

On this warm Summer's morning, my Mother's distant voice rode the waves of my fragile sleep. Squinting into the dark, the morning tip-toed by my room and out the door. Back to the monsters that trapped me with no exits. The brew of roasted beans signaled in my other world with different monsters.

A heavy growl rumbled through the early morning, becoming, part of the darkness, and vibrated through my skin. It was my stepfather, Harold, coughing up my nightmares with the alcohol sludge that had been cooked in his throat during the night. The dark shadows and I were too afraid to make a sound. I pressed hard against the mattress, my heart deep into the bed, keeping it from betraying me. Harold, like a heavy storm thundered by me and out the front door.

One eye squeezed open and a few inches above me two brown eyes intently stared into mine. Spotty anxiously waited for a sign. Her quivering body rushed at me and she assaulted me with her soft, furry muzzle and lashing tongue. It was too much for me. I threw the blanket over my head. Spotty darted around, sniffing for an opening. She poked her head under the cover. Her cold wet nose found my ear and I cringed with laughing tickles.

Every inch of the white porcelain toilet was black with roaches. Grabbing a rolled up newspaper, I swatted at the creeping little bastards. They scurried in all directions and into invisible cracks in the walls. Some crunched under my slippers like empty peanut shells. No matter how painful my cramps, I refused to sit on the bowl until every one of them was gone. Lifting up the seat, I searched all the crevasses and under the toilet lip - anywhere they could hide. And even though I knew they were gone, I could still feel their crawling legs on my skin.

Pressing down on my bowels sent a chill that traveled up my skin and focused at the top of my scalp. With a blurred gaze, I watched the tiles rise off the floor, my feet

puncturing and sliding through them, plunging me deeper, until I felt I was drowning in the still pool of the rising tiles.

Above the alley between two buildings, a sliver of sky began to glow. It's light searched through the kitchen and the life of our kitchen gradually emerged from the deep shadows. The room was warm with the aroma of coffee. When I opened the refrigerator, a cool mix of smells hit my senses, with foods laced with the odor of garlic. I reached in for a fresh bottle of milk and shook-in the island of cream at the top of the bottle's narrow neck. I tugged at the pleated paper cap that hugged tightly to the top of the bottle like a taut drum. I could feel it pull apart in a rapid stutter. Under the cover, pressed snugly below the thick lip of the bottle, was a flat inner cap of cardboard, with a little half-moon tab you had to dig out with your fingernail. Pinching it tightly, I pulled the tab -- and out it came with a hollow pop.

One third sugar, one third milk and one third coffee in a cup; globs of butter on soft swirling white tufts of dough inside a hard crispy roll; dunked into the coffee, leaving rings of sweet floating grease.

Rich echoes of a violin interrupted my breakfast. It was just a year and a half after World War II and standing down in the middle of the back ally was a young veteran. He was a tall and handsome man with a two-week-old beard and ropes of greasy black hair touching his shoulders. He was wearing a long, oversized khaki army coat cinched around his waist, looking more like a Cossack dressed for a Russian winter than for a hot, Summer day. He was playing classical music. Beautiful music. Either he was a brilliant violinist, or it was the rich hollow echoing in the ally that made it sound so good -- taking me out of myself and into that moment. People from surrounding buildings wrapped coins in torn pieces of paper and threw them down to him, hitting the ground with a dull jingle. Once in awhile he'd nod his head in appreciation, and continue to play.

There was a rumor going around about a man who lived on my floor, right next door to me. They said he was a misshapen monster and referred to him as "That Disgusting

Freak.” I never saw him myself, so I believed he wasn’t real – until that morning. When I stepped out into the hall, there he was walking behind his wife, his head bent, making himself as small as possible. He was trying to hide from intruding eyes, eyes that reflected his own disgust in what they saw.

At first I didn’t know what to do. By the time I decided to run back to my room, it was too late. Afraid I’d be discovered, I stood motionless, trying to be part of the wall. He suddenly stopped walking towards the stairs and turned in my direction. He stood above me and began to grow. He lifted his head and straightened himself into a massive overhanging cliff. His eyes were cold and unnatural, as if they were painted eyes, unblinking, staring down into mine. What once was his face had become like melted wax. One eye was almost fused closed, with hanging skin and only a hole where his left eye should have been. The stringy twisted flesh – purple-blue, red and pink scars – covered his entire face like overlapping layers of transparent maps. They traveled up his forehead, past his hairline and halfway up his scalp, with little patches of hair desperately sprouting through his scars. When he realized I was only a little boy, his hard look softened and pulled back, releasing me.

I found myself in my sister’s room with no memory of how I got there. From her third floor window, I watched the Melted Man and his wife get into a cab and drive off towards the Boulevard. Once I saw the danger was gone, I grabbed my brother’s army jacket, my trusty Spaldeen and a pile of baseball cards and ran out into the hall. Holding onto the banister posts at each landing, I twirled around them, like riding ‘The Whip,’ running down every flight of stairs in a flow of dizzy turns and leaps – and out onto the sidewalk.

My brother, Wally, was in the Navy during the War, a volunteer in the Armed Guard, and was stationed in the Pacific. On one of his missions he met up with a soldier and traded his Japanese sub-machine gun for the guy’s army jacket. What made it special was the dragon twisting and turning on the back of the jacket, with eyes of intent, ready to

strike if you came too close. It was a masterpiece! Its lushly-embroidered details were in brilliant, swollen colors of reds, yellows and blues, begging to be eaten. Hand-painted on the front of the jacket were the names of every port my brother had pulled into – about half of the world. The jacket came down to my knees, looking like an overcoat. No matter what the weather was, I wore that jacket everyday until it fell apart, into shredded pieces.

While waiting for my friends, I kept myself busy by playing an improvised game: I'd lean against the fender of a car, throwing my Spaldeen at the concrete wall at the side of my building's entrance. Aiming for a protruding edge, the ball would bounce back and I'd catch it on the fly. To the right of the wall was the window of the Plant Lady. There were plants that crawled up and around her window, covering every inch of it. Staring into the plants, I was sucked into a rain forest so dense that it absorbed the morning light. You couldn't see in or see out. The only thing we kids knew of the Plant Lady was that she was German, tall, on the heavy side, with a tight bun of braids on top of her head. The bun was so perfect it was more like a hat than her hair.

To my left was Mrs. Katz, a sitting profile leaning on her windowsill, watching the street as the people on our block acted out their lives. Mrs. Katz never bothered us children, but we felt her presence. She was our sentinel, our protector, our rock. Her plump torso was the only part of her anatomy we ever saw. I don't think I would have recognized her if I saw her on the street, complete with legs. There were a few times when she would break through her window frame to ask us to do simple errands, like sending us to Jack's candy store for a newspaper, or to Abe's corner grocery for milk. Who would ever have known that this quiet woman spoke six different languages fluently.

I could smell the heat of the coming day. The tar on the street was beginning to melt with a sweet, barbecued-rubber flavor. Its vapors wrinkled the air, putting ripples in the distant buildings. A sour-smelling stream ran along the gutter from a leaking Johnny Pump. All thickening the fresh morning air. All signs of a hot day.

Sergie Munoz was the first to meet me. Sergie and I had a love-hate relationship. I knew him the longest of any of my friends. We both had that cool walk: With each step we'd limp into the silent rhythm of the tough guy, swaying from side-to-side in the dance of the Bronx Swagger. We were the same size, same age, same super-thin, with ribs like scrub boards. Sergie was a friend who was equal to my bursts of energy. That was where the similarity ended.

Sergie had curly black hair, high bony cheeks and looked like he was holding small marbles in the lower corners of his mouth. He'd look at me with those innocent black eyes, that were always working, always planning to satisfy his own pain.

In comparison, I had wavy blond hair and cheeks that looked like two small peaches when I smiled. And wide open, blue-green eyes that were hiding my secrets. And a cowlick that insisted it didn't want to be part of me. No matter how hard I tried to paste it down – with water, hair tonics, or spit – like opposite poles of a magnet, it would shoot away from my head in confused spikes.

The rest of the gang began to filter out of their buildings wearing loose T-shirts with wide colored candy stripes and long baggy pants. No matter how hot it got, we wouldn't be caught dead in a pair of shorts. The most necessary equipment of all was our sneakers – a pair of black, high top sneakers – the ones that had a white, rubber circle on the outside ankles, with 'Keds' spelled out in its center. Only then you knew you had the 'Sneakers of the Gods'. It was the badge of the God of Speed and Swiftness.

Reaching the ages of eleven and twelve years old, we had learned to survive and protect ourselves from each other by never revealing our inner secrets. We would never make the social mistake of asking a sensitive question – what we considered a sissy question. It would have been acknowledged as a weakness and used against us. On occasion, someone would take that chance and open up. We'd tease the poor bastard with unmerciful insults, his penalty for crossing that line. The only way for us to communicate

those sensitive and necessary feelings was through thinly disguised, inventive story telling, or in the heat of a street game where we could feel each other out without losing face.

In some ways we were very close and yet we could also be cruel and distant. But we always had one thing in common – our imagination. By using our imaginations, we had great adventures that made that part of our childhood a joy.

Every game we played had its Season. We instinctively knew which day was the beginning of the card Season. It seemed as if a magic potion was released into the night air. And while we slept, it seduced us with the smells and sounds that whispered in our ears...”T-i-i-i-me to flip cards.” The next day, we all showed up ready to flip our mix of cards – from baseball players to chapterplay cliffhanger scenes and movie stares – bought in sheets of bubble gum and penny vending machines.

We were in front of Mr. Seigel’s hardware store, where he displayed metal pots, glasses and dishes in open wooden crates and cardboard boxes, outside on the sidewalk.

Music

was pumping out of Mr. Seigel’s doorway. The flipped card floated down on the soft smooth mellow tones of Nat King Cole, singing...”There was a boy, a very strange enchanted boy...”

We played one-on-one and I was matched up with Jimmy Sheehy. Jimmy was a single, tall weed in the midst of a field of low-cropped grass. His head looked like a balloon that had been squeezed at one end and its mass had been shifted to his forehead, gathering his blue eyes, nose and thin lips together at the bottom of his face. Long straight, reddish hair hung down from the top of his head, over closely cropped sides. It was difficult to tell which was his natural skin color, the thousands of connected freckles, or the pink in between.

I was distracted from our game and drawn to the rustling of a window curtain. Someone was watching me from the third floor window where the Melted man lived. A figure stepped back, dissolving into the dark room.

When I re-focused back to my friends, they were walking away from me and crossing the street to the blank brick wall we used for handball. By the time I got there, they were already in position to play Slug. Who knows why the hell we called it Slug. The older boys proclaimed it as Slug and that's what it was, a meaningless word that would always be fused to the game.

Standing in our individual boxes marked by the grooved squares of the sidewalk, the street around us disappeared and this little piece of the Bronx became our entire world. The only sounds we heard were our own voices and the bouncing, rubber Spaldeen rebounding off our hands, the brick wall and the sidewalk, in a repetitive musical beat. I'd hit the ball as low as I could, down and up to the brick wall, into another kid's box, making it as hard as possible for my friends to return it. Lower and lower I'd go, until my finger tips were scraping the concrete sandpaper, sometimes causing them to bleed. Not paying much attention to the blood, I'd stick my fingers into my mouth, suck on them and continue to play.

Our work was our play and this was a bad work day. Going from one game to another, nothing satisfied us. And then the Jelly Apple Man showed up. The kids on our block danced around the pagan idol of the golden copper vat. A shining jewel, reflecting the sun, stood majestically high at the far end of the wagon, filled with hot melted jelly. Next to it was a bin of fresh apples and a jar of sliced coconuts swimming in their own juices. Along both sides of the wagon were rows of deep, rectangular wood cubicles. Each cubicle held different treasures of dried fruit, visible to us through tilted glass doors. For a penny per fruit you could choose from dried apricots, prunes, pears and peaches. All the fruit you could afford, creating your own custom-made treat.

Total disorder erupted from unrestrained little people. Smiling, the Jelly Apple Man's thick gray mustache spread across his face, twice its normal size. "Ok, kids. One at a time.

I can't help you if you're all going to shout at me." Pointing to his side, "I want you to line up here, in one line."

We spontaneously manufactured a pecking order and juggled ourselves into a single line. The Jelly Apple Man stabbed the fruit onto a pointed stick and dipped it into the belly of the copper vat. He rolled the stick between his fingers, deep into the hot jelly, twisting and scooping the thick jelly as it unwillingly gave up its sweet offspring. When it hit the air it thickened and pulled away in warm, gooey strings, like melted glass. He wove the stick through the air, balancing and directing the jelly, and with soft hands, twisted the gooey snake around the fruit.

Melvin Melnick always had more money than the other kids on the block. He whipped out a dollar bill, a fortune to the rest of us, and begrudgingly surrendered it to the Jelly Man. Pulling out a wad of folded money from his trouser pocket, the Jelly Man neatly laid the new dollar in bed with the others. He grabbed a fistful of jingling coins from the front pocket of his coarse apron and with one finger, poked at the coins on the palm of his hand and gave Melvin his change.

Sitting on the curb with our feet resting on the soft tar, eating the fruity-warm sweet goo, the Jelly Man caught us off-guard by actually talking to us. This was unheard of; he never talked to us before. It made us uneasy.

"I've got some free time today. If you guys would like, you can come home with me. Hey...I'll show you some great stuff I have." "Yeah. Like what?" I've got guns like the cowboys have in the movies, except mine are real." We didn't bite, so he tried a different approach. "You like little girls?" We shrugged our shoulders. We were uncomfortable talking about our feelings about girls to an adult. He got the wrong message, and sat beside me. The sound of his voice was unsafe. And there was a peculiar look in his eyes.

He put his hand on my thigh. “Well maybe you should try something different. You know you learn by trying new things. I’m sure your teachers have told you that.” Like taut springs popping out of the casing of a watch, we leaped to a safe distance and shouted...”Fuck you! You stinkin,’ fuckin’ faggot! Fuck you!”

Fear and hurt swelled in his eyes. Even through I knew what he wanted, I was confused. I felt like a bully. My bigotry had a soft edge to it. There was something inside me that felt it wasn’t right. But I still went along. That summer was the last we saw of the Jelly Apple Man. He never returned.

The combination of the heat of the sun and the sweet sugar treats produced an intense thirst and, like zombies, we were drawn to Jack’s candy store to quench it with more sugar.

Jack’s thick Bronx accent was lost amongst our own. His thin, muscled body was wound up tightly, like a rubber band ready to snap. Jack always wore long-sleeved shirts rolled up above his lumpy biceps. He would button the collar to the top button, pinching at his neck. Jack’s ass was lost in his baggy pants, held up by a pair of suspenders. The part in his straight, black hair opened a path of pink skin down the center of his head, leading to his face. In his hard, bony, square jaw he held a soggy, brown growth - a half-chewed cigar that never left his mouth.

Jack and his wife, Sally, took turns caring for the store. Today they were there together. Sally was short with round cheeks, round head and round hair. Her dark features looked like they were outlined with a soft lead pencil. An apron covered her plump figure. It seemed as if all the vendors, except Jack, wore aprons – as if they all belonged to a Secret Society of The Apron.

When we entered the store, the soda fountain was on our left, with swivel chairs mushrooming out of the floor and lined up by the counter. Our eyes were level with the counter and the open boxes filled with penny candies. There were banana-shaped candies

with a thin crusty shell and doughy insides of light coral-ly orange color; chocolate marshmallow twists; chocolate-covered squares with firm jelly insides; green and red, chewy, half-moon slices of watermelon, sprinkled with glued on sugar. And there was a hard rectangular taffy, more like a slab of stone on a stick, called a Holloway. If you were able to peel off the fused paper wrapper, you then had to soak it in your mouth to soften it or else you'd shatter your teeth.

To our right along the wall were dime novels. Their covers were splashed with color and realistic art of action figures with smoothly molded shadows, begging me to enter into their world. Inside these thick, promising covers, were only words, thousands of words needing to be read. Because I was dislexic, I could hardly read. (In those days it was called Stupid.) So I had to be satisfied with wondering what the books had to say. I believed I was never to be able to enter those mysterious worlds with different voices between their covers. My friends didn't hear those voices, but I could hear the inside of those books talking to me. Throughout my childhood, I burned with a fire inside me, wanting to know what they were saying.

The whole side wall at the back of the store was filled with comic books – we called them joke books – rows and rows of them. Glossy slick covers leaned forward in their wood cradles. Their newness felt thick and smooth to the touch. Thumbing through them, I could feel their energy running across my fingertips with picture stories of super heroes created only for me.

Opposite the joke books and the phone booths was an open space, just large enough to fit three tables with chairs. At the end of the counter was a hulking, red metal coffin, pressing grooves into the wood floor. Inside, entombed in crushed ice, was a variety of sodas, like Mission Cream, Castle Orange, Yoo Hoo, and Pepsi Cola. When I pulled out a bottle of cream soda, the cold pieces of ice melted over my hot, sweaty hand, teasing my lips. My hand drank in the dripping wet bottle and I tingled impatiently for that first gulp.

Grabbing our favorite sodas, my friends and I took control of one of the tables at the back of the store. We slowly sank down into our chairs and began sounding each other out. “Ya Father chews on scum bags.” Sergie answers with...”Yeah, well that musta been da ones I used on ya Mutha.”

Melvin never joined in. He sat there in his blue cowboy shirt with white curlicue-trimmed pocket flaps, his thin, black oily hair plastered down on his head, looking like a wet rat. He had this habit of staring at your lips while you were talking and moving his lips, silently mimicking what you were saying, slightly off-sync. It drove us crazy.

During our verbal joust, Sergie glanced over towards Melvin and caught him in the act of following his lips. Sergie grabbed Melvin, and lifted him out of his chair...”What da fuck do ya think ya doin? If ya don’t cut that shit out, I’ll break your fuckin’ ass!” Poor Melvin tried so hard to stop, but his obsession was too much for him. He broke away from Sergie and, narrowly escaping his reach, ran out of the candy store.

Sergie turned to me and, as if nothing had happened, continued the game. “The only reason you were born was because the drug store was closed.” And I retorted...”Oh yeah? Well, the best part of you dripped down ya Mutha’s legs.”

Without warning, someone released the mother of all farts. It thundered throughout the whole store and vibrated our table. We were at the age when passing wind was the zenith of all jokes. My sudden outburst of laughter caught me with a mouthful of soda. It burned through my nose and erupted from my mouth, spraying everywhere on everyone.

We laughed our way out of the candy store with Sally close behind us, “Get out! Get out! And don’t come back until you know how to act like human beings!”

The dreaded Mrs. Levine, landlady of my building, was built solid, like a sawed-off tree stump. She walked into her building as we watched from across the street. Mrs. Levine’s breasts covered her entire chest. She could have set a table for four on those monumental bosom’s.

Every once in awhile, when my Mother was paying our monthly rent, she would help Mrs. Levine by giving her her insulin shot. To me it was like a Japanese torture that I'd seen in the movies: The needle presses into her skin; her fat flesh caves in, resisting the needle until it reaches the end of its flexibility; the sharp, steel point punctures through into her arm and her skin rides back up, onto the needle.

Mrs. Levine looked down at me and told my Mom..."Such a goot boy, your Solly is." They then began speaking only in Yiddish – that's when my Mom wanted to talk about things she didn't want me to hear. Yiddish. I didn't understand a word of it, except when I heard my Mother's voice. It wasn't the Yiddish she spoke that I understood, it was her round, resonant sounds that I knew so well. Sounds that vibrated and rolled around me in her womb.

My attention drifted down to Mrs. Levine's hands. They would periodically shake, as if possessed by two entities, in a constant struggle for control. While talking to my Mother this battle was going on right below her, her hands living their own lives without her knowing of their existence. Mrs. Levine tried to drink a cup of coffee, but her hands shook so violently that the cup and saucer rattled like an earthquake tremor in a glassware store. My Mother and I left before I ever found out who won the war.

While sitting on Junior Fernandez's stoop, Billy Flynn came up with the idea of setting a trap of piled-up garbage against Mrs. Levine's door. We were all enthusiastic, but Billy had second thoughts. Jimmy said, "Hey! You can't chicken out. It was your idea." "Hey, its my father who's da Super, not yours. If she sees me, my Pop will kill me." Junior reassured him, "We're not going to get caught."

"Dat's what you say. You Guys can do what you want. I'm not doin' it." Sergie warns him, "You better do it, or we'll kick your ass in." Billy's brown eyes smiled through puffy slits, looking like Roy Rogers..."Yeah, you're really scarin' me. I'm going to bust out cryin'." He calmly turns and walks away.

Feverishly, we piled the bags of garbage, one on top of the other. The tension was high; nerves were on edge. The unstable pile of garbage bags reached the top of Mrs. Levine's door. We leaned away from her door – Olympic runners ready to spring into action. We hesitated, looking at each other for a signal of who was going to ring her bell. Without warning, a rush of adrenalin pressed my finger on the bell.

Before my finger even left the bell, I was in a full gallop, with Sergie, Junior and Jimmy in front of me, whizzing down the long tile floor. One of Sheehy's shoes had a loose sole, and I could hear the slapping of leather with each uptake of his foot. The flapping sole and the electricity of our excitement, crackled through the hall, screaming in my ears. How was it possible that the whole building couldn't hear us!

We hid in the shadows of an alcove at the end of the hall. Tension built as Mrs. Levine's door cracked open. The garbage tumbled all around her and splattered on her walls. Mrs. Levine looked in the direction of our giggling, "You little Bastards! I hear ya!" Her short, hard body shook with anger. Spit sprayed from her mouth, "I'll getcha for dis!" In one leap we jumped the vestibule steps, as our giggles exploded into laughter and spilled out onto the street. Mrs. Levine's screams got thinner and thinner as we ran down the three hills, fear breathing down our necks.

While walking past Longfellow, down towards Whitlock Avenue, Junior swung a phantom punch at Jimmy Sheehy. Jimmy ducked and Junior punched him twice on the shoulder, "One, two, for flinching." Jimmy shouted, "Screw you! I don't need this horse shit. I'm going home." Sheehy took off, leaving the three of us, as we continued to Whitlock Avenue.

Observing two well-developed girls walking by, I turn to my friends, "Wow, did you see dat? They're built like a brick shit house." Sergie says, "Yeah, nice. You know you've gotta be careful." Me, "What da hell are you talkin' about?" Junior, "You mean crabs?" Sergie, always the expert, "No. My brother, Richie, told me that girls can lock

their pussys on your cock. “Ya kiddin’ me?” Sergie, “I’m not kiddin.’ You know, when you’re inside and, if the girl gets spooked, you know, like scared...you know, like a sudden noise, or if someone surprises her, you know, like her Mom catching her fucking...she’ll freeze and lock onto your cock and you won’t get out. You know, like stuck there forever.” I added...”Gee, just like dogs.”

Down at the bottom of the three hills, we came to a wired fence and heard a low, distant rumbling coming from the other side of the fence. Stepping up on a low concrete wall, with our fingers entangled in the fence, we could see across the creek where there were corrugated metal Quonset huts. They stood there like a draftsman’s mechanical drawing that had just walked off his paper in neat rows.

Turning back to the fence, I looked down into a huge, cave that went under the street. Deep in the cave’s blackness, there were two glowing pinpoints of light, like a pair of piercing eyes, that got larger and brighter as they came towards me. A hollow growl grew in intensity, matching the blood pounding through my veins. Building to a booming roar, the enormous steel-armored beast with fiery eyes, erupted out of the depths of its cave. The force of its power knocked us off the fence, as the Seventh Avenue Local climbed out of its tunnel, roared past us and onto the El.

We walked under the El across Whitlock Avenue to an abandoned public swimming pool. Its buildings and bathhouses were in rubble, burned to the ground.

When I was six and a half, living on Aldus Street, I had a friend, a black kid, whose name was Sugie. He was two years older than me. Sugie was so black he glowed with blue highlights on his satin skin. One day Sugie and I went down to the creek and, in what we thought was just some innocent fun, set a small batch of weeds on fire. We didn’t realize what we’d started. The weeds burned out of control and lit up the sky. Billowing smoke blocked out the sun all the way to our street. Fire engines appeared from all directions – a Five-Alarmer! No one was hurt, but all the swimming pool buildings were completely destroyed.

I knew the rules of my tribe: The bigger the story, the bigger the hero you were in the eyes of your friends. But even so, I was still too afraid to tell Junior and Sergie about the fire. Too frightened that someday others would find out and I'd be put away for the rest of my life. This was Sugie's and my secret.

Rummaging through the debris of the abandoned swimming pool, we found hidden in the rubble, a concrete trap door, flush to the ground. Attached to the door was a metal ring. It took the three of us to lift it open. At the top of the opening was a waffled iron step leading down into a black abyss. "Who's got a match?," asked Sergie. Junior, "That's no good. We need a searchlight or some candles." "Miller's! Lets get the candles from Miller's." I said.

Up the hills past Bryant Avenue was Mr. Miller's Deli, noted for his five-cent sour pickles. Mr. Miller, a heavy-set balding man, wore a shirt with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows and over it a white butcher's apron. My job was to keep him busy while Sergie and Junior stole some candles. Miller had three wooden barrels, one filled with pickled green tomatoes and the other two with cucumber pickles.

"Come on, Boychick, stop vaisting mine time. Pick a pickle already!" The best sour pickles were soft and thin skinned, almost translucent, and light yellow-green. "Vat are you two doink over dere? Vat are you doink?"

Sergie, Junior and I tear-assed out of the store. Mr. Miller screamed out, "You come back here! I'll tell ya Mothers! You should be ashamed!" The fear that Mr. Miller would tell my Mother triggered the instinct of self preservation, enabling me to believe I was unjustly accused. So, I turned to Mr. Miller and screamed back at him, "We didn't do nuttn'!" Thinking that was enough to proclaim my innocence, I turned and continued to run with the pack.

“Once, twice, three, shoot!” Sergie and Junior each thrust out two fingers. My one odd finger chose me to go first. There was no turning back. I had to go first or be called a Chicken.

The candle revealed a winding stairwell that led me into a bottomless black pit, filled with unknown evil, with grasping hands reaching out for my legs. My heart pounded up into my head; my internal spark drained from my legs. They were numb and rubbery as they slid onto the first step.

The candle’s flickering light made solid objects become animated with the quick, jerky movements of a silent movie. Two pairs of spiral stairs appeared, one real, the other its shadow. They swayed and twisted around each other, chewing and digesting me as I descended into its black throat. Sergie and Junior followed close behind. The candlelight was absorbed by the total darkness above and below us. We were drowning in a thick, black sea.

At the bottom of the stairs was a maze of tunnels with interconnecting rooms that refused to stand still. They were damp and musty with a pervading odor of salty mildew. Out of the depths of the pitch blackness, another flickering light appeared. It was floating toward us. Where was it coming from and who or what was holding it?

We didn’t wait to find out. Sergie, Junior and I shoved and pulled at each other, trying to be first to the stairway. A pair of hands pounced onto Sergie’s shoulders and picked him up off the floor. The last thing Junior and I saw was the pair of hands and Sergie dangling in mid-air, twisting in a circle of candle light.

Junior and I flew through the rooms, creating gale winds that blew out our candles. We hit a wall of impenetrable night. Frozen in our tracks, desperate, not knowing which way

to go, we held on to each other. Then something took over, erasing our fears, and we began slowly to push through the thick blackness. Following Sergie's plaintive cries eventually led us to the light.

The light cast nervous shadows along the walls. Sergie was being held by a man not much bigger than we were. His fluttering candle turned his face into valleys and crevasses, with caves for nostrils. It pulled and bent his features in unnatural ways, all lit from underneath, like seeing his face upside down. His voice was garbled, sounding like he was speaking through a mouthful of cotton. "What the fuck do you want?"

Like an ominous warning, Sergie pulsated in and out of the shadows. All of our toughness evaporated, replaced with the pleadings of two scared children. "Nothin', Mister, nothin.' I swear to ya. We didn't know anyone was here," said Junior. I joined in, "Yeah Mister, we didn't know anyone was here." "Then what're ya doin' here? Why ya spyin' on me?"

I answered, "We was just haven' fun. We didn't mean nothin'." The Little Man stared at us around his fat pug nose, trying to penetrate into our eyes to see the truth. Junior begged, "Please Mister, we really didn't mean anything. We're tellin' ya da truth."

His popeye forearms relaxed their grip and he lowered Sergie to the ground. He wasn't going to kill us after all. "Ok, I believe ya. But ya better not tell anybody about me and dis place." As soon as Sergie's feet touched the floor, his cockiness pumped back into his body..."Sure, don't worry about a thing. We won't say a word. What'cha doin' down here, anyway?"

"Don't be so fuckin' nose. You'll live longer," the Little Man answered. He glared at Sergie, "Ok. I'll tell ya, but no more questions after this. Ya hear? No more questions. I'm down here is because I hate cops."

Sergie interrupts, "Just because you hate cops?" I wished Sergie would just shut the fuck up, and so did the Little Man. He grabbed Sergie by the throat, "What did I tell ya. Stop wit da questions." Sergie, "Ok, ok, ok. I promise no more axing questions."

I'm hidin' from da cops 'cause da cocksuckers have been makin' my life miserable for no reason at all." We didn't dare ask him why. Anyway, we didn't particularly care for cops ourselves.

I got too close to him and the fumes from his body burned my eyes. I was overwhelmed by an odor like the seasoned dirt that collects in the corner of your big toe nails, on its way to ripening into the smell of shit.

"If I show my face out dere, dey'll kill me for sure. Yous guys gotta help me. I've been down here for a long time and I'm starvin'. Sergie answers for us, "We can do dat. We'll getcha' some food." Little Man, "Ya will?" Sergie, "Sure, it's a cinch." Little Man "Tanks. Get me as much as ya can. And remember, not a word to nobody."

When I stepped outside the hole, a brilliant burst of light attacked my eyes, like looking into a hundred flashbulbs, all flashing at the same time. I stood there in the smothering heat of the midday sun, leaning into the dense cloud of hot air. The intensely magnified emotions I felt during the short period of time we spent down in the tunnels, made it seem like a life- time. That life had become my reality and now the world I once knew felt unreal.

Dazed, I stood outside the hole, filling my lungs with fresh air, filling my memories with who I am and which world I belonged to. I was enveloped with the joy of being free from the stifling tunnels. My hair had separated into thick spaghetti clumps. I was drenched in sweat. I took my jacket off and tied the sleeves around my waist, and we began our way home.

Apartment buildings five to six stories high, butted up against each other, surrounding me with tons of bricks. The buildings sat on granite and concrete streets, busy streets, with unsuspecting people. These people felt safe walking on solid rock, living their everyday lives, ignorant of what existed below them.

* * *

Long, wavy, dark brown hair folded into a pompadour on top of her bangs, held in place with a red bow. Her bangs cascaded over her forehead; red earrings dangled and red marble-sized beads hung around her neck. My Mom's dark blue, silky dress with white spots draped over a strange man's lap. His hands disappeared up her dress. She moaned with a breathless sigh.

Seeing me startled her and she jumped from his lap. A quick tug at her polka dot dress and it fell back into place. Mom's flushed face and tense response was the same way I reacted when I was caught at what I thought was wrong. Within a split-second, I stuffed the hurt somewhere inside. I didn't care what my Mom did...that was her business and I had my own to attend to.

Sour cream and bananas with a mountain of sugar and a hard roll and butter. The afternoon sun is bright. Sparrows break across the shaft of sun rays, their shadows flickering into my kitchen. Sitting between the spears of light, staring off in a waking sleep, I watched the excited dust particles riding the streams of light.

The stranger passed by the kitchen on his way to the bathroom. When he left the bathroom, my Mom took her turn. A scream passed the kitchen on its way to the other rooms, "Disgusting! You Pig! You Son of a Bitch Pig!" She'd discovered the man was a sloppy pisser. He'd peed on her clean toilet seat and floor.

Mom was an earthy woman, with warmth and strength like the Italian movie star, Anna Magnani. She grabbed the stranger by his lapels and pulled him so hard that his feet

never touched the floor as she threw him out of the front door. “You filthy Pig! Don’t you ever come back here!” Then under her breath she says, “Men. Filthy, dirty men. De’re not worth it. I don’t ever vanta have anything to do vit dem.”

During the commotion I filled my army jacket with half a loaf of Tip Top bread from its spotted package and a piece of salami, and snuck out of the apartment.

On our way back to the pool, there were waves of sirens, swelling and receding as they passed us on the street. One, two, three police cars sped down to the pool. Flashing lights lit up the tops of the heads of a crowd of people and an army of cops surrounded the trap door. The cops shoved and pulled our pug-nosed Little Man out of the pit, screaming, cursing and laughing at the same time. He spotted us in the crowd. His eyes were filled with hate. I knew that look very well.

Junior politely asked a woman next to him, “Excuse me, Ma’am. Do you know what’s goin’ on?” “You see that little man with the police? He’s an escaped maniac...a killer. He killed a policeman!” We looked at each other and almost at the same time said, “Oh, shit!” ...Feeling lucky we were still alive.

The cops dragged him by and the Little Man’s complete focus was on us. He was so close that the spit spraying from his mouth rained onto our faces, “When I escape I’m gonna kill da little pricks who snitched. I’ll cut dere fuckin’ little cocks off!” A cop’s face swelled up beet red, with popping veins from his temples. He grabbed the Little Man by his hair, pulled his head back and growled, “Just shut the fuck up!” Both cops straightened up from a crouch, bringing the full force from their thick legs slamming him into the police car, with a dull thud against crackling metal. Their nightsticks cut through the police cars blinking lights. They hit and kicked the Little Man into the car, like a lump of laundry.

The Little Man peered out of the police car’s closed window. The look in his eyes had already killed me.

Someday he will appear in our rooms and kill us in our beds. Maybe on some hot Summer's night he'll find us sleeping out on the fire escape, or find one of us alone in an alley, hall or street and cut our cocks off. We told each other these possible scenarios all the way home, scaring ourselves to death and loving every minute of it.

Our block is alive with the twilight sounds of the streets, of children's thin echoing voices bouncing between and into each other; Spaldeens rebounding off of brick walls and concrete sidewalks; key chains skipping across chalked potsy boxes; adult voices calling from their windows – the roll call of their precious little children. Each step closer to our block held an elixir of different foods from around the world, releasing their fragrances, blending one with the other. The harmony of smells and sounds, gave us the restorative feeling of being home and safe again.

Billy Flynn was there, so was Sheehy and, of course Melvin – always Melvin, who desperately wanted to belong and be accepted by the group of older kids. Betty, Kathleen, and Junior's sister, Maria, were also there to greet the three terrified heros. And Barbara Hesse. Yes, Barbara Hesse was there.

Sergie and I had an incurable crush on Barbara that lasted throughout our young lives. And now I can't remember her face. How could I possibly have forgotten her face? Lush, straight blond hair, blue eyes and freckles floating in my memory, with nothing to hold them together. I've always wondered if Sergie really liked Barbara or if it was only because I did. Later on in our mid-teen years, Sergie went after every girl I was interested in.

During a game of Kick-The-Can on the four corners of Faille and 165th street, Barbara walked up to me, looked me in the eye and in a deriding voice said, "Don't you ever take that thing off?" In my own defense I answered, "My Brother wore dis jacket in da war. See all dese names? Dere countries my Brother's been to. He was at every one of dese places. He was all over da world." Barbara gruffly blurts out in front of our friends, "You're so full of hot air." They all laughed. I knew she was mocking me, but I didn't

know what it meant. My heart cried and the hurt rode on its tears, up to my throat and stuck there.

Sergie began to taunt me, "Ya don't know what it means, do ya?" "Yeah I do." Sergie, "How stupid can ya get." Melvin, being Sergie's lackey, was given the nod. He now had the license to humiliate me, "Ya better watch it Solleee, ya so full of hot air, ya gonna float away." It seemed everyone knew what it meant but me. Melvin stuck his finger into my face, "Look, look, his face is turning red."

Sergie got what he wanted, Barbara saw me as a fool. The others joined in, smelling a wounded animal as an easy prey. "Why don't ya take dat stupid jacket off? Its beginning to smell like shit." Each remark slowly stripped me of any power I had, leaving me naked and revealing my truth. The truth I worked so hard to keep a secret – that I was retarded. It was too much for me.

Their voices became squeaking doors from another room, fading away, joining the surrounding street sounds. Another presence tugged at my attention – away from my friends, up and over their heads to the third floor of my building. A pair of eyes, stared down at me. The Melted Man shrank back and the curtains billowed across his window.

Someone pulled at my jacket, an insult that invaded my wandering thoughts, pulling me back to the hard sidewalk, back to my attackers. Sergie was close to my face, smirking and calmly saying, "Ya know Solly, you're a real Asshole. Look at him. Look at da sweat dripping down his Jew nose."

At least once a week they'd make fun of the size of my nose. Their constant insults had beaten me down to the point where I really believed them. The truth was, I had a small nose, not as small as theirs, but a nicely-shaped normal nose.

The only way to save what was left of my pride was not to give in to their taunts, "I'd rather have a nose that looks like a nose, than those two tiny holes in ya heads that make ya all look like a bunch of pigs."

That did it. I went too far. The smiles were gone, replaced with anger. Sergie struck back, "We better not catch ya on dis side of da block. If we do, we'll kick yer ass in." Following his leader, Junior added..."And if I catch ya on my side of the street, I'll knock the shit outta ya."

I couldn't let them bully me this way. If I did, I'd always be their constant target, so I replied, "Oh yeah! Well ya both can kiss my ass in Macy's window." I stood my ground as they bunched up into a huddle, whispering, giggling secrets. They gave each other a knowing look and scattered in different directions, laughing. Alone and numb, they took my joy with them. What I had left was the wrenching betrayal of my friends.

I was invisible to most adults, except for the ones who hated me. Harold never called me by my name, he had his own names for me. A few of his favorites were: Jew Boy, Jew Bastard, Little Cocksucker, Stupid Fuck, Retard, Hey You, You, or Just Get Over Here. When he was in a creative mood, he was able to put them together in different combinations.

That day when I was passing the kitchen, Harold made a complete sentence, "Excuse me. You, yes you. Would you please come over here. Do you always walk like that? Get your hands out of your pockets. A gentleman never puts his hands in his pockets. It makes you look more stupid than you already are, if that's possible. You're not listening, are you?"

Harold's thick hands, not made of flesh and blood but of cold steel, clamped around my ankle. Harold's evil heart burned into my leg, treating me as a sub-species in his laboratory, to experiment on as he pleased. He twisted my foot around to where it

couldn't be twisted, and with the heel towards my face, showed me the bottom of my shoe.

I thought I wasn't aware of anything else, only Harold inflicting his pain on me. But the smells in the kitchen penetrated and imprinted themselves into my soul. The combination of soured beer and the cold, greasy fat of roast beef will always remind me of the putrid flavor of vomit. Many years later, anything having that certain odor triggers that memory. And for a few seconds I relive that day in the kitchen and the feelings I had suppressed so well.

Sticky paste pulled at Harold's lips, "You see? Look at this. I said look at this!" He twisted my foot another inch, almost to the point of snapping my ankle bone in two. "Your heel is all worn on one side. No wonder you wear out your shoes so quickly. You don't know how to walk properly." The stabbing pain and my stubborn refusal to scream, backed up into my stomach. A little longer, and I would have thrown up. Thank God he decided to let go.

Harold took off one of his shoes. "See?" He stuck its sole into my face. He made me feel like a dog, rubbing my nose into his shit. "See how evenly my shoe is worn?" My eyes wobbled in unfocused circles, trying to follow the alcohol fuzz that governed the movement of his shoe. "You just don't know how to walk properly." Harold proceeded to demonstrate. "You're supposed to walk evenly, like so." He shuffled flat on his feet. "Ok, my little Stupid Jew Bastard, now you try it."

I might have been stupid, but I knew something Harold didn't know. A secret underworld of tunnels that traveled beneath our building, right under Harold's evenly worn shoes. "Are you listening to me?" Nodding my head up and down. "Then what did I say?" I didn't know and didn't care. There was no point in answering because I'd always lose.

What a time for my nervous tick to flare up – an affliction that plagued me for many years. There was an overwhelming emptiness in the right side of my neck that demanded to be filled. I'd tense the tendons in my neck into thin, taut steel rods, pulling my face and neck together. I'd scrunch my head and grind it against and across my right shoulder... forward...pushing out...screwing up my face and stretching my features in frenzied twitches.

At first Harold stood there stunned and watched my spasmic performance. He then took a step back. "Look at you...a fucking Crippled Retard. Are you finished? Now stop that shit and do what I told you to do." With my face in involuntary muscle spasms, I tried my best to do what he told me to do. I made my feet move in off-balanced, hesitating leaps, stumbling from one leg to the other.

After awhile I was able to create some form of rhythm. But I still looked like a convulsive clown in over-sized shoes, flopping with each step. "What the fuck are you doing? Are you trying to be funny?" Harold lumbered toward me with loathing and contempt in his eyes.

I turned and started for the front door. Harold realized I had an avenue of escape and wildly swung his foot at me. It swooshed into space like a drunken ballerina. He caught me on his second try with the full force of his anger, right on the tip of my coccyx. "Ha! Gotcha, you Little Shit." An electrical buzz sizzled up my spine, gathering into a knot and lodged in my chest. I doubled up in pain, and lost control of my body. My throat closed and my lungs refused to take in air, as I stumbled out of the front door and into the hall of the building, down onto the cold tile floor.

I desperately sucked at the air, getting only quick, rasping gasps of suffocation. Refusing to succumb to the idea that I was going to die, and realizing that breathing in only made things worse, I began to breathe out. In return I was rewarded with small gulps of air, enabling me to breath again.

Between each flight of stairs were windows facing the alleyway. From one of these windows, a sluggish light streamed into the hall, smothered by the coming of the night. Harold stood over me in washed out tones of pasty grays, glaring with self-satisfaction. He was on the verge of kicking me again when, like a flash of lightning, two arms slashed through the dark shadow, pinning Harold to a wall. A seething storm spoke in a deep whisper, riding the thick gloom into Harold's face, "I've fought a war against people like you. Do you know what it's like to kill another human being? Face to face and with your own bare hands? No, you wouldn't, would you? Well I have. Many times. I'm not fucking with you. I'm warning you. Leave the boy alone."

The brilliant and powerful Harold, who verbally and physically attacked women and children, practically shit in his pants. He answered in a strained, barely audible voice, "I won't touch him."

"I didn't hear you."

Harold, shaking and pleading... "I promise, I won't touch him again." A dimming light reflected off two scarred hands, releasing their prisoner.

The brave Harold ran back into our apartment and screamed out from behind locked doors... "You Fuckin' Jew Lover! If I catch that scarred freak in the streets, I'll kill that Mother-Fuckin' Son of a Bitch." Harold had to prove he was a man, to himself and to me. And he was still someone to fear. Satisfied with his brief, boisterous bluff, Harold turned from the door and staggered down our long hall. With each step pounding on the linoleum floor, in a drunken stupor he disappeared into the living room. For the rest of the night Harold drowned himself into an alcoholic oblivion, passing out on the living room floor.

Sitting up against the hall wall, still in the process of breathing normally again, I heard the door next to ours gently closing. I never saw the Melted Man again. He vanished from my life and the neighborhood.

This collision with the Melted Man never did change Harold and he continued his brutal attacks. But seeing Harold cower changed me. This was my wake-up call. It left a germ of hope that people like Harold, a man of lies and contradictions, was not the reality of my self worth. He was only one of those self important bullies who bullshit their way through life, building themselves up by tearing others down. This seed that was planted inside me would someday awaken and grow.

* * *

“And now, on to Dick Colmer as Boston Blackie—
Enemy to those who make him an enemy. Friend
to those who have no friends...”

A flurry of organ music built and then trickled down. The theme music for each radio show had its own uniqueness. And whenever I heard it, it awakened in me another world, inviting me to join in the adventure.

My mom interrupted the radio show. She stood in my doorway drinking a glass of tea, holding the glass with her thumb on the top rim, with two fingers on the thick bottom. She put a cube of sugar in her mouth. The tea and her voice filtered through the lump of sugar, “Vats da matter, my Sollinue? You not feelin’ goodt?”

My body betrayed me with shivers from a sudden chill. Thinking I had a fever, my Mom touched my forehead with the back of her hand. Her hands took charge, strong and soft. She double-checked by pulling back my T-shirt and touching my stomach with her lips. Held-in tears broke loose and seeped through and down my cheeks.

“You got no fever. Vat’s wrong, Tottala? Hmmm, you must be overtired from playing in dis heat.” She kissed my forehead – I’m engulfed in the perfume of her skin.

When the light and the door were closed, I was left alone – but not for long. Every night until I was sixteen years old, when the lights were out, I had a visitor. Most children had imaginary friends to protect them. I had an old woman with a kitchen knife, standing above my bed, waiting...waiting for me to move. This would be her signal to plunge the kitchen knife, held by her thin, stringy arm, deep into my chest.

My only protection was to cover myself completely with my blanket and breathe without making a sound, or moving a muscle. After awhile, I would deplete the oxygen under my blanket, re-breathing and drowning in the hot stale air. Right under the old witch's unsuspecting eyes, I slowly created a tiny opening in my blanket for my nose.

A gush of fresh air swept into my blanket and, like a cool sheet of silk, brushed across my chest. The sudden rush of air put out the fire in my lungs. Still too terrified to move, I lay motionless, praying my tick would not appear and betray me. There was no way I'd ever sleep again.

Sliding through a dense fog that begins to scatter...from the clearing comes the sound of a muffled puff and fluttering roar of the gas burner. Fragmented voices from the kitchen lead me into a new day. And then it all starts again.

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E-mail: rothmanstudios@earthlink.net