rink where they would go every Saturday after they had started 'dating'. Neither was a particularly good skater, but both had fun holding each other's hand to stay upright. They both knew skating was just an excuse to touch, but in 1941 excuses were necessary.

On this particular Saturday, Lucy had tried to cut quickly in front of Harry when she lost control of her skates and actually went airborne. Harry had to release her hand and pull her body close in order to prevent her from tumbling hard onto the shining wood floor. They looked into each other's eyes for a moment before starting to laugh, but they didn't pull away. While the laughter faded, they remained lost in each other's eyes, in each other's arms. That was the first time they kissed.

"Will you always be there to catch me?" Lucy put her head ever so gently against Harry's chest.

“Always.”

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“I’ll be loving you, always. With a love that’s true, always,” Lucy whispered the words as she sang into Harry’s ear at the nursing home. She did it every day, never knowing if he heard her, or felt her tears fall onto his cheek. Then one sunny Detroit morning in early May, Lucy sang the song for the last time. “Not for just an hour. Not for just a day. Not for just a year, but always...always.”

That morning, for just a split second before he died, Harry partially opened his eyes. They glistened with what had been hidden tears. He looked at Lucy and smiled softly. He moved his lips and oh so gently sighed, “Always.”

When his eyes closed, for just a passing second, Lucy felt embraced by the youthful minty fragrance of Beemans gum.

Chapter 2

Jerry and Rob decided to take Jerry's red Jeep to Petoskey for one very good reason: Rob's 21-year-old Fiat Spider had no real floor to speak of on the passenger side. If you rode with Rob, you needed to keep your feet up on the dashboard. If you looked down you could actually watch the highway, and whatever was on it, zooming by below. Rob had named his beloved car Arlo.

The first time Jerry rode with Rob he had pointed out this slight deficiency, "Ah, Rob?" he said. "Have you noticed something about your car?"

"What's that Jer?"

"There's no fucking floor."

Rob had simply shrugged his shoulders and shifted into third gear.

"I can see Broadway down there."

Rob just starting happily humming '*On the Road Again*' as he shifted up to fourth and then fifth gear.

Jerry pressed his sneakered feet hard against the glove compartment. "What the hell happened to the floor?"

"New York City," Rob said matter-of-factly. "I think someone took it."

The truth is, the floor rusted out from wear and winter driving. A big chunk of it just kind of fell on to the road five miles outside Stockbridge Massachusetts about ten years ago. Rob never got around to getting it fixed, figuring it didn't really matter much back then, and it particularly didn't matter now that he was single again.

His ex, Tatiana, had taken her car and their Boston Terrier, Grisha, with her when she left. Rob couldn't care less about the BMW, but he really loved that dog.

Jerry and Rob headed out for Petoskey from New York City just before the sun turned darkness to day. New Jersey flew by quickly with Jerry pointing down at Rob's feet and extolling the virtues of having a car with a floor. Pennsylvania, however, seemed endless as they rolled mile after tedious mile toward Ohio.

Both Rob and Jerry had long since stopped commenting on, or even really noticing some gorgeous scenic valley or lush green mountain top. They stopped talking about their ex-wives or possible future girlfriends. They even turned off the radio after one local evangelist came on and promised to provide anyone in his fleeced flock with a 'full color picture of our lord Jesus Christ, signed by the big fellah personally himself', in exchange for a 50-dollar donation.

The devout could get an unsigned picture for 25 dollars, but would not get the soul-saving benefits of the signature of God. "The deeper ya dig into those pockets or purses the closer you are to being an apprentice of the Almighty! You never oughta want to risk the Lord saying to your soul: 'you're fired!'"

Jerry stretched his back, which had started to ache somewhere between Lewisburg and Lock Haven PA.

"Well, at least, we can be thankful for one thing,"

Rob yawned, "And that would be what?"

"At least we're not driving through Texas. And, just think, in a few more hours..." Jerry let his statement drift.

"In a few hours what?" Rob bit the bait.

"We'll still be in fucking Pennsylvania."

By the time they finally reached Farmington Hills, a northern suburb of Detroit and the last place in Michigan Jerry had lived before moving to New York, Rob and Jerry felt as if they had driven in from Mars. This would be the stopping off point before the short, by comparison, four-hour ride to Petoskey the next day.

"I'm gonna crash out for a while," Rob said after they checked in at the Radisson Hotel just off 12 Mile Road. "What about you?"

While exhausted from the drive, Jerry also felt exhilarated being 'home'. He knew he wouldn't fall asleep until that day's assignments were complete.