

One

# STRANGE ROOTS



*When my father, William (Bill) Steig, was a kid he was playing on a frozen pond. The ice gave way and he went under. That would have been the end of him, and me, too, but a man reached in and pulled him out just in the nick of time.*

was born in 1942 in New York City. When I was three, America dropped atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and my father left my mother. He moved about eight blocks away to West Twelfth Street. I was allowed to see him once a week, but strangely enough, these weekly visits became the most vivid memories of my early childhood.

Having discovered free love through his guru, Wilhelm Reich (more about him later), my father would change girlfriends every few months. On my visits, my father, his girlfriend, and I would all sleep

in the same bed. One morning, I started climbing over the naked body of a girlfriend of his. My father said to me, “Don’t you think she’s a little big for you?” to which I replied, “No dame’s too big for me.”



I don’t know how that language got into my head, but that’s what I said. Women were my first interest.

I lived with my mother, Liza, and my older sister, Lucy, at 63 Charles Street in Greenwich Village. We had a whole floor of the building at a very cheap rent. My first memory of the apartment was waking up every morning to a beautiful painting that Stuart Davis had given to my father. I once made a small hole in it with my toy bow and arrow, and my grandfather patched it up. Several years later, my father took the painting back from my mother and sold it for

\$2,000 so he could give the money to the Wilhelm Reich Defense Fund. About ten years ago, I saw the same painting hanging in the Metropolitan Museum.

I had a windup record player. Each needle was good for one play of a 78rpm record. My father left his record collection behind in his haste to get away from Liza. It was a very nice collection. Some of my favorite artists were Lead Belly, Albert Ammons, James P. Johnson, Sidney Bechet, Bessie Smith, Benny Goodman (“Muskrat Ramble”), Louis Armstrong (“I’ll Be Glad When You’re Dead, You Rascal, You”), and John Jacob Niles. I also had three race records of Robert Johnson. My father’s record collection gave me a good introduction to music.

My father sent me to camp every summer for two months and paid for private school. All other expenses fell on my mother, so she went to work. Her first job was painting flowers on plates. She got \$10 a day. When the union went on strike, she got \$25 for picketing. She cracked up when she found out that she had been marching for a communist union.

We didn’t have much money, and Liza sometimes had to improvise. For instance, she used orange crates as our bookcases. My classmates at school were by and large very wealthy. Many of them lived in townhouses and had maids, while I spent a good part of my time playing in the street unsupervised. In those days, parents weren’t paranoid about their children being kidnapped. I got a good view of both ends of society.

When I was six, I started playing the recorder and discovered the magic of music. Leonor Scoville was my recorder teacher. She was the first person who got me excited about playing music. I understood how to read music from the first day. She had hundreds of music books, including a complete wall of Bach scores. It was a fabulous collection. In addition to my lessons with Leonor, I experimented on my own. I found that I could play melodies off the radio by ear.

And soon I was making up counterpoint parts. Years passed before I realized I had the jazz gene. The jazz gene gives you the ability to improvise music with a sense of swing. No scientist has found it yet, but my gut feeling tells me that it's there.

I took lessons with Leonor for about two years until she was evicted from her apartment on Cornelia Street for having too many books. The landlord said that the floor was sinking because of their weight. The story was in the news for a few days. Newspapers called her the book lady as if it was weird to own a lot of beautiful books filled with vital musical information. Leonor had to move and ended up living in a railroad flat next to the train tracks.

In the two years I studied with her, I came to realize that most grownups had no understanding of music. I remember an incident in a candy store. The owner was a nasty guy and he felt like picking on me. First he told me I was a spoiled kid. Then he called me fresh. I replied, "How can I be fresh and spoiled at the same time?" Then I said, "Can you play the recorder?" When he said, "No," I said, "Well, I can."

Being able to play a musical instrument gave me power. I needed it because I was terrible in school. However, this power didn't amount to anything with other kids, who were impressed only if you could hit a baseball over the fence.

Liza's next job was teaching art at a girls' school in Harlem. This took all her energy, and she'd come home exhausted, lie down, and read detective stories. So I ended up spending a lot of time with the Kilb brothers. They lived around the corner from me on Bleecker Street with their parents, Herman the German and Aglaia, who was Greek. Paul Kilb was two years older than I, and Johnny, two years younger. We could reach each other's apartment by going over the roofs and up and down the fire escapes. Since Liza wasn't much of a cook, I often ate dinner with the Kilbs. Herman wouldn't let me

in his house unless I said, “Hi, Pop.” It made me angry because he wasn’t my father. I didn’t realize until recently that I was shipped off to another family when my father shipped himself out.

One day, I was playing with the Kilb brothers and Herman came back from outside very excited. He had a copy of the *Daily News* in his hands. In big bold letters was an announcement that the United States had successfully tested the first hydrogen bomb.

“This is wonderful news,” he said.

At that moment, I began to wonder if adults were as smart as they claimed to be.

Herman was a carpenter and had built a small boat with a motor in the back. One day, he took Johnny and me to City Island. Johnny and I dropped Herman off on a small island of rocks with a fifth of Imperial whiskey and went fishing. When we came back to pick him up, the bottle was empty. Herman then drove us back to the Village without incident. In those days, most of the adults I came in contact with were alcoholics. My mother was no exception. She was a favorite at drinking parties because she got very funny when soused. I was in the habit of staying up later than I should and witnessed adults behaving badly at my house.

On weekends, Liza painted with a cigarette in one hand or a drink in the other. She sometimes would paint on four or five canvases at a time. While the oil paint was drying on one, she would work on another. She taught me about creativity by example. A flower child before the expression was coined, she dressed in her own way, wearing capes and wide-brimmed hats. One of my father’s few fond memories of Liza was her decorating her hair with kumquats (“baby oranges” in my father’s words). When she played the piano everything was made up. She had her own style of speech, which was something akin to the bebop language of jazz musicians. For example, Massachusetts became “Massa-two-shits.”

I lived in two different worlds: my mother's world and the rest of the world. She and I understood each other perfectly, but I sometimes couldn't make the transition to the outside world. My sister Lucy was my opposite. She didn't know what the hell her mother was talking about. This created big problems for them, and they fought almost every day. Lucy would scream at Liza, and Liza would come back with a song:

Nobody likes me  
Everybody hates me  
I'm going out in the garden  
And eat worms

When Liza got angry, she might say, "Why don't you dry up and blow away?" and raised her upper lip. My mother was just too creative for her own good. It was her style. I wasn't going to try to be like her, so why let it bother me?

Despite all her eccentricities, Liza worked very hard to take care of us. She was a dedicated teacher—perhaps too dedicated. One day, she took her class at the girls' school on a sketching trip in the park. The students attacked her and beat her up badly. It was very upsetting to see her come home all black and blue. She told me that she had tried to break up a fight between two students, and the whole class attacked her. After that, she went back to school to get her master's degree so she could teach at a college.

I had a strange, small part in her getting her degree. One evening, when walking down Fourth Street, I heard the taunt "Faggot." I was being challenged. I replied, "Fuck you," and ended up wrestling in the gutter with this kid, whose name was Walsh. Unfortunately, his friend came over and stabbed me in the back with a knife. Someone yelled that the cops were coming, and we all ran. When I got home

and took off my coat, my back was covered with blood. Liza had to take me to the hospital. She was already late with a construction that she had to submit for her class and used my having been stabbed as an excuse to get an extension on her homework.

The only piece of advice she insisted on me learning from her was that I should never get anyone pregnant. She actually sent a couple of my girlfriends to a gynecologist to be fitted for diaphragms. She told me that on a few occasions she helped some women get safe abortions from a doctor in Pennsylvania whom she knew about. Abortions were illegal at that time.

By now, you must be wondering what kind of family Liza came from. She belonged to the Mead family. Everyone in the family was highly educated except for my mother, who did finally get her master's. The family is best known for Liza's older sister, Margaret, the anthropologist.

I have little memory of Grandpa Mead, who taught finance at the University of Pennsylvania. He was always talking politics at the dinner table and did not recognize the children's presence. According to my father, Grandpa Mead always missed the toilet bowl when he took a leak because he was afraid to look at his own dick. My grandmother was in the women's suffrage movement. By the time I was introduced to her, she was very old and did not speak at all. Sitting in her chair, she looked like *Whistler's Mother*.

Aunt Margaret was an interesting type. When I was a child I saw her often. She lived a block away on Perry Street. When she phoned, she never said hello or good-bye. I would hear her say "Jemmy" (my nickname) in a deep froglike voice, say what she was going to say, and click. I never liked the way she pushed my mother around, but she wasn't boring. In fact, she was an encyclopedia. She acted as if she was the world's foremost authority. As I grew up, I began to see that the world at large thought of her that way, but when I was little, she

was just Aunt Margaret. Liza met my father at a party, during which Margaret had planned to fix her up with his younger brother, Arthur. Instead, my father, who also was at that party, took Liza home.

I remember having a big argument with Margaret when I was eleven or twelve. We were discussing if homosexuality was natural. She would talk about any subject with me. I told her a story about a man who lived on my block. He tried to molest me, and I barely escaped from his apartment. I had a lot of anger because of this. Aunt Margaret argued that if the culture accepted homosexuality, then being gay was okay. It turned out that she was right. It also turned out that she was gay herself. A few years after Margaret had died, her daughter, Cathy, outed her in her autobiography, *With a Daughter's Eye*. Margaret kept her sexual orientation a secret all her life. I guess she didn't think society was ready.

To an eleven-year-old boy, a child molester was the most obvious example of a gay man. Margaret should have pointed out to me the difference between them. Then again, I wonder what she would have thought if child molesting was accepted by society.

My mother had another sister, Priscilla. We all called her Aunt Pam. Her claim to fame was having had a date with Rudy Vallée. Everyone on both sides of my family needed credentials. Pam married the writer Leo Rosten, who was the author of *Captain Newman, M.D.* This book was later made into a movie, starring Tony Curtis. The character was based on Ralph Greenon, who was Marilyn Monroe's analyst at the time of her death.

Every Thanksgiving, the Meads would gather at Aunt Pam's. The adults sat at a huge, round, polished table in the living room. The children had to eat in the kitchen so that the adults could engage in heavy discussion about politics and other things the kids weren't supposedly ready for. Pam was nice but not very interesting. She showed very little emotion. After we went home from the 1959 Thanksgiving

dinner, she slit her throat. According to Lucy, Aunt Margaret and her daughter, Cathy, discovered the body. Margaret made Cathy wipe up the blood. No wonder Margaret couldn't remember it in her own autobiography, where she wrote that Pam got sick and died.

After Aunt Pam's funeral, my great aunt Beth, who was the wealthiest member of the family by her marriage to the founder of Whirlpool, took Liza, Lucy, and me to a French restaurant for lunch. They told me it was the most expensive in New York. I had a crêpe. I think it had lobster in it but it tasted terrible and I couldn't eat. For me, funerals have always been appetite depressants. The waiter came over to me and in a thick French accent said, "What's wrong? You don't like your crêpe?"

It sounded like he said "crap." I replied, "It sure was."

I was very close to Joe, my grandfather on my father's side. He lived on Jane Street, which was a short walk away from where I lived. I saw him often and watched my first television show at his apartment. He was a Polish Jew but gave up being Jewish on the day he kicked a rabbi in the ass. When I tried to get more information about this story from my father, he was already ninety. He just laughed and said, "Joe really hated that rabbi."

Joe spent a year in a Polish jail for having tried to form a union about eighty years before Lech Wałęsa, who succeeded and received a Nobel Prize for his efforts. Joe was a house painter. He never threw anything out and made beautiful toys for all the kids in the family with the scraps he saved. He taught me his style of doodling and gave me a great lesson about color. One day, Joe was working on a painting of a painter in the country with an easel and an open paint box. I asked him if I could help, and he said that I could fill in the colors for the tubes of paint. I began to paint each tube with a different color. He stopped me and said, "No, no, no, all you need is a few colors," and showed me how to do it. Joe had big warm hands,

and I remember him washing my little hands in the sink. He died when I was ten or eleven.

My father, Bill Steig, the cartoonist, enjoyed putting the Meads down. Bill always said that my mother didn't know what she was talking about and told me not to believe anything she said. He also said that Aunt Margaret was a "shithead." Although I liked Margaret, I thought that she was much too full of herself, and as a child, I enjoyed hearing him say these things. To me, it didn't matter if my parents got along. But when I asked Bill why I couldn't live with him instead of my mother, he said something like "A child should be with his mother" and dropped the subject. Not much of an answer.

My father always presented the Steig family as the creative side of my family. He made cartoons for the *New Yorker* magazine. On my weekly visits, I used to watch how he composed a drawing by looking over his shoulder. He was very logical in the way he put a drawing together and I learned a lot by watching him. He had a way of moving his pen back and forth across the paper—almost like the movement a lie detector makes.



He had three brothers: Irwin, Henry, and Arthur. Irwin was the oldest and worked in advertising. He smoked cigars and talked like Edward G. Robinson. He liked to draw his fingers out of his pockets and say to me “Stick ’em up.” He taught me chess when I was six. He was a champion bridge player and wrote two books about playing cards: *Poker for Fun and Profit* and *Play Gin to Win*. Irwin took me to my first baseball game. We share the same birthday, September 23, but we never celebrated together.

Henry was the second oldest. He made shepherd’s pipes for fun. He once played alto sax in burlesque shows and wrote a jazz novel called *Send Me Down*. He started a paint business with Uncle Arthur but then left to become a jeweler. The still shot of Marilyn Monroe in *The Seven Year Itch* where her dress gets blown up by the subway draft was taken in front of his shop on Lexington Avenue. You can see the name Henry Steig in the back. He was the only person to get a rear view of that event.

The youngest brother, Arthur, kept making watercolors and inks and became very successful. He named his ink “FW ink.” FW was an abbreviation for “Fucking Wonder,” an expression that kids used about themselves in those days. You can still buy FW inks at art stores. Arthur liked to draw. Although he invented beautiful colors, he drew only in black and white. Bill used to say, “Arthur makes the best colors. Henry is the best jeweler. My mother is a better painter than Grandma Moses. And of course, I’m the best cartoonist.”

Bill was very competitive and way ahead of Muhammed Ali.

He was in therapy with Wilhelm Reich (sometimes referred to as “W. R.”). He liked one of Reich’s books and looked him up in the phone book and became a patient. W. R. was a therapist who had studied under Sigmund Freud, but his ideas offended a large part of the Western psychological community. W. R. was my dad’s guru. Bill did a lot of work for Reich for no pay. Dad illustrated one of his

books titled *Listen, Little Man!*, which was an angry tirade against all the people Reich thought had fucked him over. The book is actually very funny, and I recommend it to anyone who is full of anger and needs a release. My father's drawings for it were brilliant. In one of the drawings, a man has a chain attached to his ankle. A dotted line is going through the middle of the chain, breaking it. He looks at the broken chain in horror and says, "Oh, my God."

W. R. thought that the atomic bomb testing screwed up the atmosphere, which damaged people and made them more prone to murder. He also thought that atomic bombs created tornados, earthquakes, hurricanes, and so forth. My father spent two years going through the *Daily News* and the *New York Times* and cutting out all the news concerning murder, domestic violence, weather disturbances, and every atom bomb test for Reich. W. R. also told him to leave my mother. Only a guru has that kind of power over another human being.

Reichian therapy was supposed to make you sexually healthy. That appealed to my father immensely. Bill and Arthur became part of the cult, and their kids were sent to therapy to be "cured." I have seen and heard more than enough to know that Reich was the leader of a cult that abused children. The Catholic Church wasn't set up for the abuse of children but made for a perfect place for chicken hawks to become pederastic priests. The same is true with day care, the Boy Scouts, physical education classes, and the like. In Reichian therapy, you must take your clothes off, and the therapist watches you breathe and does some body work on the patient to get rid of what Reich called "body armor." Once I tried to picture my father and Uncle Arty standing naked in front of the great man, getting poked who knows where. It made me laugh, but I quickly canceled the thought.

A pretty large group of people felt that they had to take their clothes off, get poked, and become "orgastically potent." It was the

beginning of the sexual revolution, and Reich gave everyone license to get laid. If he had stopped there everything would have been fine, but he said, “Bring me your children, and I will make them into soft, loving people.”

He made it seem almost like original sin; the children were all considered sick and dragged off to therapy.

Though my mother had already been divorced, she tried to please Bill by sending me to therapy. My older sister, Lucy, and I were sent to Felicia Saxe for treatment.

My cousin Susanna Steig, born in 1944, was also sent to Felicia Saxe and other Reichian therapists. She later wrote an essay about her experiences, which is reproduced below.

### **“My Childhood Experiences with Reichian Therapy”**

*By Susanna Steig*

I was three years old. What I remember: my mother leading me down the long, dark hallway of our New York City apartment. The cold, tiled hallway. A bus. Going up the stairs of a concrete building, cold, huge and scary (a warehouse, I now realize).

She was sitting in a chair. A gypsy-like woman dressed in shiny silks, with her breasts hanging out of her blouse. Her name was Felicia Saxe. I was left alone with her. The sharp pain of her fingers and nails digging into my shoulders. And then, I was caught up in what felt like a screaming, crying machine that would never stop. My screaming and crying was what she wanted.

More memories: my face coming closer and closer to her breasts, being shoved into her breasts—I couldn’t breathe! A huge vagina, coming nearer and nearer to my face. And then, as if from afar, her holding me on her lap, her hand under my skirt, masturbating me.

I remember being on a bus with my mother, on the way there. There were newly blooming spring trees. I said something about what was happening. My mother looked out the window.

When I was an adult my mother told me that she had taken me to this therapy for months and listened to me scream. What was the reason? I was jealous of my younger sister, born when I was two years and two months old, and I was aggressive toward her.

What stopped this was that my father came to pick me up one day, saw what was going on, and decided I was not to go back. He cried and begged my forgiveness. I don't know if my parents noticed that I changed from a happy, boisterous child to a frightened, quiet one.

When I was six, my family moved to rural New Jersey. A year later, my father came to me one day and started telling me everything that was wrong with me. All I remember is that he said I was "too much of a lady," and needed treatment.

My handsome father, my savior, drove me to Red Bank, New Jersey. It was a long ride. We got out and went into a house. We sat, and I heard blood-curdling screams coming from a neighboring room. I was numb. Then, I was led into that room with a big bed, where Ellsworth Baker asked me to take off all my clothes except for my white cotton underwear. And then the pain began—pressing pain, all over my body. He also asked me to lie on my stomach and pressed on my back so hard that I couldn't breathe. This, also, went on for months.

No matter what they did to me, I made no noise, and did not react at all. This was my way of protecting myself. Since this therapy was supposed to provoke a dramatic physical and emotional reaction, I don't know what they thought.

After the first time with Dr. Baker, my father took me to visit a friend. She asked me where I had been, and I was too ashamed to

tell her. I said, “PT,” meaning physical therapy. I was very ashamed and ate some marshmallows to make me feel better.

That same year, Reich did some experiments at his lab in Rangeley, Maine that apparently turned out to be toxic. I was sent to Maine to keep Peter Reich, Reich’s son, company for a week, since we were both seven. We stayed at the home of Myron Sharaf (who later wrote *Fury on Earth*) and his wife Greta. She was pregnant. She later had a son named Peter, who killed himself when he was a teenager, rumored to be because of Greta’s affair with Reich.

I loved Peter Reich. He was my friend. We were put to bed together on that first night I was there. Myron and Greta stood over us and said, “Why don’t you make love?” Peter and I hugged and kissed. A few minutes later, Myron and Greta came into the room naked. She put in her diaphragm in front of us and said they were going off to make love, also.

One night, Greta showed me some live lobsters in a pot that were to be boiled for our dinner. By the end of the week, I had decided to stop talking.

(Peter Reich later wrote a wonderful book called *A Book of Dreams* about his childhood. He was not a true believer. He was shunned by the Reichian community.)

The treatments with Baker continued when I returned home. He gripped my leg one day and said, “Is this where you feel it when you think of Peter?” I realized that he knew what had happened in Maine and that I was part of an experiment.

Other stories I have heard:

Felicia Saxe was discredited by Reich at some point, after which time a relative of mine, as a child, was sent into treatment with her for years. Despite this, and my father’s opinion of her, not one adult in my family lifted a finger to try to save my relative.

Some of the boys who were in treatment with Felicia Saxe, at an older age than I was, were masturbated by her as part of the therapy. Felicia Saxe also ran a summer camp for children, where many horrible experiences happened to relatives of mine. I hope these former children of Reichians tell their stories.

When I was in my fifties, I was visiting my mother, and an old friend of hers was there. I found out for the first time that the friend had sent her younger daughter to therapy with a Reichian who raped her repeatedly for months. The younger daughter was eleven years old at the time. I don't know the name of the therapist, but he was later put into a mental institution.

I wrote to the younger daughter. Her older sister had been my friend when we were children. My friend had been sent to this same therapist when she was five. When she was twenty, she broke with her family and joined a born-again Christian cult. Their mother was distraught because her younger daughter still blamed her for what had happened and insisted that she had known what was going on.

As I said, I hope that all these children of Reichians write their stories. I believe this should be made part of history.

How do I feel now about all this, now that I approach my sixtieth birthday? I have spent a lifetime dealing with the aftermath of my traumatic childhood, full of abuse and betrayal. I am now estranged from most of my family. I am tired of secrets, of people not wanting to know, of a story so outlandish and horrible that I do not really want to inflict it on people unless they really want to know.

I think the Reichians were megalomaniacs, true believers, and elitists. Not one of them had a bit of empathy or sympathy for children. Many of them were sadists. I really hope the truth of what happened to us becomes well known.

This is a cautionary tale about true believers and the evil that they do.

Felicia was an ex-ballet dancer and had studied under Reich. In my research for writing this book, I discovered that she also was his mistress. She had a large dark dance studio on West Seventy-Second Street. I felt scared to walk in there. Downstairs from her was a tap dance studio, where kids with no sense of rhythm made noises. I had to go up an endless flight of stairs to Felicia's studio. The tap sounds seemed to tell of the pain to come.



Her therapy was physically painful. She would stick her strong fingers into my little body until I screamed out in pain. Then she would tell me in her thick German accent that the pain was my fault because I was stiff. Reichians considered themselves to be “soft.”

The third time my mother tried to send me, I grabbed the radiator and wouldn't let go. I'm proud of myself for having done that. It saved me from becoming a victim of my parents' stupidity. My sister Lucy kept going for three years.

I was also made to go to Felicia's camp for three consecutive summers from age six to eight. The name of the camp was Whispering Pines. It was a nightmare. One summer, I shared a room with two older sadistic boys, one of whom was Felicia's crazy son. They essentially beat me up every day for two months. The commotion would wake up Felicia, who would suddenly appear at the door in her see-through nightgown. It was my first view of a woman's pubic hair. As punishment, all three of us were locked in the room for most of the day. I can only remember that I saw very little of the lush countryside. My parents turned a deaf ear to my pleas of “get me out of here.”

Later, my father told me that W. R. had dismissed Felicia for incompetence, so I read one of W. R.'s books entitled *The Function of the Orgasm* and enjoyed it. I wanted to understand my dad and found that we both were fascinated with the subject of sex. When I was about eighteen I had a very realistic dream where I was screwing Felicia. I woke up ejaculating. I felt that it had completely cured me of any neurosis I might have developed at her camp and studio.

For the first ten years or so of my life, I called my parents Liza and Bill. Then I started to call Bill “Daddy.” I think that I wanted to remind him who I was to him. Liza remained Liza.