

Halloween

Flatlands, Brooklyn, in mid-1950's was like a series of small towns. If you walked 10 blocks down Avenue N and crossed Utica, or went the other way past Ralph Ave., you felt you were in another place with a different Main St. The bakery, grocer, candy store and butcher had a different flavor from the ones you were most familiar with.

It's no wonder they called it Flatlands, it used to be a swamp. There were so many empty lots back then. You could often walk through the middle of a block from one numbered street to another; but they were rapidly disappearing. The sound of new houses being built - hammers, hammering, had become commonplace.

Mary Queen of Heaven where I had just entered Second Grade had recently been built next to the church, at the corner of Ave. M on East 57th St. It was three stories, beige brick and the tallest building in sight. We had just moved into a newly built, brick house just down the block and across the street.

The empty lot across from our new house had a huge boulder on it. I was fascinated by that boulder. Weeds and indigenous plants grew up around it, and from my 6 year old perspective, it felt like being in the country. I found out later it was left there by a glacier. The Holmes residence down the block *also* felt out of place. Originally a farmhouse, it sat in a large sunken lot next to the school and its front door faced a different direction from the other houses. I found out later it was the 10th oldest house in Brooklyn. The Holmes' were old. Mrs. Holmes would give you an apple on Halloween. Mr. Holmes once appeared at a Memorial Day celebration in the schoolyard

next to his house; wearing his red, Spanish American War uniform, facing the whole school lined up in rows.

Most of the other houses on my block, and in the neighborhood, were built around 1928, just before the crash. They were small, attached identical twins, set in rows like salt boxes, 2 by 2 with a shared narrow driveway after each pair.

My mom grew up on E. 54th St., my father on E. 53rd. They met at P.S. 203 in 6th grade.

(where my brother and I had just left). My mom's parents came from Sicily. Grandpa Crisci, her father, had a tailor shop on Ave. N, near E. 51st St. Later, they bought the building and moved the family above the store. He was a very good tailor my grandpa - trained in Rome. My grandma Angelina, as I remember, had a quiet, saintly presence.

My Dad's mom and dad were Portuguese from the Island of Madeira. They moved with us to the new house with Great Grandma Avo' and my young uncle Walter who was only 3 years older than my older brother. When you went downstairs to borrow a cup of sugar, it was like going to Europe. Avo' hardly ever smiled, never spoke a word of English, got our names confused and used to watch wrestling every Saturday night on TV.

There was no gate or grass yet in our front yard, and the same builder was now constructing a similar house on E. 56th St., just behind the lot across the street.

One day, I investigated a lot of shouting coming from 56th St. A gang of kids, somehow got up to, and were wildly throwing debris from the second floor of the still-in-construction open wooden frame.

I must have sparked some attention because debris started falling all around me, so I hid behind the boulder. When I decided to make a run for it, a board with a nail struck me in the back the head and accompanied me halfway across the street - falling off as I ran for my front door.

I vaguely remember some kid coming up to me a few days later - possibly the kid who threw it, asking, by way of an apology (the bandage still on my head), if I was alright?

When Halloween came around I wanted to be what every other kid was going to be - a bum.

Or more politely, a hobo.

Now, someone should do a sociological study of why kids from a working class Brooklyn neighborhood in the mid-1950's, idealized depression era hobos? I do remember the song, "King of the Road" was a big hit back then.

It was a simple outfit to construct. Your grandfather's oldest hat, beat-up old play clothes, a sack on a pole for your candy and a cork that you burned so the black ash drawn on your face provided the exaggerated stubble of a beard. And oh, an important addition: You went down to Meyer's candy store bought two large sticks of colored chalk (5 cents apiece), put them in a sock and crushed it with a rock. Or, you brought it down to the corner, waiting for the B41 bus to arrive, and nonchalantly tossed it under the back wheels as it pulled away.

If no one was home, or feigned not being home, you pock marked their stoop with colored blotches to shame them because you assumed they were too cheap to give out Halloween candy.

There were fights with the chalk socks too, and if the chalk particles weren't ground up enough, it could really hurt. There were even rumors that kids put rocks in them as well.

Anyway, my mom had other plans, something about a more honorable role model than a bum I thought; ...but maybe it was really about re-purposing that George Washington costume my older brother wore in a school play two years before when *he* was in second grade.

Catholic school was different from the public school my brother and I just left, in that there were no more school plays, arts and crafts, or museum trips. The only cultural event I recall in my seven years in Mary Queen of Heaven, was a 16 mm screening of the movie "High Noon", with Gary Cooper in the school basement.

My Grandfather crafted the costume. It was historically accurate down to the double breasted brass buttons, gold-braid shoulder aiguillettes, white knee length stockings, large silver buckles on my shoes, and a three corner hat (made from a cowboy hat), crowned with a medallion.

My initial protests about wearing it fell on deaf ears; It was no use - I finally gave in I think, because the idea of being different, striking out from the comfort of conformity, might have had an appeal to me.

So here I found myself, just starting out in uncharted territory, - on my new block... reluctant, alone, feeling ridiculously conspicuous with this bright orange trick or treat bag instead of a hobo sack, dressed to the nines and out of character with hobo orthodoxy.

And then, this happened: At Avenue N, a gang of chalk-sock swinging hobos, were just turning the corner.

Suddenly, some one shouted, out "There he is, There's the Prince". "GET THE PRINCE"!

Panic-struck, I bolted down the block, turned left at the Holmes house and ran into the corner of the schoolyard, thinking quickly to devise an escape route. Not fast enough in those hard, ill-fitting shoes, to scale the 4 foot chainlink fence.

Cornered, I faced the mob and prepared to be pelted with large, multi-colored pastel chalk dots upon my elegant charcoal grey suit.

“WHY’RE YOU DRESSED LIKE A PRINCE?”, someone shouted antagonistically.

“I’m not a prince... I’M GEORGE WASHINGTON”, I shouted back.

After what seemed like a long pause, the clearheaded voice of an older boy, someone appearing to take a leadership role said:

“Oh... he’s George Washington, leave him alone”.

And as I watched their demeanors change into something like understanding,

they did leave me alone!! Go figure, the respect a gang of bums can have for their founding fathers.

But the best part of the story is: I got to be a bum the next year.