

# BEGINNINGS

I WAS BORN IN UTICA, NEW YORK, on May 9, 1930, under the astrological sign of Taurus, the bull. At my birth, my parents, Myron Cramer and Kate Pikarsky Cramer, were both in their forties, an age that was then considered late and dangerous for having a child.

My mother used to tell me that I was a “mistake” and that she would have had me aborted but my father wouldn’t let her. I always looked upon him as the guy who probably saved my life. Still, I can’t really be angry with her; back then, having a baby was unusual at age forty-one and a threat to the mother’s life.

I had one brother eleven years older than I, Leroy — his name means “the king” and he hated his name. I had a sister eight years older than I, Shirley, whom I called Shoik. I was like a little grandkid in the family.

I knew only one of my grandparents, Grandma Pikarsky. The other three grandparents had died a long time before I was born. I remember Grandma Pikarsky as a tiny bent-over “bubbie” constantly kissing my face and me constantly rubbing it off.

I was recently given a charming book about the original Jewish settlers in Utica, and I learned that most of those families were peddlers. My father was one, too, and Cramer actually means “merchant” in German. Most of the knowledge I have of my family’s history comes from an old Jewish cemetery in Utica, where my parents are buried.

There you see names like Cramer and Crameyer, some hardly legible, on the crooked tombstones.

The Cramers immigrated from what is now Lithuania. When my father was born in 1888, it was part of Russia; earlier, it had been part of Poland, and before that it was an independent country of its own. The Eastern European region where most Jews lived was called the Pale, which stretched from Latvia and Lithuania in the north to the Black Sea in the south. This was where the Jews ghettoized themselves, either voluntarily or involuntarily. They were shopkeepers, farmers and moneylenders. They had large families, too. Not only were there no birth-control pills, but they wouldn't have wanted them anyway. Women were like broodmares, and the families were big for a good reason: the more children, the more workers to make sure the family survived.

My father was the third youngest in a family of thirteen and grew up in a small farming community near Kaunas, a large city known as the Jerusalem of Northern Europe and the birthplace of much of the philosophical and religious thought of the Kabbalah. He was his mother's pet. All of the children were expected to work on farms or in shops to help support the family, but my father's mother sent him to religious school to become a cantor. He had a good voice. Her decision caused some sibling rivalry because my father didn't have to work; he just had to go to school and learn.

When he was twelve or thirteen, my father seriously injured his arm. When he heard that a doctor recommended amputating it, he told me that he ran away, into the woods. He stayed there several weeks, during which time he treated his arm with mud, roots and his own urine — real organic medicine — and the arm healed. He then returned home, but he said that because his mother had approved an amputation, he lost confidence in her and the rest of his family.

In 1904, when he was sixteen, he ran away from home again — this time to get away from religious persecution in the Pale — the pogroms — and to avoid induction into the Russian Army. He wanted to go to America, the land of freedom. He hitchhiked to the German port of Danzig, and from there took a ship to New York. A relative in Utica had arranged for his passage. He landed at Ellis Island, where

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the relative had left a note for him with a silver dollar and instructions to go to Utica to join other cousins.

In later years, my father brought over other family members, including his parents. He gave up working in the local synagogue and, like so many other Jewish immigrants, became a peddler. A persuasive, good-looking man — I got his genes — he was a natural at it. He bought a horse and cart and traveled among the little farms all around Utica selling bananas. He always said that his best friend was his horse.

Along the way, he met Kate Pikarsky, who lived in Wilkes-Barre, a thriving city in the center of the anthracite coalfields of eastern Pennsylvania. The Pikarskys also came from Kaunus, and Kate was born on the ship coming to the United States. My father and mother may have had an arranged marriage, I think, because of the Kaunus connection. Because of its low-lying position on the Susquehanna River, Wilkes-Barre flooded regularly, and my father must have felt like a modern Noah as he moved Kate to the safety of Utica.

Shortly before I was born, the family moved to the farming town of Smyrna, forty miles southwest of Utica, where my father bought the general store. All the farmers came to him to buy shoes, sugar, and other essentials. Once a wealthy farmer came in for a pair of shoes, and my father brought out a pair. The farmer looked at them and said, “They’re nice, but do you have something better?” My father had only that one pair in the farmer’s size. He took them to the back room, where he polished them, put them in a different box and raised the price to \$4 from \$3. The farmer bought them. (It’s the same for the Starbucks phenomenon today: tell people that you have better coffee and they’ll be happy to pay more.)

The Cramers didn’t stay in Smyrna long and returned to Utica.

I was born the year after the Wall Street crash and the Depression had begun. I was too young to know about such things at the time, but now I know that most people struggled financially and were nervous and depressed. With the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt as president in 1932 came the beginnings of the New Deal, but times remained hard right up until the United States entered World War II.

After searching in the recesses of my mind, my first memory is of leaving the crib. Perhaps it’s just a fantasy, but I think I remember

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my brother and sister teaching me to walk. I walked back and forth between them, holding their hands for balance. Certainly, it's something they could have done, whether I'm remembering correctly or not.

I do remember wetting my bed. That you can never forget.

My first really clear recollection is of my fourth birthday. Our lunches were packed in shoe boxes instead of brown paper bags. It was a Utica tradition: eating a shoe-box lunch with all the neighborhood kids at your birthday party.

I spent my first eight years in Utica, which was once an important city in upstate New York, thanks to its location on the Mohawk River. But like most other medium-sized upstate cities — Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse — it has declined. Whereas it once had a population of close to 100,000, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, there were fewer than 60,000 residents.

My relationship with my mother was difficult, but I had a good relationship with my father. I really liked him. For as long as I can remember, I called him by his first name, Myron, not Dad, Pops or Sir.

But there was an enigma about him because he was quiet and taciturn. Myron Cramer was a very physical person, a strong man. His nickname was "Killer Cramer" because he was in such great physical shape. He worked hard — twelve-hour days, six-day weeks. The Shabbat, the Sabbath, Sunday in this case, was the only day he rested.

On Sunday his idea of rest was to work out at the gym, and I used to go with him. He'd do his one-armed push-ups and extend a hard rigid rubber stretcher the full width of his arms to the dismay of his younger admirers who were unable to do it. He was a star of the volleyball team because of his big serve. In fact, later on when I played tennis, I'd motivate myself when I was serving by saying, "Come on, Killer Cramer."

My father didn't have a normal laugh. Rather than go "ha ha ha ha," he would exhale "haaaaaa," sounding like he had asthma. It was so much fun to see him laughing, his face getting red with a big crinkle and going "haaaaaa." We played gin rummy together, too. All in all, we had a nifty relationship. Before he died, I remember him nostalgically reminiscing his entire life to a young Kimmie Cramer and

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me. The dialogue was in Russian, Lithuanian, Yiddish, and English. When he died at the age of eighty-four, I asked the doctor what specifically was the cause of death, his bad heart? The doctor said, “No, he wore out, just wore out.” Better to wear out than rust out.

Back in the days of my youth, most Jewish immigrants were traditionally religious, and my mom and dad were no exceptions. On Friday night, the Sabbath eve, we had gefilte fish and chicken and lighted the candles. We kept a kosher kitchen, having separate dishes for *milchik* and *fleishik*, or dairy and nondairy.

When Prohibition ended in 1933, my father and two of his brothers, Eli and Harry, opened a brewery in Utica. The city once had seven breweries and was known as the Milwaukee of the East. The most famous was Utica Club, which is still going strong and brewing many famous boutique beers.

My family’s business was the Globe Brewing Company. Its label was a picture of a globe. It made beer and ale. The ale was called Royal Style and sold well; the beer, however, suffered from a branding error and did not. It was called Dictator Style Lager, a poor choice for a time when a rabble-rouser in Germany, a dictator by the name of Adolf Hitler, was consolidating his power. Poor Myron didn’t understand why his beer didn’t sell. As Hitler annexed Austria, sales plummeted.

I remember going to kindergarten, playing in the sandbox, building sand castles, and crying. Did I miss my mother? Was I hungry? Did a bully break my building? I don’t remember why, but I cried. It was a tough experience. I’m going to cry nostalgically now just thinking about it — all that time at the sandbox building sand castles!

While I don’t remember much about my early years, some good experiences have stuck in my mind. I remember a guy teaching me how to draw cartoons and caricatures. I have a talent for that, and I enjoy using it. (I still draw caricatures with my grandchildren; they love it. They give me a subject, and I draw little caricatures, like Santa Claus, Popeye and so on.)

My background was humble and unsophisticated, and I was a bit of an underdog. Many years went by before I realized I was skillful, accomplished, and popular. Looking back, however, I was probably more successful in grammar school and high school than I thought at

the time. I certainly didn't think I was outstanding. It's only in the last thirty to thirty-five years that I realized I was "outstanding." Now that's amazing. So that means the first forty years of my life I didn't know how good I was. I'm sure I'm not the only person who has felt that way about his early life.

I think my family background had something to do with my feeling of being an underdog. Given my mother, it's a wonder that I like women so much. Mother was emotional and nervous, and she preyed on people's feelings by threatening to kill herself. She was physically unattractive. Up until she was sixty years old, she was fat and slovenly. Despite weighing over 200 pounds, she would chase my brother around the house with a rolling pin. She wasn't as severe with me because in her fifties she couldn't run as fast. But she was still a tough cookie.

Paradoxically, before my mother died she became very attractive. She was an elegant eighty-year-old. For someone who died "a thousand deaths," she lived to the ripe age of ninety-three according to her birth certificate — but she told me she was ninety. Isn't that just like a woman? Always making herself a few years younger.

When I returned to Rochester for a forty-five-year high school reunion, one of my early boyhood friends, John Edwards, remarked to me that he thought my mother was "anti-Christian." That's a switch from "anti-Semitic." He felt most unwelcome in my house, he said, because my mother made him feel so uncomfortable.

My mother was not all that bad. When I was about six, I remember a storm with thunder roaring like Godzilla and lightning aiming at me. I asked her to make it go away. She took out her Bible and prayed, and the storm went away.

When I was about nine, I stepped into a hive of bumblebees and they attacked my feet. I ran home "faster than a speeding bullet" to escape instant death (that was Superman's influence). My mother bathed my wounded feet in Epsom salts. I did not die.

I remember the neighborhood kids in Utica, like Carl Michaels and Sonny Barth. We did the things kids normally do. There was a garbage dump not far from where we lived, and we'd go there to scavenge for things.

I loved collecting. With no strong sibling connection, I was kind of a loner. I amused myself by collecting things. I think it started with

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cigar bands. My father was one of the many American men at that time who enjoyed cigars, and while driving, he would spit cigar residue from the front window. I had to dodge not to get the splatter in the back.

I also collected election cards, which politicians running for office gave to potential voters, stamps, butterflies, beetles, and all sorts of baseball cards. It's too bad I didn't hold on to any of those collections because they would go for mucho money on eBay today. Collecting is a solitary activity, but a beneficial way of passing time when you are alone. (I try to influence my grandchildren to collect stamps. It's one of the greatest hobbies a young person can have; you learn geography, mathematics, languages, even history.)

In 1938, my father sold the brewery and moved his family to Rochester, where he opened The Four Corners Liquor Store. It was the beginning of my lifelong interest in liquor, wine, and beer.

My parents were antiques. They were immigrants. They spoke only Yiddish to each other, and I'm ashamed to say I was a little embarrassed by them. We kids all wanted to be Americans, and so it was hard to have immigrant parents and extended family who spoke broken English. My father couldn't even really write. He could sign his name, he could read well, and even with his accent, he could express himself clearly. My mother was a penmanship teacher and had magnificent calligraphic handwriting. She wrote my father's speeches for him. Myron was active in philanthropic work, which Judaism encourages, saying it's a mitzvah, or God's blessing, to aid the less fortunate.

Mine was a Depression family. My parents counted every penny. Most people back then lived modestly, with poverty never far away. Life was a struggle, but there were success stories, and I think my father was one, relatively speaking. We had a house and a car, but my parents were always struggling or felt that they were struggling. At the supermarket they would always buy the brand that was a penny cheaper. (I think that's why I am very aware of what things cost. When I go to a supermarket today, I always look at the unit cost to find the lowest unit-cost item. More people should do that.)

I remember my brother teaching me to ride a bike and later

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how to dance. Because of the age difference and his becoming a soldier in World War II and my going off to college, I really didn't know him that well until much later in our lives. He was my roommate when I was young. We shared the same bed. While he slept, the grinding of his teeth frequently woke me up. That's the reason I've been an insomniac.

World War II was a most memorable event for me. On December 7, 1941, I heard about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on the radio while I was reading the Sunday comics. What a shock for an eleven-year-old, comparable only to the September 11, 2001, destruction of the World Trade Center. In 1942, I was a twelve-year-old junior commando in charge of a group of ten-year-olds protecting our neighborhood against any and all spies, traitors, and a surprise attack on Rochester.

## MY IMMEDIATE FAMILY

### AUNTS AND UNCLES

There were only a few years that I had real interface with my aunts, uncles, and cousins. We left Utica for Rochester when I was eight.

I recall with admiration my Aunt Dora, a widow — a unique example of women's liberation — who ran her family's scrap business, a "junkyard." She was a handsome, dignified woman working alongside her employees, sorting and bundling copper tubes and old rubber tires and removing lead from batteries. Her number-one worker was her son Leon, an ex-prizefighter with a cauliflower ear to prove it. He was my father's favorite. It's obvious that Killer Cramer would be best buddies with a welterweight.

My Uncle Eli and Aunt Ida lived in a big brick house with my cousins Larry and Toby, both approximately my age. Aunt Ida died recently at just over 100. Larry and I are still close and enjoy a mutual interest in Internet bridge and rooting for Syracuse University's basketball and football teams. Larry and I are the last survivors of the Cramer clan.



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My mother's family in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, was poor and lived in a multifamily house in the Heights. The Heights was built in the late 1800s and was the only residential area not affected by the frequent flooding of the Susquehanna River. It's part of an endless block of row houses, each with a prominent front porch as wide as the house. My memory of the large Pikarsky family is blurred and vague. There are names — Aunt Ray, the youngest, and Uncle Harry, the only male. The family was a noisy and quarrelsome lot.

I do recall seeing a pretty little girl, probably about seven, two porches away. I never talked to her, but nonetheless fell in love with the vision, fantasizing that we would marry when I got big. Then she would pack my lunch pail, and I would go off to work in the coal mines, raising our sons to become miners like me. To quote the young Tom Cramer when he was once engaged in conversation with a pretty little girl, also about seven, while we were at a rest stop returning from a skiing trip, "You are so very beautiful. To think I will never see you again."

My fantasy of being involved with coal became a reality. Seventy years later, I'm an active investor in a coal-mining project in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania — not Wilkes-Barre. But the seven-year-old girl will remain a fantasy forever.

### MY BROTHER, LEROY

How he hated the name Leroy. Everyone called him Roy, but I called him LEEEEroy.

He was drafted at twenty-one, going off to fight in World War II. He was assigned to the Newport News, Virginia port of embarkation to help process Army troops going to action overseas. Having flat feet, plus his battalion commanding officer's being the occasional recipient of a bottle of Scotch from Four Corners Liquor, allowed my brother to keep his desk job and eventually become a staff sergeant.

He returned home after the war in 1945 and went to work at my father's liquor store. He was the night shift, closing the store at 10 P.M. I also worked at the store occasionally during the Christmas and New Year's holiday season, trying to look like an eighteen-year-old, the legal age to sell alcoholic beverages.

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Leroy never married. Socially he was shy and worried a lot. Women frightened him (there's our mother again). His social skills consisted principally of being a terrific dancer. He was a different person on the dance floor. He became luminous doing the rumba, cha-cha, and complicated ballroom routines (his positive influence on me). In his thirties he moved to Miami Beach, opened a small liquor store and stayed close to our parents, who retired there. He lived with them until their death. His main recreation was going to a dance club twice a week.

His joy was a bird, a little parakeet named Dickie. After Dickie died, I bought him another Dickie and then another, another, and then another.

His girlfriends were few. Finally, in his early seventies, he found true happiness. He met and lived with Geraldine Wagner, who became his caregiver and nursed him after a stroke. Her children and grandchildren became his joy. After the stroke, his anxieties and lack of confidence went away. He forgot he had problems. If there is such a thing as sweet sorrow from his illness, this was it.

Leroy died at seventy-nine from a staph infection, which he contracted while being treated for a minor seizure in a Miami Beach hospital. It was a sorry ending to a sad life, but at least he was happy during his final years.

Being a bachelor with limited financial responsibilities and a certified miser and having a good financial adviser (me), Leroy accumulated a meaningful estate. His will provided handsomely for Geraldine and her children, with enough left over to leave to my sister's children, Terry and Glenn, monies to maintain a decent lifestyle. The monies he left my children were in the form of individual charitable foundations, the nexis to their education to be philanthropic.

## MY SISTER, SHIRLEY

The early memories of my sister are vague. My nickname for her was Shoik. I remember her as very pretty, with a perfect figure (she became a John Robert Powers fashion model in her early twenties when she left home for New York City). She was a good source of income for me as a child. My disappearing from the living room when

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she was with her boyfriends became very rewarding financially. One of her boyfriends had the same first name as me. He spelled his Gerry with a "G." I spelled my Gerry with a "J." I liked him so much that I changed my spelling to his.

Shirley married Nat Goldberg from the Bronx in 1944. Nat fought in World War II, where he was a sergeant in the infantry and participated in the Allied landing at Salerno in southern Italy. He was a likeable, big guy with an equally big smile. I called him the Great Goldberg. Unfortunately, after twenty years of marriage they divorced.

Shirley appeared to have an interesting but rather normal life. She was a modeling fashion coordinator. The business she started was called Fashion Plate, and developed fashion shows at major shopping malls and on cruise ships. She received fees from everybody: the models, the clothing manufacturers, and the department stores. It sounds like she was a great businesswoman, but her accounting consisted of filing the uncashed checks in a hat box. When I saw this, you can imagine my advice to her.

She was energetic, sportive, and popular with men and women alike. Shoik actually taught me how to play tennis. I was eight, and we used our Elmore Road street as the tennis court. The net was imaginary.

I liked my sister, and she liked me, which is more than I can say about her relationship with our brother. Their communication consisted of her scolding him and him sulking.

As Shirley got older, she moved to Miami Beach, and had a series of admiring boyfriends. Many facelifts and knee and hip replacements later, she finally lost her energy and spirit. Her final years ended sadly; she was alone in Florida, ministered by a series of incompetent caregivers. She died choking on a shrimp cocktail at her home celebrating her daughter's fiftieth birthday. Terry, her daughter, Daphna and I were witnesses to this tragic event.

She is buried near by brother in Fort Lauderdale, but not too close so they can't argue.

## MY NIECE TERRY

Shirley's children, Terry and Glenn, grew up in a ranch-style house in suburban Hillsdale, New Jersey, an early example of the migration

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from the cities to suburbia in the 1950s. Both were estranged from Shirley and Nat after the divorce.

Terry was an unusual beauty, with purple eyes, raven hair, and a permanent suntan. She was artistic and had exquisite taste. Unfortunately, in her early twenties she suffered from Crohn's disease, a viral disease of the intestines that required removal of a major part of the intestines. She then became addicted to pain-killing drugs. This led to her being in and out of rehab centers and tough love from me with military-like control over her activities. This was not my normal nature. I had to be the "bad guy."

My wife, Daphna, the "good guy," tried to treat her gently, with lots of love, renting a garden apartment for her, and encouraging her to attend beautician's school. Unfortunately, whatever we did did not work. Terry spent a night in jail for stealing prescription pads from her doctor and writing prescriptions for hallucinogenic drugs. Shame did not deter her. When she was clean and sober, she was optimistic about her future but it didn't last.

Men were attracted to Terry for her spirit and bravado, but when it looked as if she would find happiness and love, she would self-destruct in front of her new love by injecting crack cocaine. This was a sad part of the family history. Terry died in 2003, one day before the death of her mother. My sister, afflicted with dementia, died from choking. The mother at age seventy-eight and her daughter at age fifty were treated in the same intensive-care unit. They died twenty-four hours apart and are buried next to one another.

## MY NEPHEW GLENN

Shirley's son, Glenn Goldberg, had a difficult life, somewhat similar to Terry's. There must have been something in their upbringing. I was not aware of anything unusual, but then I did not live with them.

Glenn appeared to be a typical young man. I played catch with him, throwing a baseball and football back and forth, batting grounders and pop-flies to him. He was like a little brother, and we bonded.

Once I took Terry and Glenn to a bus terminal for a ride to a summer sleep-away camp in upstate New York. They made such a

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scene — Glenn in particular — that I had to take them back home. I, who never had the opportunity to go to sleep-away camp, was totally surprised by their behavior. I found out later in life from an experience with my own kids that it was not that unusual.

When Glenn married Fran, he used the event to divorce his biological family, with the exception of Terry, and adopt Fran's family. His relationship with his mother and father, and me became distant. Later, when he had business-related financial troubles, I did hear from him. He called asking for a loan from his mother. Later on, he called me again and again, asking if I could lend him some money.

Glenn was inept as a businessman. He filed for bankruptcy twice. He got hooked on drugs, most likely influenced by Terry. To his credit, he recognized his problem, attended Alcoholics Anonymous, and has been clean for the past ten years as I write this.

Glenn and Fran had three boys, Adam, Bryan, and Jared. Unfortunately, Adam and Bryan were born with many mental and physical handicaps that required special treatment, and they were difficult for their parents to handle. Finally, thanks to monies from Leroy's estate, they were able to go to a special-needs school in Geneva, New York. Jared is a normal young man, attending college at Hofstra University on Long Island, and carrying on an interest in the Cramer sport of tennis.

Fran divorced Glenn once the boys were out of the house. Glenn's current life, however, has changed for the better. The inheritances he received from Leroy and then Shirley and Terry allows him a reasonable lifestyle. His work regimen has been simplified; he is a chauffeur. I am proud that Glenn won the war against the enemies of his upbringing, a difficult marriage and family environment, defeat in business, and his serious exposure to drugs. A severely wounded warrior who is victorious at the end.