

PROLOGUE

SPRING 1945

The first time I encountered Big Mike was in his restaurant, Smith's. It was 1945. My mother had promised to take me there for lunch as a reward for doing my winter chores and my spring cleanup of the yard. This was a real treat for a ten-year-old: not just going out to eat, but going to Smith's, the place in our little upstate New York town where the politicians, businessmen, and other important people went to eat, drink, socialize, and talk politics.

My mother made me dress in my finest trousers, button-down shirt, and pullover sweater. It was still cold, even though it was spring. We walked from our house on the hill in the fifth ward down to Remsen Street in the heart of the main business district. There were the five and dime stores where my mother would occasionally buy things. There was the enormous fortress-like stone building that was City Hall, Mr. Stone's Tailor Shop, Healey's Ice Cream Parlor, the new Cohoes Theater with air-conditioning, and Shahan's fruit market. It was my universe.

We would have driven downtown, but my father had left our family the year before and taken the car and our gas rationing coupons with him. I never saw him again.

Smith's, a three-story Tudor building with the restaurant on the ground floor and an apartment on each floor above, still operates today in the City of Cohoes. Back then, it doubled as the headquarters of the local Democratic Party.

Upon entering, one is met with a fifty-foot-long mahogany bar. Originally a fixture in Tammany Hall in Manhattan, once the

headquarters of New York's most corrupt political machine, the bar is said to be the longest in upstate New York.

That day, the barroom was bustling. My mother and I walked the length of it to enter the restaurant in the back. Two blue-and-white Chinese vases, much taller than I was then, and maybe am now, towered over the ends of the bar. The mounted head of a moose peered down from the wall at the entrance to the dining room.

The waitress seated us at a corner table to the left of the oversized stone fireplace. I sat with my back to the wall so I could see the action, as people-watching is one of my favorite pastimes. My mother discreetly pointed to a large gentleman dressed in a white suit, with his collar buttoned all the way to the top. He was enormous, probably about 300 pounds. He sat alone opposite us, also at a corner table. He was holding a menu but looking around the room.

"See that man? He's a political boss," my mother said in a low voice. "His name is Mike Smith."

Years later, I realized that on that day, I had seen Big Mike in his restaurant; he had recently been indicted by a special grand jury for committing election fraud and fixing property assessments, under Governor Thomas E. Dewey. Big Mike was eighty-four years old at the time. About four years later, on New Year's Eve, 1949, he passed away.

I was interested and had to ask my mother what a political boss was. She explained that he controlled the city's government, the police, the firemen, and the town leaders, including those leading our schools. I was aware that in our predominately Catholic city, mine was considered one of "the godless schools." The Catholic kids in my neighborhood told me that they could not be my friend because their priest had said that if they played with a Protestant like me, they would go to Hell. Catholic girls in town were told by their church leaders that if they kissed a Protestant boy, they would get pregnant.

Sitting with my mother, the two of us furtively regarding this enormous man across the room, I pictured my elementary school. During air raid drills, we kids would joke that if a plane ever flew over Cohoes, our school would collapse on us. We had no cafeteria, no playground, no recreation facilities—just a dirt yard and a washroom. Behind our school was a ravine where the city dumped its garbage.

I looked at him, this political boss. He reminded me of Sidney Greenstreet, the actor who played sinister characters in Humphrey Bogart movies like *Casablanca* and *The Maltese Falcon*. I asked my mother if Mike Smith had anything to do with the way our school was. Of course, she said. He ran the city's government.

As a ten-year-old, I was puzzled: How could anyone in charge want kids to live like that? I thought he probably wasn't that great of a boss.

As if he knew what I was thinking, Big Mike turned to look at me, for what seemed like minutes, resembling a stern schoolmaster. I looked away. "He is reading his menu upside down," I told my mother.