



*Will you laugh just like your mother*

*Will you sigh like your old man*

*Will some things skip a generation*

*Like I've heard they often can*

*Are you a poet or a dancer*

*A devil or a clown*

*Or a strange new combination of*

*The things we've handed down.*

– *Marc Cohn*

On a July weekend when singer-songwriter Amy Winehouse died, Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger got married, and a right-winged Christian fundamentalist staged a killing rampage in Norway, my family, descendants of Lithuanian immigrants Forby and Veronica Bikulege, gathered together for our first family reunion.

Summertime seems to be the season for familial bloodlines to flow together and converge in one spot. The heart of our heritage beats in Pittsburgh, with vessels streaming across the country from San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Denver, a main artery carrying cool oxygen from Buffalo, and hot blood pumping northward from Miami, Greer, New Orleans and Beaufort. Framed in the triune of the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio rivers, and crowned by steel and glass, Pittsburgh is home, or the place to come home to, for sixteen cousins.

In 2001, when my father Stanley passed away, gone before him was his only brother Joseph, and two of his three sisters, Dolores and Frances. This past January, Irene, the last surviving sibling, left the earth to join her family, and on the night of her funeral, in a Denver Marriott bar, my attending cousins, led by Dolly, our new matriarch, joked about the possibilities of uniting the greater clan, our offspring, and a variety of significant others. I did not believe our reunion would become a reality. It did, and it was a blast.

Witness ten-year-old Ethan beating the crap out of fifty-something second cousin Vivian in badminton. Listen as Cousin Butch plays the single tune he knows on a concertina, reminiscent of Grandpap Bikulege or Cousin Tony squeezing the air out of an accordion. Shriek in laughter as Chucky Joe shuffles his feet in what should be a polka, but may just be a bad audition for *America's Got Talent*

. Look across Johnny's backyard to see little girls in teeny bikini's jumping around in a blow-up swimming pool while grown-ups seek shade under the trees, drinking beer and discovering one another again.

Whether a family congregates annually, once-in-awhile, or for the hallmark occasions of weddings and funerals, what becomes apparent is the unhampered passing of time. It burrows

in the lines and creases on a smiling face, stretches in the aches and pains of aging bodies, gurgles in a new baby's laughter and squeals in the delights of little ones. Time floats away in the dreams of youth.

There is a silence that rests around a family circle too. For whatever reason – work, calamity, illness, death – people are missing and are missed. My mother told me that as she looked at my cousins, she could see their parents, and for a moment, I imagined being her, hearing the voices of her past, and looking into the blue and brown eyes of her husband, his siblings, her mother and father-in-law. Along with my Aunt Rose, my mom is one of the last survivors of her generation, and it must be a kind of sorrowful déjà vu to catch a glimpse of souls swirling in the personalities and physical imprints pressed into the characters and make-up of other human beings. Hopefully, there is some contentment knowing that life goes on.

Our parents were engineers, teachers, salesmen, and homemakers whose offspring are engineers, teachers, salespeople, homemakers, physician's assistants, flight attendants, information systems experts, bar owners, vice-presidents of development and capital markets, and CEO's. We descended from hard workers, hard drinkers and incessant smokers to an educated collection of motorcycle enthusiasts, triathletes, Dragon boaters, photographers, writers, astrologers, dancers, embroiderers and yogis. Some of us have been laid off, others tossed around, a few left behind, and at times, let down. For one July weekend, we were children again, the crazy kids of Dolly and Charlie, Irene and Walt, Sonny and Irene, Petey and Rose and Frannie and Carl.

Orbiting the Bikulege nucleus are the loves of our lives that have made the questionable decision to bond with us. There is a solid generation in front of us now, young men and women with noses like ours, thumbs and toes matching the outlines of our hands and feet, dimples, eyelashes, and chubby cheeks shared by one generation, and given to the next, and the next and the next.

About forty of us were able to make it to an event that sported cocktail napkins with the warning "Caution – Bikulege Reunion in Progress." In summertime airline terminals, families return home wearing tee-shirts touting "I Survived the Smith Reunion," or making grand pronouncements of a family era – *The Jones Family Reunion: 1930 to 2011*. Our family sported tee shirts that said "*I want a Hot Tub,*" courtesy of State Farm Insurance.

We aren't a huge clan, and you may not know anyone with the last name of Falkowski, Hubis, Bikulege, or Jackson, but we are out there, and in 2013, we may be coming to a beach or dude ranch near you. If you listen closely, you may hear the breath from the bellows of an accordion in the distance. That's us. That is the second gathering of our generations in the making.

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