Excerpt from “The Lost ‘i’”

We, my mother, brother and I, can be forgiven for not seeing the clues. For years, something haunted him; something that he determined could not be shared, not with anyone, not even us. It’s only now, years after my father’s death, with hindsight, that I can see the evidence of his obsession.

**Clue #1:** He must have been in his mid-sixties when he started disappearing into one of the rooms in my parents’ modest, three-bedroom rambler in Silver Spring, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, D.C. The room, which had been my brother’s bedroom when he was in high school, became my father’s study after my brother left for college. The room was small, perhaps only ten by twelve feet, furnished with a mahogany desk that had been part of my parents’ bedroom suite, a bookcase, and a small couch on which my father often slept after he became ill.

Only my father used this room. Sometimes, I would catch a glimpse of him sitting on the couch, reading from his beloved collection of the *Tales of King Arthur* or a Zane Grey western. My father, a scientist and a logician, was ever a dreamer, an optimist, and a romantic who loved to escape into a world where evil was conquered; dragons were slain; and the good guys were the only ones left standing after a shoot out at the OK Corral.

When he began closing the door to his little study, we might have wondered what he was doing in there. My father was a private person, but not a secretive one. Perhaps, he even locked the door. I don’t know because none of us ever tried to enter this room while he was inside.

Maybe we should have wondered how he could spend hours in there. His explanation was that he was organizing his papers. But what papers? How many could there be?

How could it take so long? We teased him; mocked him; accused him of goofing off. But we never thought to investigate what he was actually doing in there.

**Clue #2**: One weekend afternoon, while at my parents’ house for a visit, he quizzed me on the law concerning name changes. It was actually more like a cross-examination. At the time, I was a prosecutor in the State’s Attorney’s Office and I really didn’t know much about any area of the law other than criminal law. My only experience with variable names was with aliases and fugitives from justice. I answered his questions by suggesting that a person could change his name to anything. “If you wanted to be called Mickey Mouse,” I remember saying, “you could, provided that you weren’t trying to defraud creditors.” But what about your “real name?” my father asked. His question didn’t seem to make sense, so I continued to be flip, dismissive. I said something like, “Ok, Minnie Mouse then or Donald Duck, take your pick.” I expected my father to laugh. He didn’t. Instead, he looked stricken, even angry. Somehow I knew the conversation was over.

If only he had asked me the real question on his mind.

Years after my father died, I had occasion to research the law regarding name changes. Legally, changing your name is relatively easy. The process, governed by state law, usually involves filing a petition; swearing that the change is not intended to defraud creditors or law enforcement officials; advertising the intended change in one or more local papers to give interested parties an opportunity to object; paying a fee; and waiting a specified time for court approval. As I told my father, you can change your name to

almost anything, provided you're not doing so with fraudulent intent, such as trying to evade prosecution for a crime. Also, your new name can't interfere with copyrights. So,

for example, you can't be Colonel Sanders or Jenny Craig. Additionally, trying to name yourself a numeral, a punctuation symbol, a racial slur, or a threatening or obscene word would be problematic.

But, as I would learn later, my father’s dilemma was really not about *how* to change his name.

**Clue #3**: In the basement of their house, my parents kept boxes of old photographs: sepia-toned pictures of my father and mother in a rowboat in Central Park, my father bare-chested and smiling at my mother who is in a bathing suit leaning back, her arms folded around her knees; a picture of my grandmother, Ida, and my grandfather, Willie, on a wooden bench, both of them looking directly into the camera. The picture, originally black and white, has been painted so Ida’s cloth coat is green with huge black buttons and Willie wears a pale blue jacket and gray work pants. There’s a picture of my father’s brother, Ruby, and his sister Dorothy, and one of my uncle Saul in an Army uniform during his tour of duty in Italy after the War. These were old photographs, laying unsorted, mounded in shoeboxes and round, metal tins that once held cookies and fruitcakes.

After he retired, my father would frequently descend the basement stairs, saying he was going to “organize” these photographs. Though he might be gone for hours at a time, there was never any evidence that he had sorted, grouped, or arranged them in any way: no folders, no albums, no notebooks. Here again, we teased him, accusing him of using

his “I’m going to sort through the photographs” as an excuse to smoke his beloved pipe since my mother had banished smoking from the main floor of the house.

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Sometime after he died, I found his birth certificate in his study. It was a half-sheet of thick, yellowing paper, bearing the seal of the State of New York and certifying the birth of a baby boy, born on September 21, 1908 and named “Jacob Joseph Lebowitz.” I must have read and re-read those words several times before it sunk in. All his life my father had spelled his last name with an “i” after the “e.” All his documents had the “i”: his marriage license, his social security card, his passport, his driver’s license, my birth certificate, my brother’s birth certificate. But on his official birth certificate, my father’s name had no “i.” When, I wonder, had he discovered the discrepancy?

I have no doubt that this is what was haunting him in that small study. This is what he was brooding about down in the basement. This is why he had cross-examined me that long ago afternoon.

Learning that there may never have been two “i’s” in Leibowitz? Not really that big a deal, right? But, I’ve no doubt that, to my father, it was an extraordinarily big deal. Why? I can think of several reasons.

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**Reason#1: My father, the chemist**. Chemists know that every ingredient matters. Change an atom and you have a different molecule. Change a molecule and you have a different compound. Change even the minutest proportion of a formula and you have a

different entity. Two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen combine to make water. But two atoms of oxygen and one of hydrogen combine to make hydrogen peroxide.