
HEY...I'm Just a Kid (a True Story)

Ron Bond

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School's Out

IT WAS ALMOST three o'clock on a school day. Even though I didn't look at the clock on the wall, I knew the school day is almost over when the teacher wrote tonight's homework on the blackboard. The early dismissal bell rang, and the bused-in kids like me got up out of our chairs and left the classroom early. Six long yellow buses waited outside for us. We sat two kids on each side, on green bench seats with windows on each side of the bus. On the ride home, I usually sat with the same kids, and sometimes a friend would save a seat for me. After the bus stopped in different neighborhoods, dropping off kids, the school bus drove down Morris Park Avenue, until we reached my stop, Tremont and Morris Park Avenue. Most kids that got off the bus were met by someone — a mother, a father, a big brother or sister. No one was ever there to meet me.

I walked down the block toward my building on 437 Morris Park Avenue. On the way home, I walked past Dunrite Movers, and the neighborhood bar, where I poked my head in to see if Mom was there. Today she wasn't there. Then came Harry's candy store on the corner of Morris Park and Lebanon Street. I walked to my building and ran up the staircase to the fourth floor to my apartment. I ran up two steps at a time, while holding on to the banister with my left hand and books in my right hand. I pretended that each step was on fire, so I barely touched down before I was on the next step. Flights of stairs go fast when you take them two at a time and make a game of it.

My apartment door was still open from this morning when I left

for school. Since I didn't see Mom at the bar when I looked in, I knew she was still sleeping, so I entered the apartment quietly. I heard her snoring in the bedroom; she was asleep, just the way I left her. By the bed on the night table, the plastic top was off her coffee cup, and it wasn't full anymore. The French cruller that I bought this morning with the coffee and cigarettes was bit into. It was shaped like a half moon now instead of a circle. The Kool Kings 100s pack of cigarettes was open, and three cigarette butts were smashed into the black plastic ashtray. She had probably been up and awake for about twenty minutes, judging by the coffee that was now half-drunk. Every day was the same with her. If she wasn't in the bar when I walked by, that meant she never got up and out of the house, so I would find her home still asleep.

I walked down the hall into the living room and watched television. I drifted between Channel 5, Channel 9, or Channel 11. Those were my favorite channels to watch. On those channels I watched Superman, Abbott and Costello, The Three Stooges, Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck cartoons, Popeye, and Felix the Cat. After a few hours of watching television I got hungry, and since Mom didn't cook and wasn't awake, and there was no food in the refrigerator, I left the apartment and went downstairs to Harry's candy store and luncheonette. Harry's was the center of the whole neighborhood.

After I passed Johnny Moon, the tense, tough-guy teenager who stood guard at the front of the door, I walked into Harry's. Once inside, Harry and his whole family were there. Behind the counter were Harry, his wife Florence, his older pretty daughter Barbara, and big Alice, who was a few years older than me. She usually sat at the last red stool at the counter with a bunch of French fries in front of her, reading a magazine. Harry's had everything; you could get candy and ice cream, newspapers and magazines, and toys. There was a soda fountain with hand-pumped syrups that flavored seltzer water that came out of the long silver spigot with the black handle. At Harry's, there was also a grill for hamburgers and hotdogs and grilled cheese sandwiches. Everything came with a pickle and French fries. A more

complete meal a kid could never find.

The last six seats at the counter were for food; the others were for fountain sodas and ice cream. While you waited for food or a soda, there were comic books in a rack by the window. If it was busy enough, you could finish a few comic books without actually buying them. It was easy to keep up with Superman and Batman and Archie, while Harry and Florence were cooking behind the counter. Near the door was a red Coca-Cola cold soda box that opened on the top with two sliders. The left side was soda floating in ice and water that froze your fingertips by the time you pulled out your favorite soda. The right slider had ices and ice cream packed neatly to the top, like bricks in a wall. Next to that was a telephone booth with an accordion door that closed, to give you privacy when you spoke.

I ordered a Coke, burger, and fries. Florence reached into the freezer and came out with a frozen burger patty that she put on the hot grill. Then she put the frozen French fries into the hot oil basket. They made a bubbling sound as they cooked. The Wurlitzer jukebox near the telephone booth was playing "Sugar Shack," and if there was a quarter put in there, there would be two more songs after that. As soon as the burger and fries were done and placed in front of me, before the Coke was poured, Florence asked me if I wanted a splash of vanilla or cherry squirted into the Coke for a nickel more. Tonight, it was one vanilla pump from the nozzle to sweeten up the Coke.

As I ate the burger and listened to music, I waited for my father to come into Harry's like he always did before he went up to the apartment. He usually came into Harry's around five or five-thirty, when he got off the train. He stopped at Harry's every night after work, sometimes to borrow money for the next day, or to place a bet on a horse race at Belmont or Roosevelt Racetrack. Then, he would ask Harry for the winning numbers of the day that he played the night before. Harry and that luncheonette ran everything on our block. Harry was a tall, thin man with short gray hair, cut military style, and he walked with a limp on his left leg.

The story that was told on our block that he got his limp from

being shot in the leg when he was a young man, and had been a gangster. He told everyone he was a button man for Dutch Schultz. I don't know what a button man was, but I knew what a gangster was. On Saturday afternoons when I slept over at my Nanny's house, I watched James Cagney movies with her. After she cleaned the house, she would always ask me if I wanted to watch old gangster movies with her. She seemed to enjoy them so much that I could never refuse her. It must have been true about Harry being a gangster, because all day long tough-looking guys like in the movies, about Harry's age, would come into the candy store to visit with him. They sat in the back and drank coffee with Harry, and they told stories. At the end of the stories they would laugh and pat each other on the back, and fold their fingers in their hand to make them look like a gun, and they would pretend to shoot each other while they laughed. I saw many of these men hand money to Harry all during the day. I was just a kid, so while I didn't know what Harry did, all I know was that he had a great candy store. All the rest was over my head, and it was probably better that way. Sometimes, knowing someone's past makes you see them differently.

Harry knew all the kids, and all of our names, but when you spoke to him, he just stared at you when we went into his candy store, like he didn't know us, and would ask, "What do you want, kid?" He never called you by name; we were all just kids to him. He had a way of keeping us quiet and keeping us kids in line just by being himself. Maybe it was his size, or the gray hair, or his deep blue eyes that didn't blink as he stared at you. When he locked eyes on you in his store, you would always behave. Because of who he was on the block, and what he gave us, we all felt grateful to him and his candy store.

My father told me that Harry was what you call a loan shark (maybe that explained his cold, lifeless eyes). He said Harry would loan you money, and when it was paid back, he made you give him back more money than the money he gave you. The longer you owed, the more you had to pay back. My dad also said Harry was a bookie. I

never got the explanation on bookie, and how it all worked. By owning the candy store and the other things he did, Harry was the rich guy in the neighborhood, and he lived down the block on Lebanon Street in The Bronx, the same neighborhood with all of us. Harry knew I was Buster's kid, so I could always go there for food or candy, anytime I wanted, and I could even have a small toy that was on the counter — but never the ones that were in the big glass case in the back of the store.

On the night I'm telling you about, Dad came in and saw me at the counter. He went to Harry first, and whispered something to Harry. Then Harry put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a big roll of money wrapped in a rubber band. He handed my father twenty dollars. Dad said, "I'll see you Friday, Harry." He put the money in his pocket as he walked over and patted me on the head. He never kissed me in public, and hardly talked to me. He saw my paper plate had only a few fries left, and he motioned to me with his arm. That meant *Let's go*.

We walked to our building to go up to the apartment. When I was with him, we took the elevator; when I was alone, I always took the stairs. I could run up four flights of stairs before any elevator would arrive at the lobby, so why wait? We got out on the fourth floor and walked down the hall to our apartment. He went left to the bedroom. I went to the right, to the living room, and turned on the television, so I could watch cartoons and do homework at the same time. Before the television had a chance to come on, the screaming started. For a quiet man, his voice surrounded the apartment as he yelled at Mom. For a woman who was sleeping a moment ago, her voice was louder than the television that I sat in front of. After working as a laborer all day, finding Mom still in bed, a dirty house, no dinner, what else could he do?

After an hour of fighting, Dad got into the shower and got dressed to leave for the night. By the time the apartment door closed behind him, Mom was in the shower and ready to start her night. Sometimes she remembered to lock me in; other times after I did homework,

before I went to bed, I locked the door. Neither of them ever said goodbye to me. Almost every day and every night was like this. There were no milk and cookies before bed, no mom to tuck me in, no kiss on the forehead like on *Leave It to Beaver* or *Lassie*. With them both out of the house it was quiet now, and I was tired. It was bedtime. I crawled into my bed that was waiting there for me. It was exactly how I left it that morning. The big blanket Nanny gave me for Christmas was crumpled up at the bottom of the bed. I pulled it up over my shoulders and wiggled my head into the pillow until it was just right. I whispered the nighttime prayer that Nanny taught me, closed my eyes, and smiled, thinking about tomorrow and what I was going to do in school.