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Bronx Tales

“Hello darkness, my old friend / I’ve come to talk with you again / Because a vision softly creeping / Left its seeds while I was sleeping...”

Simon & Garfunkel – *The Sound of Silence* (1965)

If Bronx moxie exists – inherited by the rights of sonship or bestowed by the streets themselves – it was mine for the taking at just five years old.

Alone in a back bedroom of our Sedgwick Avenue apartment, I was cutting pictures from an old *Life* magazine – a game my mother invented because I was bored. An old radio sat plugged into a wall socket nearby on the floor. I looked from the metal child-sized scissors in my hands and to the wire snaking from the radio.

Whether precocious stupidity or innocent bravado, I thought it *possible* – to be smarter or faster or just stronger than the current. Pulling the radio wire between the scissor blades, I let the choice balance itself in my mind for a moment.

Then I cut. *Fade fast to black.*

The explosive pop of electricity was a thunderbolt within the temporary blindness. When my eyes regained clarity, I was splayed out several feet from where I sat, the air blanched with the burnt aroma of melted electrical cord and, unbeknownst to me, my singed and smoking dirty

blonde hair. I looked at the scissors, still attached to my right fingers, a small triangular wedge blown out from one blade. My first thought as I heard the panicked footsteps of my mother coming from the hallway was, “*No bright light, no Jesus.*”

Quickly, I threw the scissors from my hand and underneath a nearby dresser.

“What happened?” she cried out once into the room.

Inside my heart pulsed quickly, somehow resuscitated from the moment it stopped.

“*Nothing,*” I said, creating my first lie and believing it as I began to cry.

“The saddest thing in life is wasted talent.”

Robert DeNiro as Lorenzo the bus driver in “*A Bronx Tale*”

As the youngest of six children, I was only as valuable as the paper my stock was printed on.

My father, Michael, parlayed his survival through World War II into a marriage with my mother, Rita. His parents – immigrants from Poland who joined the exodus of cultures passing through Ellis Island – brought forth their only son along with two daughters into the first generation of the American dream. Her parents – from German/Irish lineage, much like *consigliere* Tom Hagen from “*The Godfather*” – abandoned her as a small child in New York to be adopted and raised by strangers who became family.

Before my birth came three older brothers and two older sisters. The fifth floor walk-up on Sedgwick (one of the longest and busiest thoroughfares in the West Bronx) became home for eight – living room, kitchen, three bedrooms, one bath, steam radiators for heat and window air conditioners for cool, along with a dumbwaiter for trash. The oldest brother occupied a small

vestibule area off the entrance door; parents had the largest bedroom; the other two brothers and sisters each shared a room. The only room orphan, I usually began my nightly sleep on the fold-out living room couch. Roused from sleep and shepherded by my mother into father's bed once he left for his late night bus shift, she would take her rest overnight in the living room.

It was then the shadows would come alive – and give birth to my fear.

As a small boy, I loved watching the Universal Pictures black and white horror films on television – those classic portrayals of Dracula, Frankenstein, the Wolfman and Mummy. My mother couldn't understand my fascination; I wasn't sure myself.

“They'll give you *nightmares*,” she would lovingly warn.

And nightmares I had – the kind where I would try to scream inside the dream but nothing would pierce the terrors. Many times I sensed a half-lucidity while trying to escape the sleep, a small night light in my parents' bedroom casting a dread, yellow glow to what seemed to be large shadowy figures standing over me. On more than one occasion, I pissed the bed in fright. Once fully awake, paralyzed in body, my throat would let free blood-curdling screams for help and rescue.

Mom came, soothed, and comforted me back to sleep – yet sometimes I knew she was angry at having to change the sheets and my pajama bottoms, as if the smell of my urine would somehow translate into a weakness my father's nostrils would sniff out once home.

“*Wait 'till your father gets home,*” was a threat she used effectively and one he carried out with violent efficiency – be it with hands or belt. She, too, could turn a thrashing hand into the face, hands, or behind of any of us to prove her point or teach a lesson. In those days it wasn't called “abuse” but merely “good parenting,” tacitly approved by Dr. Spock and the way of the world my father and mother came from.

Even the Catholic priests and nuns at St. Nicholas of Tolentine Catholic School gave their blessings – and added their own brutalities.

Having survived the rites of passage known as kindergarten at P.S. 122 in the Marble Hills section of The Bronx, I followed in the footsteps of my older siblings down University Avenue and was sentenced to elementary school at Tolentine. White shirt, blue pants, clip on tie, dark socks and shoes were the required uniform of the parochial school attached to Tolentine Church, known as “The Cathedral of The Bronx.”

In those days, there was an unwritten contract between the families and the staff, making them an extension of the discipline that came within what should have been safe boundaries: home and school.

As the youngest member to attend Tolentine, I came with the baggage of my older brothers and sister (for some reason, the sister closest to me in age was schooled in another parochial institution closer to our apartment). My elementary, yet sharp, mind couldn't chalk it up to their scholastic achievements but more so their behaviors. Something in my bones and balls said, *“Pay attention – this is the real lesson to be learned.”*

And so I became an observer, a scout of human behavior, a chameleon of the geographies I was forced to navigate.

Acceptance and love became twisted at their root with pretense and survival. Come my entrance into 3rd grade at Tolentine, I abruptly realized that the religious figure of authority – the nun who had charge of our class – was a full on abuser, a cunt wearing a cross, and wielding such weapons of violence as a steel-edged ruler, a map pointer or her bare hands with which to inflict pain upon children.

At eight years old, I was beginning to realize my eyesight was poor – squinting, no matter where I sat in class, was my only chance of seeing the lessons chalked onto the blackboards in our classroom. That didn't matter to Sr. Mary Jane Frances – her snarling, rotund, and usually sweating face swathed in the black and white coif, wimple, and veil that I wanted to choke the living shit out of her with.

She quickly fell to ridiculing me, thrusting her map pointer out to call me out in front of my classmates when I would have trouble seeing what she had chalked on the blackboard. Screwing her pasty features up in a mock squinting behind her own glasses, she would ask, “Can't your parents afford to buy you glasses?”

Her humiliation would elicit nervous laughter from some other students, my face glowing with a mixture of uncontrollable shame and a roiling anger that made my entire body tremble with latent violence. Mortified and paralyzed, she would sometimes make the class sit in silence until I tried to read what I couldn't see. If I made one mistake, she would then punish the rest of the class with some draconian fucking assignment – more shit shoveled into my lap and braced with the low, murmured grumblings of the others.

The funny thing is I never cried at the embarrassment, nor did I ever confess it to my mother (such truths were never even considered being brought to the attention of my father). For the rest of my 3rd grade year under her abusive tutelage, I just ate the shit sandwich on a daily basis – outlasting her until she stopped even calling on me for any input in our studies.

Feelings of abandonment began to come full circle, the oval of loneliness tightening its circumference around my heart. Whether at the unpredictable battleground of home or the religious purgatory of school, my imagination began to be something – *someone* – that became safer than anyone else to trust.

“Imagination is the only weapon in the war against reality.”

Lewis Carroll from “*Alice in Wonderland*”

For some reason, my getting a red tricycle when I was years younger than the brutality inflicted at Tolentine sent my older brothers and sisters into some manifestation of jealousy. It confused me so I asked my mother about it, why they seemed so angry.

“They never *had* one,” she frankly admitted. Oddly, I didn’t feel special – it would be years later that I learned the word *vindicated* and what such a feeling bestowed. I knew the black-hearted envy I felt whenever one of their birthdays were celebrated – cake and candles, presents and gifts of money from close relatives. *Attention spent on someone other than me.*

So a part of me – during that horrendous year of not feeling as if there were anyplace to feel *safe* –began to cull my imagination, fueled by all of those sojourns into the pages of reading. My mother would take me to the public library and I would come home with more than an armful of books, fiction and history, stories of dinosaurs and the origins of electricity, and always a new biography. Most were within my age range but many were quite far ahead, searching for something more.

Whatever I was reading – from our old encyclopedias to a paperback dictionary I had for school, to *The Hardy Boy* mysteries and the Sunday funnies in the *Daily News* – I began to be fascinated and captivated by stories. Soon enough, it gravitated deeper into a fascination with music, television shows, and films. One day my mother sat me down in front of the television and said, “You’re going to *love* this movie.”

The Jets. The Sharks. The streets of New York City. Whites and Puerto Ricans, youth gangs and policemen, love and hate, life and death. The music and...*the story*. It won the Best

Picture Academy Award the year of my birth, but to a young boy in the 1970's Bronx it was a license to dream, an invitation for my imagination to shield me from all of the war my heart had survived over such a few short years.

When it came to music, Sgt. Pepper had truly taught the band to play – and the Beatles were just a strand of the creative DNA that began to coalesce in my spirit. In our large family, I would hear my father play his Johnny Cash or Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass records. My mother still swooned over Sinatra on vinyl as she did in real life at the Paramount and Strand theatres, or would do housework to the strains of old Tony Bennett or Judy Garland records. Down the line of my brothers and sisters, it could bounce from the Rolling Stones to Cat Stevens or Simon and Garfunkel, into Cream, Jimi Hendrix or Yes, and from Creedence Clearwater Revival, Chicago, the Carpenters, John Denver and the Jackson Five. My best friend – that transistor radio and single bud earphone – was never far away, tuned into Cousin Brucie on WABC 770AM after dinner and until it bedtime.

From the influence of movies – whether on the big screen or TV – I imagined being swept up into the realms of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* or the *Planet of the Apes*, maybe joining Gregory Peck and the gang blowing up *The Guns of Navarone* or chasing wild with *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. I was absolutely in love with any and all of The Marx Brothers movies and adored Laurel and Hardy along with The Little Rascals shorts. I can still recall the thrill of sneaking from bed one night to silently crawl into a dark corner of the living room late one night while my mother was watching *Bonnie and Clyde* – and being stirred the glamour of the outlaws on the run amidst the Arthur Penn tableau of sex and violence.

Even on the many television channels available, I could dream about being a friend of *The Monkees* or riding through the dangerous desert terrains with *The Rat Patrol*. As a young

boy, I imagined joining *The F.B.I.* and solving major cases or riding shotgun with *Adam-12*. Decades before Andy Sipowicz there was *N.Y.P.D.* or *Mannix* to mainline my fix for cops and detective stories, or *Lost in Space* and *Land of the Giants* to satisfy my science fiction curiosity. And, yes, of course – I fell oceans deep for and actually suffered heartbreak when my first love married her master on *I Dream of Jeanie*. And in honor of my own Bronx moxie, I was one of *The Bowery Boys*, ready to break into “Routine 7” at the drop of a hat.

All this and more began to speak to my heart in the language of *love* – something that, at times, was hard to come by no matter how hard I wished or wanted. It would take decades of life ahead to be able to look into the rearview mirror of my own story to unearth the treasured joys of boyhood in The Bronx and how – no matter how dysfunctional and dangerous they all were – the people around me bound by blood were still, after all, *la mia famiglia*.

“I’m just a kid from The Bronx who got lucky.”

Ace Frehley, original lead guitarist for *KISS*

In the scheme of things and in relation to my family of origin’s line, I came last – the youngest, *the baby of the brood*.

The logistical reality of cramming eight people into a Bronx apartment was more than enough to put stress and strain into the mix. Memories of my parents and their vicious fighting with each other was about money or just the explosive anger of my father coming out sideways unfairly colors the negatives of my mind’s movies. In those stories of boyhood, I have to dig through some tough and rocky soil to harvest those memories that can still bring the fruit of a smile to my face and a wine-like warmth to my heart.

There was a candy store on nearby Kingsbridge Road that my mother would usually take me to after dragging me through Alexander's department store up on Fordham Road for what seemed like – and usually was for – hours at a time.

It not only offered candy but hawked newspapers and magazines, smokes and cigars, hot dogs, coffee and sandwiches and had a long counter with circular metal and plastic cushioned swivel stools. Whenever we had the chance to go there, my request once seated and swiveling to my delight was always the same.

"I want an egg cream, please," I'd tell the counter man. "I've been good today." My mother would always slip me a dollar before we entered so to give me the pleasure of paying for myself.

The store owner, with a slap of a worn and wet counter towel over his shoulder, would give me a grin before responding, "Comin' right up, mister!"

A New York egg cream is not just a cold beverage (and one that made a hot summer's Bronx day that much more enjoyable) – nor does it contain either eggs or cream. It's milk, seltzer water, and chocolate syrup mixed in a glass, stirred lightly, and best enjoyed immediately before the head goes bye-bye and the taste goes flat. The feelings it left languishing on my taste buds and a delicious after-fizz in my stomach now seem ethereal, too innocent to be real.

And being the youngest also had its privileges with my father as well.

Most every Sunday morning he would return to our Sedgwick Avenue apartment in his bus driver's uniform carry two precious treasures in his hands – the bulging copy of the Sunday *Daily News* (which included the extended, full-color edition of the Sunday comics) as well as a bag full of New York Black and White cookies. *And I had the rights of sonship, as the youngest, to first dibs on both.*

Those comics took my eyes and laughter into the illustrated stories of *Dick Tracy* and *Dondi*, *Little Orphan Annie* and *Blondie*, *Beetle Bailey* and *Brenda Starr*, *Mary Perkins On Stage* and *Tales of the Green Beret*, *Lil Abner* and *Junior Jumbles* and so much more.

With a glass of cold milk and my fingers waiting to be smeared with the colorful printer's ink, my father would give me the privilege of dipping into the dozen Black and White cookies he had brought home fresh from the bakery on his way home.

These confectionary delights were full moon shaped yellow cake-like cookies with a hint of lemon flavor, iced with half-vanilla and half-chocolate fondant. It posed a daunting question to such a young boy's inquisitive mind: "*Which half to bite into first?*" Either way, it was a delicious decision.

Sunday's would also normally bring about most of us (with the regular absence of either my oldest brother, Mickey, or sister, Nancy) piling into the family station wagon for a short drive from The Bronx, over the George Washington Bridge and into New Jersey for a day and dinner at my paternal grandmother's house on Bergen Boulevard in the enclave of North Bergen.

Blanche ("Granny" or "*Grandma*" to any or all of us) was the Polish immigrant mother of my father – a sweet and loving, rotund and always cooking type of joy woman, welcoming the ramble of grandchildren into the back door of the house and through the kitchen which always greeted me with the aromas of her incredible dishes prepared for our Sunday feast.

My father's two sisters – Aunt Dottie and Joanie – also lived there, along with Dotty's two sons, my cousins Billy and Jimmy. When my oldest brother would join us, he would invariably find his way down to the basement enclave of my cousins – they were all the same age and shared numerous loves of music, drugs, women and booze together in their early 20's life.

Once inside Granny's kitchen, I would often and alternately cherish and try to escape her smothering hugs and kisses as her youngest grandchild – but she also knew that I loved getting a piece or two of black licorice she had secreted in one of her kitchen cabinets which was always given in love to me with the warning, *“Now that's it – don't spoil you dinner and don't tell anyone.”*

In my young life and story, this was an outpost of love and safety – my paternal grandfather (“Pops” or “*Grandpa*” to us) had died when I was a very small boy; Aunt Dottie had divorced from my Uncle Jimmy, her sister, Joanie, had never married. My only memories of Pops at the house in North Bergen were of sitting on the back steps with him, climbing onto his lap, my boyish hands rubbing the stubble covering the cheeks and chin of his strong Polish face. In that sparse recollection, he is always smiling and cooing in my ear, my fingers constantly trying to grab at the black plastic comb or pack of Camel cigarettes in the pocket of his white dress shirt.

He would pull the comb out, run it through my hair, let me do the same to him, and he would cackle with laughter saying that we were *“...looking good.”* Little did I realize or know that I would inherit his thick, lustrous head of hair, part of a legacy that keeps me bound to him even though I have little else to know about him.



“One of these days...One of these days...POW! Right in the kisser!”

Jackie Gleason as bus driver Ralph Kramden in *The Honeymooners*

I'm not saying that my father was a caricature of Ralph Kramden or vice-versa, but as a young boy watching black and white reruns of *The Honeymooners* on television, I couldn't help

but notice the similarities of character. Even my mother, confidentially, would sometimes confess that she had “...*married Ralph Kramden.*”

The idyllic respite of Grandma’s house in Jersey was immediately punctuated by the cold realities of Monday mornings, a return to Tolentine, the abuses of Sr. Mary Jane Frances, and the adventures of riding the MaBSTOA (Manhattan and Bronx Surface Transit Operating Authority) bus lines to and from school.

There were times my father pulled the route down Kingsbridge Road that would take us to Tolentine on University Avenue. It was in those days of Bronx boyhood he pulled me aside and taught me what he called “...*a life lesson.*”

“Listen, son,” he said, “it’s not just a bus you’re trying to catch. This is about *life.*” He put a hand on my shoulder. “Always be at the bus stop *before* the driver gets there. And that’s gonna apply to a lot more in life than you think.”

One day, while rushing out of the apartment on Sedgwick late with two of my older brothers, he enforced this lesson in a way I’ve never forgotten.

As soon as we were on the sidewalk and taking off on a full-speed run across Sedgwick Avenue and heading towards the bus stop at the corner of Kingsbridge Road next to the Veteran’s Hospital, I caught sight of the bus slowing down. It’s doors opened, and I could see the image of my father waving at us. At first, I was gleeful to realize that he was *waving to us*, his sons, to come on. He had us.

His wave stopped, he closed the doors of the bus, and drove on to meet his schedule, leaving us to wait for the next bus, be late for school, and deal with the consequences. It was the period at the end of his *life lesson* sentence – and to this day, if at all under my power, I’ve never been late for anything I was committed to or responsible for attending.

In his twenty-five years of driving for MaBSTOA, he would usually come home to our Bronx apartment in the middle of the night while on break. It was in those quiet hours of the night, while asleep on the living room couch while my mother rested in her husband's bed, that I would hear the door unlock and know that Dad was home.

Taking our family dog, a mutt named Skippy (due to his peanut butter colored coat), for a quick walk, he would come back inside and most likely find me wobbling through sleep and into the kitchen, which he would leave dark with the exception of a small night light my mother would leave on. It was there and then he introduced me to a ritual I have continued to this day – having a glass of cold milk and some cookies, then going back to bed.

When I first discovered him doing this, he didn't scold me – he simply said for me to be quiet, not wake anyone, and he pulled out another chair at our kitchen table and invited me to join him. It wasn't a time for talking or discussion – it was simply a moment between a father and his youngest son, both enjoying something other than the milk and cookies, a shared bond that connected us because it was *ours and no one else's*.

I was a boy of maybe six or seven when, on vacation from school, I was given the golden opportunity to go to work with my father for his night shift. In preparation, my mother had me napping most of the day and she even packed a sack lunch for me as she did for him.

It was an adventure – riding with my father in the car, stopping at *White Castle* for hot chocolate, and arriving at the cavernous bus barn. Inside it was a scary and overwhelming smell of bus diesel fuel, musty air, and noises I couldn't decipher.

Yet there was also a thrilling frontier to find myself in, standing in front of row upon row of silent and empty buses waiting to be driven into the city streets, helping people get where they needed to go. And my father was one of those heroes who drove them.

I remember him bringing me into the dispatcher's office, getting his routes and schedules together, gathering up handfuls of the paper bus transfers they used, glad handing and joking noisily with the other uniformed bus drivers standing around.

One of them tousled my hair and said, "Hey, Mike, who's this?" He winked at me. "Little too short to reach the pedals, isn't he?"

My father's strong and protective arm came around my shoulder and rested there.

"This is *my boy*," he said. "Johnny can drive with the best of 'em."

A father's blessing. The other men, all towering over me, came around and patted me on the shoulder, offering their worn and work-weathered hands to shake mine, giving me some rough but playful slaps on the cheek.

It was my first initiation into a circle of men.

"We all used to collect baseball cards that came with bubble gum. You could never get the smell of gum off your cards, but you kept your Yankees cards pristine."

Penny Marshall, Actress & Bronx Girl

Being the youngest of six – and having three older brothers – I tended to inherit a lot of things. Unwanted heirlooms to some, hand-me-downs to others. But one of the treasures of childhood was the vast collection of baseball cards I took ownership of once Mickey, Jeff, and Tim no longer wanted their collections, discarding them for the pursuit of girls, rock 'n' roll, and football cards.

By the age of eight, I was also into collecting cards from *The Monkees* and *The Partridge Family* too – but that's because I had a wicked crush on Shirley Jones. But the thrill of buying a

new pack of baseball cards was almost like going to the dope man's house and scoring some good shit. I mean, anywhere from a dime or fifteen cents and man, that *smell* when tearing open the pack and my mouth already drooling for that pink, rectangular slab of bubble gum.

The dopamine rush bounced inside my head as I would slowly look from card to card, shuffling one behind the other as I chewed, cursing when I found more than one repeat from a player I already knew was in my card box at home or whooping with joy when someone I really wanted came into sight.

Now, as a Bronx boy, I knew that pinstripe blue ran in my veins. Even though it was a short three-mile route from Sedgwick to East 161st Street and Yankee Stadium, it wasn't a place my father would take me to. Sure, watching the games on television was always a big deal – for me those players were larger than life. Whitey Ford, Mel Stottlemyre, Horace Clarke, Mickey Mantle, Gene Michael, Tom Tresh, Joe Pepitone, Roy White, Thurman Munson, Bobby Murcer, and Ron Swaboda were the heroes of the House That Ruth Built in my boyhood.

And all I got from my father were tales of how many games he went to in person, somehow expected to live vicariously through his euphoric recall. My first baseball game I ever went to with him was a New York Mets meeting with the old Washington Senators at Shea Stadium, the tickets one through a contest with a local Chicken Delight franchise. I remember having a good time but somewhere in my heart wishing we were at a Yankees game.

Of course, as a boy, I also knew the pleasures of owning a Spaldeen and begging my older brothers to include me in their stickball games out in the middle of Sedgwick Avenue. For the uninitiated, the pink, high-bounce rubber ball (branded by the Spalding company but tagged with the New York-ese moniker of *Spaldeen* for eternity) was the joy of any boy and the terror of most parents – whether screaming at me to “...*stop bouncing that goddamn ball in the house...*”

or my mother's terror-filled thoughts of one of us getting clipped by a car out in the street while involved in one of the neighborhood stickball games.

Shit, it was dangerous when home plate and second base were manhole covers and first and third base were the fenders of parked cars. Hilarity and the occasional barrage of curses from frustrated drivers always ensued when a car approached from either direction and over a dozen kids refused to give ground or stop play to let them pass. It's actually where I learned to fly the bird with the best of them, giving it back to the drivers even if I was watching from the sidewalk.

Knowing my mother would have killed me if I ever got hurt in the street was one thing – or to hear the dreaded words of, “*Wait ‘till your father gets home*” as a threat to a beating that would have been worse than any injuries I might have received outside of the care of my brothers.

Yet even in those formative years before New York City became teeming with dangers of its own, the specter of death and the realities of loss were not hidden from even my boyhood imagination or heart.

“You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you.
Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.”

Matthew 5:4, *The Message*

During those first nine years of life growing up in The Bronx, the light of life met the shadows of death in many different shades of grey.

It was the deaths of two of our family's most treasured aunts – Rita and Edna – that introduced me to the sounds of grief, the tales of life celebrated, and the surrealistic dramas of

funeral parlors scaring the shit out of me for no good reason other than the creep factor of seeing a dead body up close and personal.

The memory outlines for Aunt Rita's funeral are fuzzy, reminiscent of some of the plethora of home movies she was the auteur brilliance behind. My mother was always screening them for either her enjoyment or as some sort of cinematic punishment towards the rest of us, celluloid reminders of how young and beautiful my parents used to be post-WWII or how darling my brothers and sisters – and me – were in the jump cut 8mm features.

It was Aunt Edna's illness and passing, followed by the funeral, that brought death into my young heart's vocabulary. I remember her becoming very sick and in her last days playing an impromptu two-on-one touch football game with my brothers at night outside the hospital where she died. I remember crying the day my mother sat us down after coming home to tell us she had died, something about the sadness in her own eyes and voice overcoming a counterintuitive feeling inside to think how gruff, brusque, and mean Aunt Edna could sometimes be.

Of course, then there was the funeral parlor and seeing her lifeless body embalmed into a frozen tableau of style and grace. When my mother tried to get me to come with her and pray at the side of the casket, I remember feeling an urge to piss my pants and pass out at the same time.

"That's a dead fucking body," I recall thinking. *"You go. I'll wait here."*

And, yet, I was fascinated by her laying there, the slight horizontal silhouette of her face and body visible from where I was frozen in my seat in the back of the viewing parlor. The whole experience – from the décor to the lighting to the barely audible organ music playing on a speaker system, to the almost imperceptible fragrance of formaldehyde and the hovering solemnity of the funeral director converged to not only overwhelm my senses but also to somehow comically witness the portrayals of grief in action.

And it made me think about God, a childlike comprehension in a mind trying to assimilate the sacred and profane.

In our large Polish clan, there was no reading of the Bible. Church on Sunday's was, of course, part of the Catholic upbringing and social circles. Of course, the major events – Easter, Christmas, the assorted family christenings or someone getting married within the family line warranted getting on the monkey suit and usually ending up at a brunch somewhere at a relative's home or apartment.

Somewhere along the way during those first school years at Tolentine, I received a gift of *The Children's Bible*. Illustrated and easy-to-read, this scriptural tome fascinated me with all the *stories* of both the Old and New Testaments. In those early Bronx years, it was absolutely a favorite of mine to read and reread the tales, be entranced and captivated by the pictures, and begin to think about what and who God was like.

True – it was a far fucking cry from the parochial beatings I took and the religious theatre of attending mass at Tolentine Church. It was also my first love affair with paradox – a boy on the cusp of his First Holy Communion and already awakened in heart and soul to the cruelties of the world, the flesh, and the evil behind both.

“It was interesting to think that the very first liquid ever poured on the Moon, and the first food eaten there, were communion elements.”

Edwin “Buzz” Aldrin, Jr. – Astronaut from *Apollo 11*

Armstrong, Aldrin, and Collins slipped the surly bonds of Earth on my seventh birthday – July 16, 1969 – and were literally on their way...*POW! Straight to the Moon!!* To me, the whole series of events were permission to dream, escape my life, and fly far, far away with all of them.

As a boy, I was just one of hundreds of millions across the globe who watched all of this heroic mission unfold on television – but it was the cinematic story unfolding in the hearts and minds of an entire nation that swept me into the atmospheres of my own budding imagination.

Four days later – on the evening of July 20th – I remember our family (sans father, who was out driving his bus route) being huddled around our television set, watching the haunting and transfixing images of the lunar landing of the *Eagle* and soon followed by the eerie yet amazing images of Neil Armstrong’s space-suited figure climb down.

Those words became ever etched into my memory:

“That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.”

And it reminded me of my First Holy Communion, just a few short months in the rearview mirror of my story. *It was my first big secret, one I swore would go to the grave.*

The elements. The Body and Blood of Christ. Serious shit, even for a seven year old who was both fascinated with the theatre of religion and the underlying spiritual paradox of sin. *God is all – and God sees all, right?*

It goes without saying that the rites of First Holy Communion were taken rather seriously by the priests and nuns at Tolentine. Having watched all of the home movies filmed by Aunt Rita of my brothers and sisters celebrating their days of Catholic honor (along with many of my cousins, too), I felt an indescribable pressure the day I was ushered into Tolentine Church through an adjacent hallway connected to the school by my father. Oh, yeah – *I was late getting there.*

For weeks before, we were run through the training drills – how to walk, what to do, where and when to kneel, how to pray, and especially how to reverentially accept the Eucharist on our extended tongue (and how not to fuck up and accidentally drop it).

Even though we were just a few minutes behind the expected arrival time – and as my father raced me into the school and handed me over to one of the nuns helping our second grade class through the ceremony – I received the icy death stare of the cloaked penguin that made my yet to be brass balls melt into a puddle of shame and fear inside my briefs.

Inside the church, I made my way to one of the final pews reserved for my school mates. Some looked at me with a wry smile on their face, maybe figuring I was doing this on purpose. Others wouldn't dare raise their heads or turn and gawk out of fear that God would strike them with a lightning bolt inside the Cathedral of the Bronx or one of the nuns would corner them later in a fit of rage.

With family and friends of all of us cherubic second grader's in attendance, the ceremony went forward. And when the time came for us to file from the hard, wooden pews and into the main aisle of Tolentine to begin the holy march towards the altar and the awaiting priest, I felt...well, *nothing*. I was near the end of the line, shuffling along – the boys on one side, the girls on the other, all dressed up with just one place to go.

At the altar, we took our places and knelt as the priest and older altar boys came down the line. As practiced, the priest would solemnly remove the communion wafer from the golden chalice while the altar boy would hold the communion plate under our open mouth and tongue to make the saving catch in case of error.

As the sights of Tolentine's majestic, vaulted ceilings, grand statues of Jesus and Mother Mary, and beautiful stained glass windows surrounded me, the smell of incense filling my nostrils, it came my turn. The priest brought the Eucharist out and towards my dangling tongue with the words, "...*the body of Christ.*" My voice was small but sure in its responding "*Amen.*"

And just like the *Eagle* on the Moon months from then, the communion wafer landed successfully. I rose from my knees, and walked with my head bowed and hands prayerfully interlocked back to my seat in the pew. As practiced, I knelt and began to pray. The Eucharist began to lightly dissolve on my tongue.

This doesn't taste good – no, not at all.

As in any live-fire exercise, in the heat of battle, some decisions are truly split-second. I thought about, realistically, chewing on what seemed to be a piece of thin cardboard in my mouth and instinctively began to gag but didn't cough. As my head was bowed in prayer, I surreptitiously glanced to my left and right – no one was looking.

I barely opened my mouth and nudged the soggy communion wafer off the tip of my tongue with my top teeth, watching it tumble and take flight towards the floor of Tolentine, perfectly arching in motion and landing well under the pew in front of me.

One small sin for boy, one giant sin against Godkind.

Per the family ritual, there was a gathering at our Sedgwick apartment afterwards. Good food, communion cards with money enclosed (I remember the joy of smelling the green fives, tens, and twenty's that were like treasure inside), and the impression I had gotten away with murder lurking deep in a hidden room of my heart.

For decades afterwards, I often thought of the Tolentine custodian who cleaned up after the ceremony that day.

Aghast by the discovery, perhaps he pocketed the hardened wafer in his trembling hand like a lucky gold doubloon found on the Bronx sidewalk, thinking anyone so bold to leave one of these behind was truly blessed and lucky to still be above ground and walking without crutches. He was a man of honor because he never said a word to anyone about it.

“Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty.”

Mother Teresa

The feeling would never quite leave me or go into exile – *in the midst of a family or the middle of a world beyond it, I always felt alone and lonely.*

By the age of nine, the early 1970’s New York City in general – and the streets of The Bronx in particular – began to deteriorate under the growing specters of rampant crime, violence, massive debt, uncertain political leadership, garbage everywhere and just a few short years away from the well-earned and warned slogan of “*Welcome to Fear City.*”

My parents decided it was time to move. Being the youngest, my vote didn’t count. And I don’t know the why or how of it all, but their decision was to buy a house in a small village located in Greene County, about two hours north of New York City. My father would still work his bus driver job for over a year, living in the city with a friend and commuting to our new home on the weekends.

As relocation loomed, I was helping my mother one day gather and pack various items of our family into cardboard boxes well ahead of the move. I found a stack of baby books that she had lovingly put together for each of us. Mine had a soft yellow cover with an image of an angelic baby boy’s face and a soft little lamb.

Opening the cover, I began to flip through the pages listing important historical dates of my story, some pictures Scotch-taped into various blank pages with outlined picture frames, and pages inviting stories to be told and events of importance to be memorialized.

Soon after the initial pages, my fingers began to turn page after page of what was supposed to be my story.

The pages were blank. No words, no pictures. Nothing.

Growing wise beyond my Bronx years yet still curious in my own innocence, I brought the book to her as she was busy sorting through and packing items elsewhere in the apartment.

“It’s not finished,” I said to her.

She laughed, a Pall Mall cigarette dangling from her mouth. “No, we’ve got a long way to go,” she replied, thinking I was speaking to our packing up and moving out. “Be a good boy and keep helping Mom, would you?”

With hesitant steps, I moved closer to her and held out my baby book. She stopped, looked at it, and took it from my hands.

“*This?*” My head couldn’t figure out if it was a question or accusation.

I nodded. “All the rest of them have everything.” It was true – the previous five siblings had baby books filled to the brim with pictures, memories, and mementos of pleasures and pride. “What happened to mine?”

My mother blithely flipped through some pages and shut the book, handing it back to me.

She laughed again. “Things got *so busy* after you were born,” she told me. “It’s not that...” Her voice trailed off into corridors of memory I didn’t have a map to or permission to walk with her down. “Don’t worry,” she finally said. “I’ll finish it someday.” When I didn’t say anything else, she took a draw on the Pall Mall, blowing the smoke out above my head. “Please go pack the rest of those books and help Mom, okay?”

On the turning away, something eased my feet into the wet cement of truth. It hardened almost instantaneously, and I was trapped as unseen arrows flew viciously into the depths of my heart. They pierced with intention and wounded with a ferocity of the words I already knew.

Last. Alone. Unfinished. Forgotten.