

Shored Up

by [Peter Lopatin](#) (May 2019)



Brooklyn Bridge, George Luks, 1916

Years before, Paul had taken his teenage sons to see the house and neighborhood where he had grown up. Seeing the place again had brought to mind an incident from his childhood, an event that had long since taken up a permanent position on the margins of his consciousness. (The margins: that nebulous realm where everything important resides.) But, in truth, his memory of the incident was as much the impetus for the visit as its result. Certainly, he wanted to satisfy his sons' natural curiosity about his past. But he wanted as well to

satisfy his own curiosity, to excavate his own foundations, to look once more at the place where his character had assumed, more or less, its final form.

But now, ten years after he had returned with his sons, he is back again, alone, to see the place again. And he poses this question to himself: *Why do I keep recalling this incident? Why now, nearly sixty years after the fact, do I recall it as vividly as I recalled it—or as vividly as I imagine recalling it—five years ago, ten years ago, twenty years ago?* He can't answer his own question and he doesn't expect ever to be able to. Eventually, questioning comes to an end and at that point remembering suffices. He has now reached that point. He yields to memory's demand that it be given free reign. And so, he remembers.



His father (always 'Father' in his recollection) had been the first to notice the crack in the foundation. Sometimes, standing outside their modest Brooklyn home, Father would enthusiastically describe to his son the renovations he planned to make, but in fact never would. He tagged along one late spring day as Father walked slowly past the rear entrance that led to the kitchen, speaking to his son with great bravado.

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"You see what I'll do? I'll just break through that wall there and extend the kitchen out to here," indicating with a grand and definitive sweep of his arm the imagined new outer wall of the house.

Then aged ten, the boy found it hard to imagine a house being cut into that way, transformed and augmented. It was inconceivable surgery, although he knew it had been performed on the house next door, the house that belonged to old Mrs. O'Brien, whose son had accidentally shot himself with his father's police revolver—years before Paul was born—and whose husband, upon seeing what had happened, suffered a massive heart attack and died on the spot. He knew of this from listening to his parents speak about it in hushed tones. Occasionally, Mother would have him bring some of her homemade applesauce to Mrs. O'Brien, and he would enter her house as if entering a mausoleum. The stale, heavy air suggested death and decay, and to his sensitive soul the house seemed barely to have a heartbeat.

Father stopped and looked at the foundation of the house on the kitchen side, the side facing Mrs. O'Brien's house. Something had caught his attention. The day was hot and beads of sweat had formed on his now-furrowed brow. Putting his cigarette to his lips to free his right hand, Father bent down to where the lily-of-the-valley border met the foundation and drew aside a tangle of foliage that concealed part of the foundation from view. Paul moved in closer to see what it was that had caught Father's interest.

"There's a crack here," Father said gravely. "There's a crack in the goddamned foundation. You see it here?" he asked the boy, pointing to the crack. "It goes right up the wall here," he said, gesturing upward. Paul's eyes traced the jagged, irregular path of the narrow crack from the foundation up the stucco wall of the house. There was concern and displeasure in Father's voice and Paul felt important at having been admitted entrance to this space of dark discovery.

"Yeah . . . But Dad, how can you tell if it's a real crack, I mean if it's a real crack all the way inside, all the way through, or if it's just outside and doesn't really go deep, you know what I mean?"

Father stood up. He stared at what seemed to be the crack's midline, at about the level of his knees.

"Goddamned son of a bitch," he said quietly, ignoring his son's question, his eyes still fixed on the crack. "The miserable bastards."

"Who?" the boy asked.

"The miserable bastards" was an expression that Father would use often, sometimes to refer to one or another distinct entity of collective malevolence—the Internal Revenue Service, the Department of Sanitation, the anti-Semites, the "Commies"—and sometimes, as now, to the indistinct, impersonal Fates.

Father didn't answer, and continued to stare at the crack. Mrs. O'Brien came out of her back door, folding chair and rosary beads in hand. She was Jewish by birth but had converted to Catholicism when she married Mr. O'Brien, in time becoming quite devout. Paul knew enough so that he experienced a kind of cognitive dissonance when she and Mother would chat in Yiddish while Mrs. O'Brien fingered her rosary beads. The dissonance was enhanced by Mother's coexisting attentiveness to Mrs. O'Brien and her occasional contemptuous asides—always out of earshot of the old woman—about her having abandoned the traditions of her Fathers for the alien idolatry of Catholicism. Parched and moribund—as if she were oxidizing in the summer sun—Mrs. O'Brien sat serenely in her aluminum chair, its nylon webbing frayed and faded and its metal frame speckled abundantly with rust. She was clothed, as usual, in an old, but colorful, post-war floral acetate dress, and offered up to the waiting heavens her generous bounty of *Hail Marys* and *Our Fathers*.

"Oh, it sure is a hot one today, Norman," she said to Father.

"How are you today, Mrs. O'Brien?" Father was

always polite to women, in a stiff and oddly formal way.

“Oh, just fine, Norman, but don’t you know, this heat is just somethin.’ I was sayin’ to my nephew from Phoenix over the phone how it’s as hot here as it is down there. Oh, brother, I tell ya.’”

“Well, yeah, that’s really something now, isn’t it, Mrs. O’Brien?” Father said, distracted.

Although Father’s face and eyes pointed in her direction, the boy knew that Father’s mind was zeroed in on the crack. He had begun to breathe more heavily. Turning to his son and pointing at the foundation, he said: “We’ll have to tear all this up and see how far down the crack goes and then . . . uh . . . we’ll shore it up there.”

His voice trailed off as he finished his sentence, suggesting to Paul that although Father was confident of his diagnosis, he was deeply unsure of how to treat the injured house. *‘We’ll shore it up there.’* Paul had never heard that expression and wondered what it might mean.

“What about the part below the ground, the foundation?” the boy asked. “How do you fix a crack in the foundation?” Father stared downward and wedged his cigarette tightly in the corner of his mouth. He stood stiffly, arms on hips. Turning to face his son again, he took his cigarette out of his mouth and said: “I’ll have to excavate the whole goddamned border here and shore up the foundation.” There it was again: *‘shore up the foundation.’* He paused for a long while, looked back at the crack, and said again: “The miserable bastards.”

Father was a heavy man, and physical exertion made him breathe rapidly. But now, although his only exertion had been to walk around the house, he had begun to breathe more heavily than usual and reached into his pocket for his Nitroglycerine pills. He usually took only one, but this time

Paul noticed that he popped two under his tongue, standing motionless as the sweat on his brow began dripping down his cheeks. The boy knew that Father had some problem with his heart and that Nitroglycerine was supposed to help. But from watching television and reading the encyclopedia he also knew that it was an explosive, and that puzzled him. He had seen a TV western in which some grizzled, old prospectors, careless with a crate of Nitroglycerine, blew themselves up. He had once asked Father why it wouldn't make his heart explode. Father smiled and tousled the boy's hair, but never answered his question. Paul wondered whether Mrs. O'Brien's husband had taken Nitroglycerine pills too. He wondered if his heart had exploded.

It seemed that Mrs. O'Brien had caught on as to what was occupying their attention and, holding up her rosary beads, called out, cheerfully, "I'm praying for you, Norman."

Hail Mary full of grace. The lord is with thee.

"That's good, Mrs. O'Brien," he called back, throwing a polite glance at her and forcing a smile. "Yessiree, that's real good."

Turning away from her, he took a deep breath, shook his head laconically, and quietly muttered "What bullshit!" With a sharp snap of his middle finger, he flicked his cigarette butt toward the base of the crack. Mrs. O'Brien continued to beam her angelic smile in their direction.

Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

Father stood a minute more, arms on hips, waiting for the nitro to do its work. Then he took a deep, measured breath and began walking slowly toward the rear door that led to the kitchen. Paul followed close behind.

Mother was busy cooking when they came inside. She

cooked resentfully, impatiently, as if food were an adversary, and cooking, a particularly onerous form of penance. She braised and macerated and minced. She shredded and whipped. She reduced sauces. She boiled and scalded and roasted. She seared meat and rendered its fat. She separated eggs. She thrust oven thermometers into the bound, stuffed carcasses of fowl and roasts. She hacked a cleaver clean through bone in one swift stroke. She placed hot dishes on heavy, black iron trivets. The preparation of food for her family's consumption was, for her, an unwelcome and—strange to say—*distasteful* business. She was an angry woman, although Paul would not understand her anger—the anger of an intelligent and sensitive woman with dreams she would never realize—until he was grown. By then, her dreams had long since become fossils.

Father had been overweight all his life. More than once, he had recounted to Paul how, as a child, he would sometimes return home tearfully from school after being mocked and bullied by the other boys because he was fat and spoke with a lisp, and how his mother would comfort him with a peanut butter and banana sandwich, slathered with honey. Food was solace to him. And here he was, married to a woman who deeply resented the wifely duty of cooking. Yet oddly, in spite of her bitterness, the fruits of Mother's efforts in the kitchen were uniformly delicious. Father consumed each of her dinners as if it were his last, ever seeking solace in the fleeting pleasures of gustatory sensation and the tranquil satiety that followed, and always praising Mother—albeit stiffly—for her culinary skills. Then she would berate him for eating so much of what she had prepared, often shouting: *'Norman, it's enough! Your weight!'* Father grew fatter with the years, prematurely less mobile, and multiply medicated for high blood pressure, cardiac insufficiency, and gout. The last of these ailments was one in which he took perverse pride because of its association with the rich living of overstuffed aristocrats.

When father and son came inside, Mother was pounding a cutlet of pink veal with a small mace. *Thwack! Thwack!* Paul moved quickly next to his mother to watch her cook, a process that always fascinated him.

"The foundation of the house is cracking," the young boy gleefully announced, "and the crack goes all the way up the outside of the house. We have to excavate. We have to shore it up."

He placed particular emphasis on this new expression: '*shore it up.*' As he spoke, Mother was placing the cutlet, by then dipped in egg and breaded, into a skillet, where it crackled keenly in the hot oil, sending an arching spray of scalding droplets into the air. Paul savored the tang of the hot oil as its aroma filled his nostrils, but then, feeling the faint but unmistakable bite of the hot oil droplets on his bare forearm. he stepped back quickly from the stove. Mother's attention turned sharply from the stove to Father.

"The foundation? What do you mean? Isn't that serious, Norman? What'll we do?"

"I've got it all taken care of," Father said. "Nothing to worry about. We'll just shore it up and run a patch through there. It's nothing."

But Mother knew it was not nothing, precisely because Father insisted it was.

"What do you mean run a patch? Are they going to have to start knocking down walls? Will they really have to excavate? How much is this going to cost?"

Father feigned distraction as he rifled through the tool drawer. "Where the hell is my auger?"

Mother pressed the back of her hand to her brow,

looked upward, closed her eyes and, with a weary sigh, said: "Give me strength."

"What do you mean strength?" Father replied sharply. "I told you it's taken care of. Just go about your business."

"Isn't it my business if this house is falling down?"

"Nothing's falling down," Father said dismissively. "I've got the whole thing under control. Just leave the whole thing to me, would you please?"

He turned his attention back to the tool drawer.

"Who the hell swiped my auger?" he said.

Paul knew that the crack was not something benign and he doubted that Father had anything under control. He wondered: What would Father do about it? Why had it happened? Did it point to a weakness that could appear somewhere else in the house? Would cracks start to appear everywhere? Would the house crumble, like ancient ruins he had seen in pictures? Or was it simply that the house was approaching the end of its natural lifespan, like Mrs. O'Brien, and would soon be dust?

"Norman, how could this happen?" Mother asked plaintively, taking the veal out of the pan and placing it on a sheet of paper towel. She sat down wearily at the kitchen table, neglecting, in her distress, to turn off the flame under the now empty pan. Father stood by the tool drawer, his arms again on his hips. He was breathing heavily again, the Nitroglycerine notwithstanding. Each inhalation seemed to be pushing back against the weight of his helplessness.

The pan had begun to smoke, but Paul was the only one who noticed.

"Look, I'll take care of it . . ." Father began.

The smoke suddenly became thick.

“Mom, the pan!” Paul shouted. She turned and looked, then stood up just as the oil in the pan burst into flame.

“Oh!” she screamed, drawing back immediately.

Father ran to the stove, grabbed the flaming pan and carried it quickly to the sink, where he let it drop from his hands. He turned on the tap and stepped back, as great plumes of steam and smoke billowed and the flames flickered and died. Paul hurried to the sink to see the spectacle up close. Father opened the window over the sink to let out the fumes. Mother sat down at the kitchen table, head in hand, and quietly wept. Through the open window, Paul saw Mrs. O’Brien, still seated in the driveway, still holding her rosary beads.

Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

In the days following his discovery of the crack, when Father came home from work, he would always go outside to look at the wall, breathing heavily as he examined it, straining to see if the hairline upper terminus of the crack had advanced. He checked out the corresponding part of the inner wall and foundation in the basement and, with evident satisfaction, told Mother that all was well because there were no signs of water penetration. But Mother did not seem assuaged by his reassurances. Paul wasn’t sure what to think. He was relieved to hear that the crack had not spread, and yet he was disappointed that the adventure was not as harrowing as it might have been had the crack gone clear through the thickness of the wall. But one could hope.

It was the middle of June when Father discovered the crack. The summer was securing its foothold and the welcome succor of July and August loomed. Within a few weeks, Paul’s world took on its summer conformations: the quality of

light in the afternoon; the stirring approach of thunder from the west and the crisp smell of ozone after a thunderstorm; the sweating of the leaves in the heat of the day; sleeping with open windows, a sheet for a cover. Each day was congruent with the next and with the one before. For Paul, to feel these things, only dimly aware that it could be otherwise, was to inhabit a world of beneficent timelessness, in which the warm, gentle present felt eternal.

The status of the crack changed from that of an unexpected, alarming event, commanding the family's attention, to that of a being that had come to dwell with them. Paul had come to feel the intrusion of this unexpected thing into his family's life as oddly thrilling, not unlike that of a good horror movie. But he felt confident that, in the end, their safety and prosperity would somehow prevail; after all, things had always been that way. The scary movie ends and you leave the dark theater and step out into the welcoming effulgence of the afternoon sun.

But then, in late August, when one notices in the air something that had been forgotten but is vivid and immediate when remembered, the equipoise was disturbed and the world began to tremble and teeter. Mother had gone to the basement laundry room with her wicker basket of wash. Paul was already downstairs, in the workshop, looking for yet another tool that Father had misplaced.

"What's this?" Mother's voice was strident, with a quality of alarm to which he had grown accustomed, uttered in a tone that carried with it the unspoken question: *"What new travail am I faced with?"*

"What? Where?" Paul asked, rushing into the laundry room. Mother's attention was fixed on a point where the wall met the ceiling, roughly corresponding to the point on the outside where the crack disappeared beneath ground level. The paint had chipped away in a swath a few inches

wide, extending diagonally from the vertex of the wall and ceiling nearly halfway to the floor. Running through the center of the swath was a crack, perceptible only at close range, and through the crack, water had obviously seeped.

"It's that damned crack," she said. Paul saw that his mother's brow was furrowed and her mouth fixed in an expression of bitterness as she started to fill the washing machine with laundry, throwing some of it in angrily.

"I don't deserve this kind of treatment." Her voice was tearful. "It isn't fair; it isn't fair; it just isn't fair."

Mother's complaint distressed him by its oddness: '*treatment*' implied a willful actor, and '*isn't fair*' a malevolent one, like Father's *miserable bastards*. So he asked, without expecting an answer: "What do you mean, *fair*, Mom? It's just a crack." And there was no answer.

When the workmen arrived a week later to begin the repairs, it was a cool, bright Saturday morning, quite early, and Father was still in bed. Mother was cleaning and had opened the windows to air things out. The brightness seemed almost palpable – part of the air itself – and, briefly, the house lost its shadows and its creaking speech to the growing light and the ineffable rustling of curtains and blinds.

"Norman, you'd better get up! They're here," Mother called upstairs.

Father listened to what the contractor had to say, nodding and breathing rapidly.

"Yeah . . . uh-huh . . . okay . . . yeah, right," Father said.

Mother listened and placed her hand over her mouth. She gasped repeatedly and was not mollified by Father's

reassurances that “this is routine foundation work” and “we’ll wrap this up in two weeks.”

Paul followed the repair process carefully, as the workmen excavated around the foundation, exposing its hidden entrails. Observing it all, he felt an awakening, as the decay that had long been concealed was aired and removed. School had begun and he returned home each day eager to see the progress of the dig. The work was slow. The workmen used a rotary power saw where they had to cut through the stucco, even through the concrete foundation. And the foundation—as Father had, with uncanny prescience, predicted—was now shored up. The piercing whine of the saw passed distinctly through the cooler air of late September—a sharp line of sound with its own cutting edge. The longer the work proceeded, the more slowly it seemed to go and the more distant and theoretical its completion appeared to be. It was as if time itself had begun to accumulate in their midst, a thickening mist of time settling over them, set to seal them forever in their eviscerated house, like ancient fossil insects encased in hardened amber.



One morning in late October, Father didn't wake up. Mother screamed. An ambulance came. They said it was cardiac arrest. For the few weeks that followed, work on the foundation stopped, but then resumed. Sometimes, late in the afternoon, when the workmen had gone for the day, Paul nestled alone in the hollow of the excavation and thought of Father. Sometimes, he cried and wondered if Father's heart had exploded. But he also played in the excavation with his friends. They played at War, and in that precarious shelter, they hid from the Germans—the miserable bastards—toy rifles in hand, their backs up against the exposed foundation, now shored up with heavy timbers, as they crouched and waited for the German counterattack they knew was coming. Mrs. O'Brien prayed for Father's soul and told Paul that he was with Jesus. Paul had no idea what she was talking about. But, like Father,

he was always polite to her. Then, Mother would chase them out of the excavation, explaining that it was not a safe place for children to play. He tried to imagine what a “safe place” would be. He imagined a place where foundations never crack and hearts don’t explode. A place that’s never unfair. But it was just as well. By then, the air had grown so cold and the ground so hard.

The End

Peter Lopatin was born and raised in New York where he earned his JD degree and practiced corporate law for thirty years. Along the way, he studied philosophy as a graduate student at the New School for Social Research. After retiring from his legal practice, he obtained a Certificate from the New School in teaching English as a Second Language and has been an ESL teacher since then. He has taught at the University of Connecticut/Stamford, Norwalk Community College, Manhattanville College and, most recently, at the Stamford English Language Academy. Peter’s short stories and book reviews have appeared in *Commentary*, *The Weekly Standard*, *The New Atlantis*, and *New English Review*. His poetry has appeared in *New Millennium Writings* and *Poetry East*.

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