PREFACE

(B) NO LIMP FISH

JENNIFER GEORGE

"No limp fish," insisted my grandfather, shaking my hand firmly in his. "Harder. Look them in the eye, and let them know they're meeting someone."

I was a little girl when my grandfather taught me how to shake hands properly—and it made a lasting impression. Crushing palms in my wake, I think of him every time I reach out to meet someone. I've met small hands, big hands, strong and weak hands, just fingertips, and—as Papa Rube so accurately put it—limp fish. Whenever I speak to a class of fourth- or fifth-graders about my grandfather, they expect to hear myriad crazy-contraption adventures—that his house was animated, his kitchen ablaze in gizmos and gadgets, closets filled with bowling balls and parrots, and that even the simplest task would involve an elaborate series of pulleys and gears and winches. Instead, or in addition, I teach them how to shake hands.

When introducing Rube to a classroom full of kids, I start with fun, little-known facts about my grandfather. Not surprisingly, he loved cars, and he was one of the first people in New York City to own one. According to family folklore, there were only twelve automobiles in Manhattan around 1910 when Rube acquired his Minerva, a monster of a vehicle that was nearly impossible to steer and required a chauffeur, who sat outside in the elements while wrestling the giant, boat-sized vehicle into submission. I have no idea what happened to that car, but Rube would own many over his lifetime—the last of which was a diesel Mercedes that rumbled and chugged along as if powered by a grumpy herd of buffalo.

Rube was born on the Fourth of July in 1883 and died on the anniversary of Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1970. He was a lefty turned righty by his Victorian schoolteachers, yet he always drew with his left hand. He gave memorable, heartfelt eulogies, especially for those he never knew. He didn't believe in retirement and changed careers at age eighty. He called New York City "the front row," which I leave to your interpretation—I have my own. His favorite dessert was whipped cream, until the advent of Cool Whip, which he loved even more. He played croquet, smoked Cuban cigars, and wore shoes when swimming. He was always on time. He was always the center of attention. And he had enormous ears.

▲ Rube and his granddaughter Jennifer in Asharoken, Long Island (1962).

My father, George, and his brother, Tom, were raised in Manhattan, in a town house on West Seventy-Fifth Street. There was a staff of nannies, housekeepers, the chauffeur, and Tessie, their beloved cook, who made the best pecan cookies in the world.* This is where my grandparents held notoriously fabulous parties. I remember hearing how they would send all the furniture to storage and line the walls with paper so their artist friends could vandalize the place with their own form of graffiti. "The Gershwin boys," as my grandmother called them, would play piano and sing. Groucho Marx, the Three Stooges, Jack Dempsey, Fanny Brice, and an army of Ziegfeld Girls came and went, while Mayor Jimmy Walker was on hand to make sure that alcohol flowed freely, despite Prohibition. My father and uncle used to tell me how, at one of these illustrious events, Rube brought Charlie Chaplin upstairs to say good night to them, and, to the young boys' delight, Chaplin did his funny Little Tramp walk and moustache smirk. I am convinced that the "feeding machine" in *Modern Times* was a product of Chaplin's friendship with Rube.

For most of my childhood I was unaware that my grandfather was a cartoonist. To me he was just Papa Rube, the sculptor. His clay and tools were kept upstairs in a small studio off the bedroom that he and my grandmother shared at their modest weekend house in Asharoken on the Long Island Sound. He kept his work in progress under damp gauze, to keep the clay malleable. Once finished and dry, off it went to be cast in bronze and mounted on a black laminate base with a simple etched title below. I vividly remember sneaking into his studio one afternoon and peeking under a layer of damp cloth, only to see my grandmother's head staring back at me! He had captured her likeness so perfectly in clay that it was terrifying. Sadly, he never sent that sculpture to be cast. He said he was unable to capture Irma the way he saw her, and he destroyed the piece before anyone could see it. I may be the only one who did.

Going to Asharoken, which my parents and I did most summer weekends when I was a child, was never my favorite thing to do. I didn't like the sun. I wasn't fond of sand. The water was cold and murky, and in those days horseshoe crabs, which I found terrifying, were abundant, as were jellyfish, and my preference was to stay indoors. So in between meals I played marathon games of canasta with my grandmother, and Papa Rube taught me how to draw. We'd pull our chairs up to the black lacquered, U-shaped desk in the living room, like a dock jutting out into a harbor of flat gray carpet, and anchor ourselves. Paper slid easily across the desk's smooth surface. Pencils rolled around, too, while stretchy rubber erasers (the kind he always liked) stayed in place. One particular afternoon I asked my grandfather to "draw an elephant." Within seconds an elephant magically appeared before my eyes, Rube's enormous hand gliding easily across the page to reveal the funny animal. "Now *you* draw an elephant," he said, handing me the pencil. I swiftly tried to imitate his strokes, hoping my elephant would look like his. He watched me with a raised eyebrow, as if to say, let's see if you can do that again. Next he drew a duck, this time with a dog, and handed me back the pencil. "Your turn." Again I tried my best to copy him, hoping I'd have a duck and a dog that looked just like his. I remember Papa Rube watching me draw, then looking over to my grandmother to pronounce, "She's got it. An open hand." I was seven at the time.

During those lazy weekends at the beach, Papa Rube and I would put together puzzles or a house of cards, or we'd play dominoes, and we even tried our hands at constructing the animated hobby kits that were licensed under his name—small plastic models of his drawings that were as baffling to him as they were to me. But my favorite thing to do with Papa Rube was make paper balloons. The first time my grandfather made one, I was mesmerized. He took an ordinary piece of typewriter paper, and through a series of creases, rips, and folds, ended up with a small packet that you could blow up from one end into a magical paper balloon. He patiently made one after another until I had committed the process to memory. And from then on, I was a balloon-making machine! We had dozens upon dozens; they covered the desk, the chairs, and the windowsills. I remember thinking that one day my grandfather would teach me how to make them float. If anyone could do it, he could.

Then there was the napkin rabbit. He appeared only at dinner and from under the table—a little creature with floppy ears, a small head, and two pudgy arms. He spoke to me in squeaky anecdotes—funny commentary on the food, the family, and the things people said and wore. When I was very little, the napkin rabbit felt real. By the time I was around five, it dawned on me that the napkin rabbit was Papa Rube's invention—a puppet made out of folds and knots in his dinner napkin. And while I

***TESSIE'S FAMOUS PECAN COOKIES**

¼ lb butter
1 cup flour
1 tablespoon water
1 tablespoon vanilla
1 cup chopped pecan nuts

Mix everything and shape like "dates."

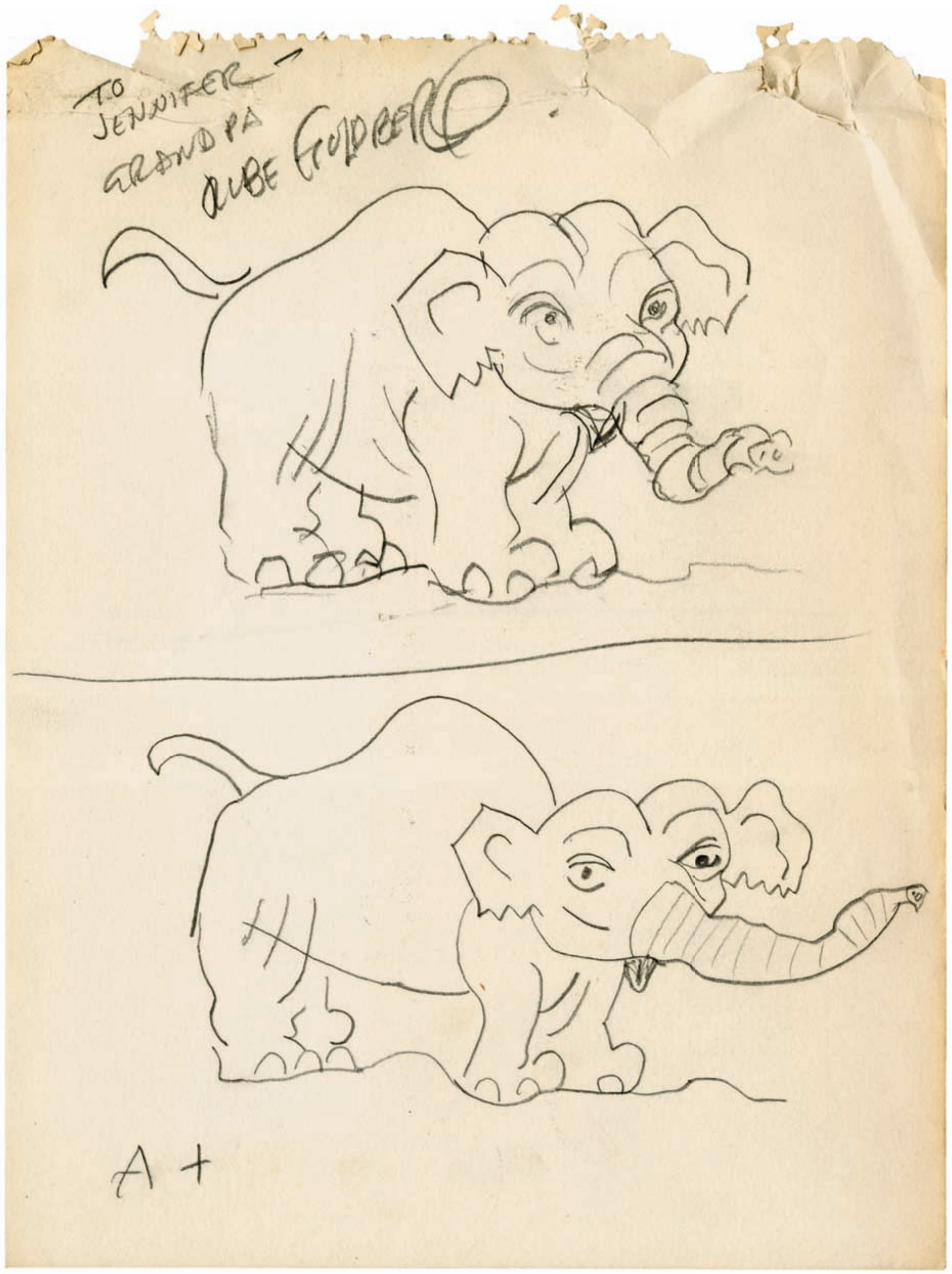
Bake 30–40 minutes in a slow oven (350°F).

After removing from the oven, cool on rack and sprinkle with 2 heaping tablespoons of powdered sugar.

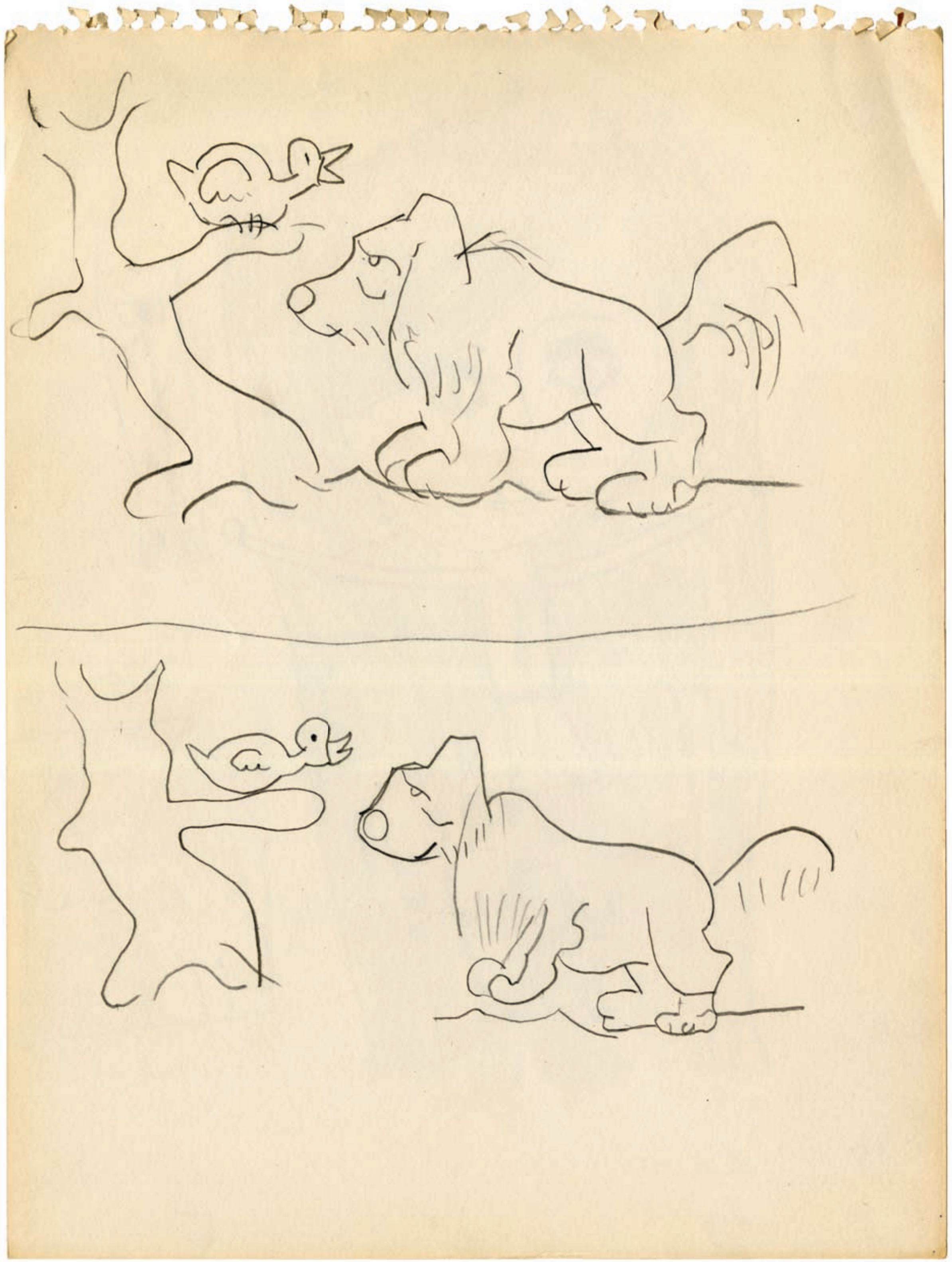
could copy his animals with pencil and paper, this little creation of Rube's eluded me. Try as I might, I could never replicate it myself. In hindsight, the little puppet was my grandfather's way of bringing me into the dinner conversation. I may have been too young for what the grown-ups were talking about, but my grandfather made sure he wasn't too old to entertain the youngest person at the table.

At the beach I never seemed to notice Papa Rube's cigars, but in the city, at my grandparents' apartment on East Sixty-Ninth Street, the smell of fine tobacco was everywhere. Havana cigars were Rube's preference, and he always managed to have them on hand, despite the fact that they were contraband. I imagine he got hooked after discovering them on his honeymoon there in 1916. Every now and then I'd spend the night on the pullout couch in the den, and Papa Rube would put me to sleep with my favorite bedtime story: a recounting of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, which the Goldberg family miraculously survived. He told me about how he and his brother, Walter, who lived there with their family at the time, were awakened when their beds rolled from one side of the room to the other. He told me about the fires, the lack of fresh water, buildings that were destroyed, and the city that was in ruins. I'm not sure why I was so transfixed by this story, but he patiently told it to me over and over again. Eventually he'd say good night, dim the lights, and I'd be alone in the tobacco-scented study, looking at his cartoons that covered the walls—a blur of characters and contraptions that lulled me to sleep and guarded me from earthquakes.

By the time Rube had his retrospective at the Smithsonian in 1970, I understood that my grandfather was important. He understood it, too. Rube's ambition was no secret. When he traveled anywhere, he made sure the press was alerted in advance and interviews scheduled, along with photo ops; in this sense he was a modern man. At his core, he understood the power of the press. After all, years



◄ Drawing with Papa Rube: Rube Goldberg elephant (top) and (bottom) his seven-year-old granddaughter Jennifer's elephant (1967).



of newspaper syndication had made him a household name. This was all the more poignant as he struggled to make the rounds in Washington, D.C.—doing all the requisite press for the Smithsonian show. At this point I knew my grandfather was sick; I just didn't realize how sick. You can see it in the photo of him on page 192, sitting in the life-size invention the museum had built, titled *Simple Device for Taking Your Own Picture*. Sadly, just a few short weeks later, Rube would succumb to cancer—and his passing would be front-page news.

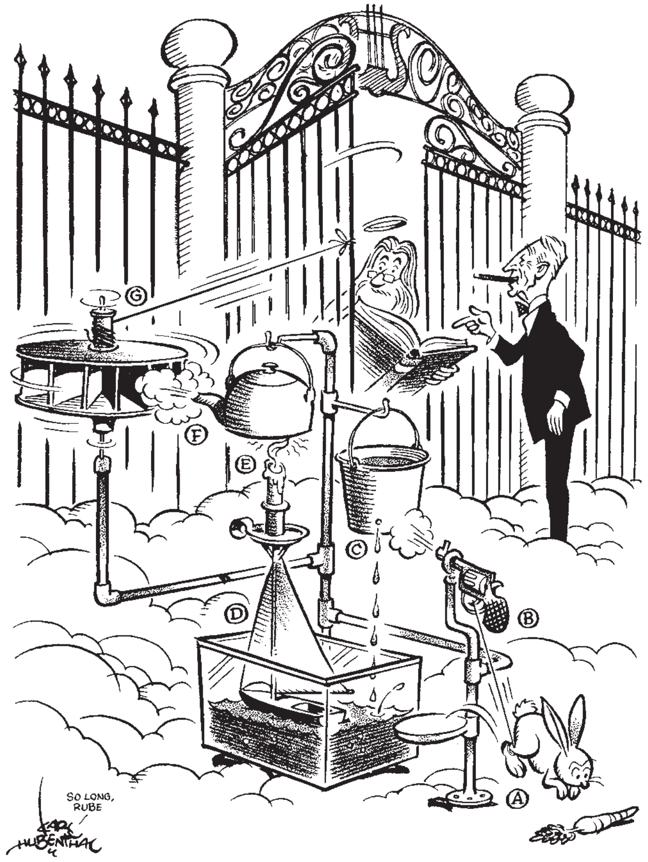
The Los Angeles *Herald-Examiner* ran a cartoon on page one of my grandfather waiting at the pearly gates beside a crazy contraption, handing his card to an angel and saying, "Goldberg is the name—Rube Goldberg." His funeral at Frank Campbell's in New York City was packed to the rafters, its elegant, ground-floor chapel overflowing onto Madison Avenue. Flowers from artists, writers, and politicians filled the stage—even President Nixon sent his condolences. And while speaker after speaker took to the podium, I sat with my family in the front row, quietly trying to entertain myself. On a small stand was a stack of Frank Campbell hand towels meant for the grieving. I took one and tried to make the napkin rabbit, but, true to form, the creature ended up looking nothing like Rube's. Instead I fashioned it into a paper doll replete with its own custom paper dress (a harbinger of things to come).

After Rube died, I would hear his name periodically on TV, or mentioned by a teacher, or see it in print in the *Times* crossword puzzle. In school, it was fun to show my friends Webster's Dictionary and point out that my grandfather was an adjective. But as time passed, the innocent and somewhat enchanted childhood memories of my grandfather gave way to a deeper reality. Fame can do funny things to a family. In compiling this book, I became profoundly aware of not just the extent of Rube's genius, the breadth of his celebrity and punk spirit, but of the extraordinary scope of his output (nearly

◀ Rube Goldberg duck and dog (top) and (bottom) his seven-year old granddaughter Jennifer's duck and dog (1967).

fifty thousand drawings make up his life's work). Finally, after all these years, I also understand my father's quiet struggle and the overwhelming length of Rube's shadow.

From my perspective and by my father's own admission, it was not easy being Rube's son. My father rarely talked about his father, although Rube always managed to come up in conversation, especially when people commented on my dad's name: George George. "Your parents must have had a great sense of humor," they would say. But in fact it was Tom Goldberg who chose the last name George. There are two different stories to the name change: Tom's version is that Rube wanted a fresh start for his boys without the baggage of their famous father's last name. Irma's version, as told to my parents long after Rube died, was that he wanted his sons to change their name for their own safety. Anti-Semitism was flourishing on both sides of the Atlantic, and they were not immune. In solidarity with his older brother, my father adopted his comically alliterative name when he left for college. And, as luck would have it, George W. George turned out to be the pitch-perfect name for a man in show business—it chimed. My father began his career writing for TV Westerns such as *The Rifleman* and *Bonanza,* and went on to produce film and theater. *My Dinner with Andre* was perhaps his proudest achievement, although *Memphis* (the musical he conceived but never got to see on Broadway) winning the 2010 Tony Award for Best Musical might have challenged *Andre*'s place in his heart.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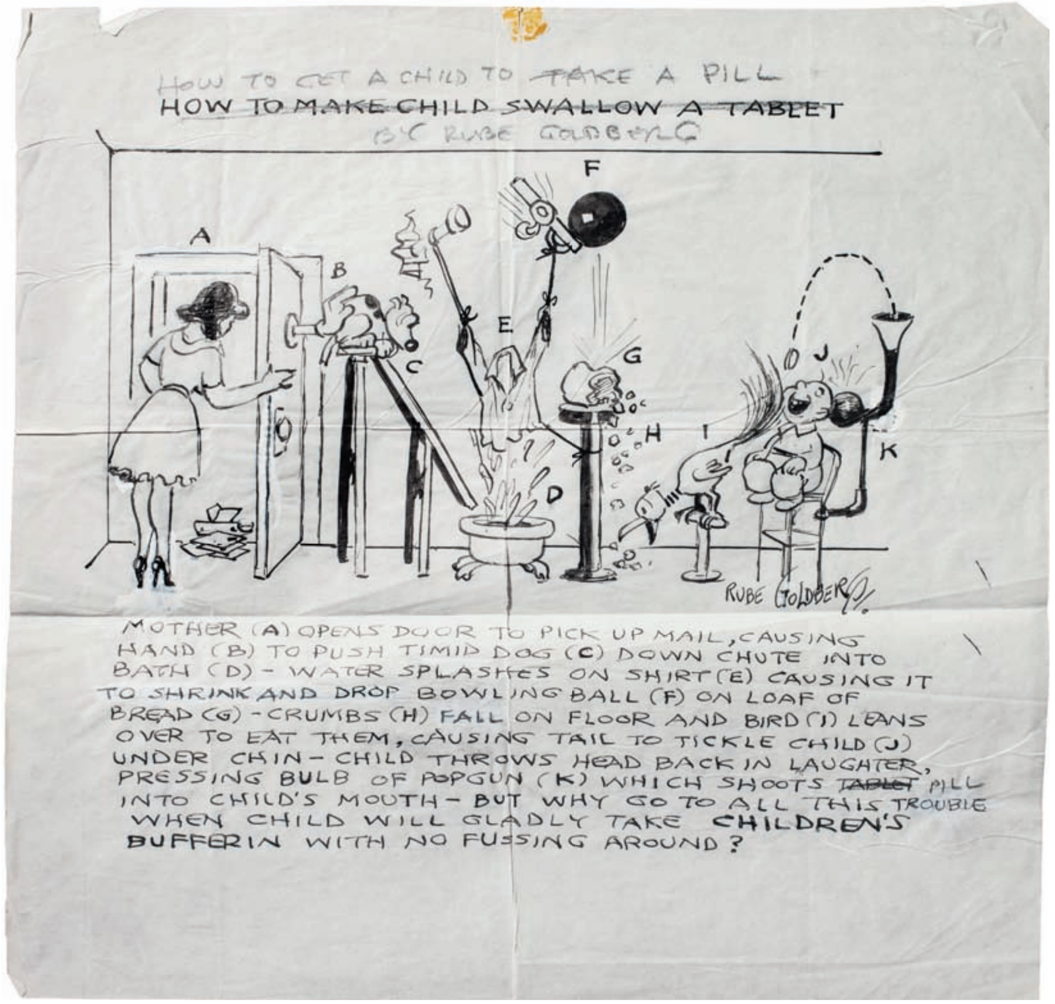
SO LONG, RUBE
KARL HUBENTHAL

◀ "Goldberg is the name—Rube Goldberg." This cartoon by Karl Hubenthal appeared in the Los Angeles *Herald-Examiner* accompanying Rube Goldberg's obituary (December 1970).

Yet, despite his professional success, my father struggled with his relationship with Rube. Finally in his eighties he went to see a therapist, who ultimately boiled it down to two simple words: "Rube won." The doctor urged him to "let it go," explaining that even the healthiest of egos can't compete with an adjective. At the end of his life, after my mother died, my father moved into his own apartment in New York City. When I was putting the final touches on the place and hanging art, my dad insisted that none of Rube's drawings be on the walls. In fact, he wanted them out of his apartment altogether. This is how my father let go. So off they went to my apartment, to be stored under my bed, where they remain to this day.

Through it all my father still understood the cultural importance of Rube's work. Over twenty years ago he founded RGI (Rube Goldberg, Inc.), as a way to keep the legacy of his father's work alive, to make his cartoons available to the public, and to create national machine contests for students of all ages. Although he didn't live to see the viral nature of "Rube Goldberg machines" on the web, nor the worldwide growth of RGM contests—with teams participating from as far away as China and Korea—he would not be surprised by his father's ongoing popularity. Today, hundreds of thousands of students study Rube Goldberg in STEM (science, technology, education, and math) and STEAM (the a stands for art) curricula nationwide. And if our educators are right, the RGM contestants of today will be the problem solvers of tomorrow.

If this book could shake hands, it would look you in the eye and, with a firm, strong grip, let you know you are meeting someone. It is my pleasure to introduce you to my grandfather—Rube Goldberg.


HOW TO GET A CHILD TO ~~TAKE~~ A PILL
~~HOW TO MAKE CHILD SWALLOW A TABLET~~
BY RUBE GOLDBERG
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RUBE GOLDBERG
MOTHER (A) OPENS DOOR TO PICK UP MAIL, CAUSING HAND (B) TO PUSH TIMID DOG (C) DOWN CHUTE INTO BATH (D) - WATER SPLASHES ON SHIRT (E) CAUSING IT TO SHRINK AND DROP BOWLING BALL (F) ON LOAF OF BREAD (G) - CRUMBS (H) FALL ON FLOOR AND BIRD (I) LEANS OVER TO EAT THEM, CAUSING TAIL TO TICKLE CHILD (J) UNDER CHIN - CHILD THROWS HEAD BACK IN LAUGHTER, PRESSING BULB OF POPGUN (K) WHICH SHOOTS ~~TABLET~~ PILL INTO CHILD'S MOUTH - BUT WHY GO TO ALL THIS TROUBLE WHEN CHILD WILL GLADLY TAKE CHILDREN'S BUFFERIN WITH NO FUSSING AROUND?

▲ "How to Get a Child to Take a Pill." Pencil rough for newspaper cartoon (September 5, 1963).

JENNIFER GEORGE is the granddaughter of Rube Goldberg. She is a writer and a jewelry and clothing designer. For almost twenty years her label was carried at Bergdorf Goodman, Barney's, Saks Fifth Avenue, Bloomingdales, and dozens of other specialty stores across the United States. She lives in New York City.