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( essay )

It was not that we thought they were gangsters when they walked through the door. In their long coats and stingy-brim hats, in the way they stood and the expressions on their faces, we could see they were from the rackets squad, and they were scary. By the time I was fourteen years old, I had attracted the attention of the police a few times, and I thought I knew what they were like. But the calm, almost bored look of these guys, who had simply strolled into the Capri Athletic Club on Carroll Street, was new to me.

They told us to stand up. The head detective asked us kids what we were doing there. We said we were members of the club. He told us to move to one side of the room and empty our pockets on the table by the far wall. The room was filled

*Illustration by Liz Priddy, with background and textures from Bittbox.net; trophy courtesy of Red Weir Athletic Supply and photographed by Gene Royer.*



# The Carroll Capris

Burt Kimmelman



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with the usual athletic-club furniture—a few tables and chairs, a bar with bar stools and a TV set on a high shelf. The head detective, looking around the room while his men searched us, spotted the picture of Gypsy Rose Lee, which someone had taped up on the wall. The movie *Gypsy* was just then a hit in the theaters, and the movie poster on the wall showed Natalie Wood posing in a pink satin one-piece corset. Almost in a growl, he told us to take it down.

Mousey, our football coach, who was standing on the other side of the room with the rest of the men, went over to the wall and deliberately removed the offending image. Even at the time, in that tense moment, I understood the irony of these cops—who seemed to have felt themselves insulted at having to occupy the same room with a bunch of small-time hoods and some fawning kids—acting out a piety I felt sure was just for show. Maybe the cops had shown up because the Capri A.C. had decided to allow us kids to hang out there. In the fall weather most of us played on the Carroll Capris sandlot football team, which the club sponsored. Like goslings we had taken to following Mousey around, no matter the time of the year. He took a real interest in us, and so we were allowed to hang out at the club. And now we were getting rousted.

I watched as the detective moved from one boy to the next, feeling each one of us carefully and methodically, while his superior stood by looking on. Over on the other side of the room, one of the men, Tommy Pescara, got into a scuffle with two of the detectives because they had found a snub-nosed .38 revolver on him and were trying to handcuff him. Tommy, who was tall and muscular and who himself was a cop, was trying to show them his police badge. The detectives didn't care. They got him handcuffed finally and hauled him away, apparently satisfied with their catch and that they had made their point.

Tommy showed up at the club the next day, explained that everything was all right and then went out into the street to toss a football around with a couple of the other guys, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. I never learned anything more about the encounter. But that was the milieu in which I was moving. This was a neighborhood known in 1962 as South Brooklyn, and this part of New York City had its own rhythms and rules that we all obeyed.

A lot went on, some of it showing up in the newspapers. For the most part, though, except when an incident touched one of us boys personally, we were left in our more-or-less innocence. Of course, we knew we were consorting with gangsters. It's just that we didn't really appreciate what that meant. We

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On a Saturday morning, not too long before the Capri A.C. was raided, I had stood before the opulent scroll of the Torah in the basement of a rabbi's house in Brownsville. The two heavy, continuous rolls of gilded text had been arranged by the rabbi and me upon a podium at the far end of a long, narrow room.

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were more interested in what most teenaged boys were interested in, sports and sex. Even the infamous Gallo-Profaci mob war, which unfolded mostly in South Brooklyn and adjacent Red Hook, was a vague pageant passing before us in the tabloid headlines and behind a screen of cigarette smoke and subdued conversation. We knew about it because the men forbade us to go outdoors after dusk, and we read of the exploits dutifully and salaciously narrated in the daily papers. It was only when the cousin of one of our "crew," and then the uncle of another, were gunned down that we somewhat realized the gravity of the dispute.

On a Saturday morning, not too long before the Capri A.C. was raided, I had stood before the opulent scroll of the Torah in the basement of a rabbi's house in Brownsville. The two heavy, continuous rolls of gilded text had been arranged by the rabbi and me upon a podium at the far end of a long, narrow room. The house was located across the street from where my grandmother lived on Herzl Street, deep in the heart of a midcentury American shtetl. Her Brooklyn neighborhood was a considerable journey from my home in Park Slope, a few blocks from the club.

The basement of the rabbi's home served as a shul. It was unlike the other two shuls on my grandmother's block, which were larger, more stately. The shul on the next block was truly splendid, containing a circular balcony where the women sat looking down on their men and boys. The women, in

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a way, fulfilled the role of exalted witnesses of their sons, fathers, brothers and husbands in their heroic hour of prayer.

However, the tiny shul in which I was being Bar Mitzvahed was not without dignity, partly due to its lack of pretense. Along with the rabbi, I stood with my back to the congregation. The men sat on both sides of two very long, roughly hewn dark wooden tables arranged along the sides of the room, while the women and children sat closer to the doorway, facing me from behind a low-slung dirty white curtain. When I got to the appropriate scripture passage, the children ran up behind me from around the curtain and threw paper bags of penny candy at me. They waited for this moment with little patience, bridling under their mothers' cautions. I read the Hebrew text assiduously, intoning the Law for family and friends as well as for the shul's regular congregants.

The orthodox rite was held for the sake of my grandmother, even though she was not really religious and my parents were atheists. I used to stay with my grandmother over long weekends and sometimes for a week or more when my mother—divorced from my father by the time I was six—gave up trying to handle me. My grandmother was the super of her building. People were always coming to see her in her apartment, frequently staying to talk and eat. I learned a lot about how to live there. I can see and hear her telling me as I was growing up—she did this often—“You can listen, but you say nothing.” At the time I thought she meant it was okay to listen to neighbors who stopped by her apartment to share news and gossip or to argue over the lives of fictional people in the TV soap operas. It occurs to me now that she may have been referring to other, darker situations.

She had come to the United States by herself at the age of thirteen, in steerage, escaping oppression and poverty back home in Belarus. She'd moved to Brownsville from Chicago in 1934, deep in the Depression, with her sick husband, a house painter, and four children. Brownsville produced its “good Jewish boys” who went on to become doctors, lawyers, rabbis, cantors or musicians (like the son played by William Holden in the 1939 film *Golden Boy*, the preposterous but resonant story of a violinist who becomes a prizefighter, breaking his father's heart). But a few boys went on to be gangsters. The headquarters of the Jewish mob Murder, Inc. had been a block away from her apartment, not far from that grandiose shul. It was clear to me that the inhabitants of South Brooklyn, like their counterparts in Brownsville who had arrived in America not long ago, had learned my grandmother's lesson well. Was this simply the code of all poor immigrants?



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When we were not hanging out at the Capri A.C. we were most likely at a candy store around the corner on Fifth Avenue, along with the men. The store was operated by “Joe Bush” and his wife. His real name was displayed on the store’s awning: “Joseph Buscemi, Prop.” Mr. and Mrs. Giuseppe Buscemi couldn’t avoid hearing what their patrons, standing around on the other side of the counter of their soda fountain, talked about, but they didn’t have to listen, and they knew better than ever, ever to say anything.

Joe Bush and his wife heard and saw plenty, with all these guys spending their time there, yet the couple knew to keep their mouths shut. Looking at them, it was difficult to know anything at all about what they might be thinking. They sold their sodas, newspapers, magazines and candy, made change, and that was it. A short and squat, graying man, Joe Bush might allow at most a slight smile at someone’s joke as he made his way from the soda fountain, where he had just fixed up a cherry parfait or lime rickey, to the cash register near the doorway to deposit payment for the purchase of the *Sporting News*.

The candy store also contained two wood-and-glass telephone booths in the back where a person could close the door to make or receive a phone call and talk without being heard. Nearer to the store windows were a few newspaper and magazine racks, though when the weather was okay, the two newspapers everyone in the neighborhood read, the *New York Daily News* and the *New York Daily Mirror*, were set outside the doorstep on low-lying metal stands. The *News* and *Mirror* carried the same stories, mostly of local human tragedies and other, less sordid tales, but with slightly different photos.

Here we could read about some of the events it was best not to mention. One of my favorite articles was a story about the assistant scoutmaster of the Boy Scout troop I had belonged to until recently. Henry Roth was a young Jewish man who had married a young Irish lady and converted to Catholicism. He wore a crucifix on a thin gold chain around his neck where a Star of David had been. They and their baby lived a quite respectable life a few avenues away from the candy store, in Park Slope, not far from my home. At the time Park Slope was very Irish, just as South Brooklyn was very Italian—many of its inhabitants having come from Palermo and Naples—while Brownsville was very Eastern European Jewish.

If I had been looking, I might have seen that there was a lot going on inside Henry’s head. Along with his pal Charlie, Henry would take a few of us Scouts camping in upstate New York. Charlie was a very good-looking, almost feminine, beardless young man with a deep voice. These weekends

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inevitably ended in scrapping and food fights and disheveled, abandoned campsites on a Sunday morning before we piled into Henry's station wagon to head back to the city. The newspaper article related how Henry had stolen a bakery delivery truck after drinking in a local after-hours bar until nearly morning. He then led a cadre of police cars on a wild chase through Park Slope and South Brooklyn. As he'd sped along with one hand on the steering wheel, he had tossed loaves of bread and boxes of pie and cake out either side of the truck, careening down a deserted Seventh Avenue in the dawn light. The escapade was all neatly detailed, with nuanced variations, in both the *News* and *Mirror*.

Everyone in the neighborhood bought both papers twice a day, the morning and evening editions. Morning and night, droves of people descended from their apartments to get their papers. One reason for the crowds was that a lot of money was at stake. In the evening, the papers newly arrived, it was not unusual to hear someone yelling from a window across Fifth Avenue down to someone exiting the candy store, "What's the number?" The "number" was the last three digits of the day's proceeds at Aqueduct Raceway. If you guessed it correctly, there would be a juicy payout by a local bookie who inevitably was someone's uncle or father. The number was dutifully published in the *News* and *Mirror*.

The members of the neighborhood's athletic clubs, social clubs and social-athletic clubs all frequented Joe Bush's. It should be noted that while many of these were "athletic" clubs, their constituents were not very involved in sports, with the exception of watching a horse race or maybe a baseball game or boxing match on TV, playing the occasional stickball game in the street outside their storefront headquarters or cavorting with a prostitute who had paid a visit to their club's back room, usually to take on a number of customers in turn. These guys would stand around in front of the candy store telling jokes or stories, horsing around, throwing fake punches at each other; some would mock the ducking of a punch or jump back from a fake kick in the shins. In between, they would occasionally make or receive phone calls in the back of the store or maybe pocket slips of paper someone handed them.

But the Capri A.C. remained our center of gravity. We could be off the street there and at the same time shielded from our families. Meanwhile, we enjoyed being adopted by surrogate fathers who tolerated our awkward behavior. The space became a kind of home for us, and Mousey was not only our ultimate protector but also our adviser. It was he who assured me, for

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To play against my friend Richie in practice, for example, was to be subjected to an unrelenting and ferocious assault that would leave me astonished and breathless. Richie was a boy whose father would stand over him after dinner, demanding the answer to one arithmetic problem after another and slapping him hard in the back of his head when he came up with the wrong answer.

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example, that I would not go blind because I masturbated. Mousey was a pants presser in a dry-cleaning shop by day and a shylock (loan shark) by night. Our football team and the kids who played on it seemed to be what were important in his life. Looking back, it occurs to me that Mousey's life must have been terribly dreary except for the kids who played ball for him. He once took a few of us home to meet his parents, with whom he was living. He had no wife or girlfriend, though he was especially proud of his ability to make prostitutes come, as we learned from the stories he fed us.

He was a short, slender, balding man with a pointed face (hence the name "Mousey") and light brown curls on the sides and back of his head. He would bite down on the filters of the Salem cigarettes he chain-smoked as he called out instructions and gibes and exhortations to his team during games. Then there was Sonny Boy, our assistant coach, a larger, round, dark-complexioned, dark-haired man; he was married, taciturn and in a sense Mousey's straight man. Sonny Boy ably assisted him with whatever had to be done in the ongoing emergency of a football game in progress.

Among the other men who looked after us was Vinnie, who came to all the games with his son, Johnny Limp. "Limp" had had polio, which had left him with a staggered gait, so he couldn't play sports. He made up for this lack with his bossiness and foul, taunting mouth—often accusing someone of an unfairness while pointing his crooked arm that he had broken years

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before; the arm had been set badly by some incompetent doctor in an emergency room. Limp was particularly proud of the fact that his father would be the one to bring the eight-millimeter color movie camera to memorialize our play.

Perpetually unshaven and dressed in a sleeveless T-shirt and slacks, Vinnie was a bighearted slob who liked everybody and loved his three sons and a daughter—though they seemed to be growing up almost by chance, on their own. I remember vividly how Vinnie beamed when his daughter, JoAnn, and I returned to their backyard one summer night from necking in their living room. Our kissing was passionless and mechanical, her buck teeth colliding with mine as we tried to figure out what we were supposed to be doing. The yard was just off their kitchen. It was a bit of greenery and open air. A hundred people could look down at us, except that the view was blocked by an overhead trellis Vinnie had erected for the warm weather, stringing Japanese lanterns along it. On a hot evening we all easily gave in to the sultry, peaceful ambience, the air filled with a thick humidity in part because of the swimming pool Vinnie had bought and set up. And so we kids sat around, getting drunk on cans of Rheingold beer, while he and his wife and a number of other gap-toothed grown-ups looked on, grinning at us approvingly.

About midway through the football season it was announced that on the following Sunday night at the club we'd be watching the game films Vinnie had made. We all showed up and sat around, restlessly joking, as Vinnie tinkered with the projector. We couldn't wait to watch the films, particularly the one of our latest outing, when we had beaten our opponent badly. The Carroll Capris were undefeated, and we had developed a new sense of self-importance. The lights were finally switched off, and the projector began its noisy clicking as blank light suddenly hit the screen. We sat back in the darkness.

But Vinnie, who in the parlance of the time was considered a genuine "hoople," had begun the reel of film with some footage of a beautiful, naked young woman standing unceremoniously and without a hint of emotion before the camera as she inserted the end of a mop handle into her vagina. He must have somehow arranged to have the black-and-white pornographic film spliced in for a joke. We all laughed and then jeered but quieted down when a bunch of green-uniformed figures—ourselves—abruptly ran across the screen in a blur, seemingly without rhyme or reason, and then did so

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again, the same sort of fleeting green and white shapes, unidentifiable except for an occasional number on the back of a football jersey.

It was odd how bloodless and without drama the short, silent clips of these small green players were, as if they were participants in a dance in which the choreography had somehow dissolved, or as if we were watching some sort of distant mayhem we knew nothing about but tried, in the darkness, to fathom. The film was nothing at all like the game we had played with such fierceness, and occasional pain, to the point of exhaustion. What we were watching lacked the sense of danger implicit in the sport itself and in the lives of the people in that darkened room. Though it was not normally a topic of conversation, danger was something people lived with day in and day out.

For me, football was a violent pastime, and because of this it fit perfectly into my angry young life. This was also true for a number of my teammates, who were restless and savage, full of confusion and frustration. We were angry and violent enough that even a contact sport like football could not assuage us. To play against my friend Richie in practice, for example, was to be subjected to an unrelenting and ferocious assault that would leave me astonished and breathless. Richie was a boy whose father would stand over him after dinner, demanding the answer to one arithmetic problem after another and slapping him hard in the back of his head when he came up with the wrong answer. So Richie would roam the dark night streets rolling drunks. He'd make them stand up and would then knock them over with a punch to the jaw. At least he never wanted to set them on fire. I was not surprised, running into Richie decades later, to learn he had just finished a five-year "bid" in the penitentiary.

While my life in South Brooklyn was not without its dangers, which I could at times find exhilarating, I had come to know violence and the threat of danger long before I had joined the Carroll Capris. I couldn't have been more than nine when, along with the rest of the kids playing on our block, I saw a neighbor drag his wife by the hair down the steps of their stoop and out to the curb between two parked cars. I'd gotten the feeling they were both alcoholics: I'd noticed each of them in an unkempt state, sometimes staggering a little, as they walked by my building. She would pass us as we played, with her head held high, as if she were part of an aristocratic courtly procession, wearing white socks and black shoes, her blouse haphazardly tucked into the waistband of her skirt. She stood out to me because of the

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fire-engine-red lipstick she always wore, applied well above and below her lips.

As we gathered around to see what was happening, her husband pulled her into the street and slammed the side of her head repeatedly into the bumper of one of the parked cars. She lay almost passively, not screaming, apparently resigned to her beating. The design of certain cars at this time was meant to evoke a jet fighter plane or the Flash Gordon spaceship everyone saw on television. The car sported exaggerated, sharply pointed tail fins, as if it could fly, and the bumpers featured chrome extensions that resembled the head of a bullet or torpedo. So of course he aimed her head at one of these "bullets." After one or two thumps, bright blood was spewing from underneath her flowing gray hair. Luckily the police arrived at this moment and took them away.

What I now find remarkable, remembering the brutality, was how we stood around calmly watching. On the one hand we were shocked by what we were viewing, but on the other hand we took in this series of events almost as a matter of course. What did we know? Weeks later I saw the wife again, passing me on the street on her way home, almost in a strut, though she stepped a little too carefully, her clothing disheveled as always, her makeup smeared.

It was at about this time in my life, as I was walking home from school one day in Park Slope, that I first saw a dead person. The man had been shot and was sprawled on his back at the top of the steps to a brownstone apartment building. He lay just at the entrance, as if he had gotten his key out and tried at first to step through the glass vestibule and had then turned to face his assassin. The police were standing around in front of the building while the body straddled the entrance step in what would have been an uncomfortable position had the man still been alive. There was no sense of reverence about it at all, just a desultory civic drama unfolding.

The air of peril in the streets also permeated my life at home. Even after my parents—a doctor and a teacher—split up, they were at each other's throats. Their many fights were at times physical entanglements, frightening and sad. I knew what Ralph Kramden meant as he brandished his fist each week on *The Honeymooners*, telling his wife, "You're goin' to the moon, Alice! Bang! Zoom!" Yet my mother gave as good as she got. My younger brother and I were hostages to our parents' battles in a war that never came to an end. There was also the war between my mother and me. No longer able to hurt me with her hand once I had reached puberty, she resorted to

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using a belt or spike heel in order to get my attention. But our altercations never achieved the mythic stature of her fights with my father.

My parents were locked in a fierce hatred, the flip side of a passionate, heated, profoundly physical embrace. Their conflict, as was true of our lives more broadly, was complicated by complex cultural battles. My father and mother had met in the army during World War II, each of them in a loveless marriage they were escaping in the service. Later, in the heyday of the McCarthy era and its pervasive, lingering afterglow, my father, a lifelong communist, was being watched by the FBI, as were we all, a fact my parents reminded me of occasionally. He moved to Greenwich Village, a left-wing, intellectual and artistic part of Manhattan, leaving me to fend for myself in Brooklyn. On weekends my brother and I visited him and eventually his new wife and our half-brother. Back home our mother, who had boyfriends of all kinds, finally settled in with a conga player in an Afro-Cuban band who drove a cab by day and was a member of F.A.L.N. (Fuerzas Armadas de la Liberacion Nacional), an extreme left-wing Puerto Rican liberation group that plotted, among other acts of protest or subversion, to blow up the Statue of Liberty. Meanwhile, I would look forward to watching *I Led Three Lives*, another television show of this period, whose stories were about tracking down communists and arresting them. I had also seen the movie *I*

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*Was a Communist for the FBI.* I found myself rooting alternately for both the hunter and his prey.

When I was seven a car knocked me over, breaking my leg, as I was rushing into the street after a rubber ball I was throwing back and forth with my father, who was visiting. He scooped me up, carried me upstairs and set me down on the sofa in our living room. I was scared, crying, in pain. Then a vague anxiety crept over me, the pain forgotten. What if, because of my accident, we were discovered, found out by the uniformed police officers and ambulance attendants who had filled the living room as they tried to get the information they needed for their reports and to get me to a hospital?

What if we were to be revealed as the un-Americans we really were? Of course by then I had already developed a poignant sense of vulnerability as a Jew, a palpable if undifferentiated conception of what the Nazis had done (including perpetrating my uncle's death in combat—a grievous loss remembered every Friday night by my grandmother, who would sob as she lit a *shabbos* candle); and I was quite aware not only that few Jews lived in our neighborhood but also that my friends on the block were *goyim*. This was not necessarily a bad thing, though by definition they were, therefore, anti-Semitic.

Beyond this fundamental dichotomy of Jew and gentile, however, I had already absorbed the fears my parents felt as leftists. Had I, perhaps, heard the conversations about events like the executions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who had been my father's patients in Greenwich Village (as were a great many leftists of the time)—with whom he, and possibly my mother, must have been friendly? Park Slope was inhabited by blue-collar people who hoped the commies would be vanquished, especially in the wake of the Korean War.

By the time I reached adolescence, what I had come to realize was that I didn't really belong anywhere: not in the Village with my father, not in Brownsville with my grandmother, not in Park Slope with my mother and brother, not even in South Brooklyn with the Carroll Capris and the gangsters who became our role models. I was not quite what the people who lived in any of these places were supposed to be. In a certain sense I was always passing through, yet I had no clue as to where I might be heading. No matter where I went, something about me was odd, and my sense of anomie was inescapable.

I was the quintessentially pent-up, angry kid, driven, paradoxically, to behave as if I was invincible while I sought a refuge from my fears in

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recklessness. I ended up drifting into the “crew” of boys in South Brooklyn because I was seduced by their bravado and sometimes lawlessness. I finally gave in to the recklessness, embracing it as a way to explain to myself why it was all right to keep my own counsel and pretty much follow my own rules. I was, in other words, unburdened by conscience—except when things got really out of hand.

Once, for instance, I was seized with profound dread when riding a bus back to our neighborhood after an evening of stalking about in Flatbush, where I ended up in a fight with a boy who had the temerity to talk back to a bunch of us. He and I tussled until we had both had enough, and no blood was spilled. Now, seated in the back of the bus, one of the boys in the crew, without a hint of what was to come, slashed a passenger’s throat with a church key (a beer-can opener) in a fit of alcohol- and marijuana-laced rage. The rowdy evening had suddenly turned into a frightening dream I could not get out of. In a panic, I shepherded the five of us out of the bus and onto the street, hoping we could avoid further trouble for the night.

We staggered along the sidewalk, drunk, the bus having moved on with its bleeding and dazed victim and the other riders who were stunned by what had happened. A cop on foot patrol found us and lined us up against a fence to question us and calm us down. When Billy D’Amato, a lanky, particularly vicious and brutal kid, started to mouth off to him, the cop slapped him hard across his cheek so that Billy fell back against the fence with a thud. Billy sobered up on the spot. We all did. The cop told us to go home, “Now!” We left, without a word.

The violence around me was most affecting when I was not involved in it, when I was only a spectator. The most sickening act of violence I ever witnessed in those days was perpetrated by an older boy, Fat Anthony, who was leading a crowd of his friends, an older crew, down Carroll Street and onto Fifth Avenue just as I was about to turn up the street on my way home. A dark-skinned man was waiting for a bus at the bus stop there, probably on his way home from work. He had no inkling of the crowd approaching from behind him. Fat Anthony, who was carrying a baseball bat, wound up and hit the man in the back of the head. The man shot into the street head first, rising off the sidewalk as if he were a guided missile. For a brief moment I was frozen in place, but I quickly pulled myself together—I knew enough to keep on walking. I have no idea if the man survived that blow—he probably did not—or what happened afterward. I never asked anyone about it, and it never came up in conversation.

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Bus stops might seem ordinary and routine places, but they could be hazardous. Waiting at a bus stop with my friend Monte, a skinny, pale kid with curly red hair who attended my junior high school, I found myself in the wrong place at the wrong time. We had just left his girlfriend's apartment one afternoon, having spent the day there playing hooky from school. We were in a Puerto Rican enclave, a couple of blocks beyond the territory the South Brooklyn Boys street gang claimed for itself. Some Puerto Rican boys walked up to us, approaching from across the avenue. They stood looking us up and down, and one of them said accusingly, "You South Brooklyn." He had a baseball bat dangling from one hand, with which he kept tapping the sidewalk casually. We both said at once, "No, no, we're not." The boy with the bat continued to tap, in soft thuds, reiterating the charge with more emphasis, now especially looking at Monte. Monte simply said, "No," a little breathless, waiting for the next move. One of the boys, Ralphie, was someone I knew from primary school, so I interrupted the back-and-forth to appeal to him, saying, "You know me, Ralphie; I'm not South Brooklyn. We're okay." Ralphie thought for a second and then said I was okay, but Monte would have to pay the price for being caught on their turf.

The kid with the bat began winding up and letting go huge swings aimed at Monte's head and shoulders while the rest of us, and some other people who were also waiting for the bus, looked on. Monte covered up as best he could, in the meantime yelling, "Please, no, I'm not South Brooklyn." The Fifth Avenue bus arrived soon after the beating had begun, the driver pulling over and patiently waiting with the front door open after the others at the bus stop had climbed on. As the boy with the bat paused for a moment to catch his breath, I grabbed Monte, who was still on his feet, and pushed him up the steps of the bus, jumping in after him. The driver quickly shut the doors. Ralphie and his friends watched the bus pull away, probably feeling satisfied that they'd made their statement.

At least we had seen them coming. That poor guy Fat Anthony clobbered with his home-run swing had no idea what was about to happen. The sudden assault on him oddly reminded me of what had happened to a kitten that had been resting comfortably in the arms of a boy my age when I was returning home from junior high school one afternoon. There were two boys near the corner, just hanging around, not far from where the Union Street bus sat idling at its bus stop. As I walked by them to get in the bus, I noticed the one boy stroking the kitten; it was enjoying the attention. Just as the bus pulled into traffic the boy tossed the kitten under the bus's doubled back wheels. I was leaning out the window of the bus to watch them,

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Not only did I need the harsh contact of football, but I also desired the orderliness of a well-run team. I yearned for physical banging because of the angers I harbored within me and because my emerging man's body simply demanded it. I loved the sense of abandon that came over me when the ball was snapped and everything was happening all at once. . . .

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curious as to what they were doing, and instantly regretted seeing the flat mélange of gray fur and bright red blood on the dark blue asphalt street as the bus pulled away, heading toward home.

What kind of experiment was this? Did these two boys grow up to be killers, perhaps for hire? What is a killer made of? I doubt they became, if they lived long enough, doctors or teachers. In the neighborhood, and maybe all of Brooklyn, there seemed to be a tenor of violence, irrational and pure, sometimes homicidal, which could be ignited with the slightest spark. When we played football, a full-body contact sport, I would see that ferocious anger at work. Football allowed us to let off steam, but it could also reward the untempered violent impulses within us.

Violence was endemic in Brooklyn, but in South Brooklyn perhaps especially so. It was the lingua franca of machismo. And it could take the form of the most poisonous sort of racism. The kids in South Brooklyn seemed different from the group of boys, mostly Jewish, that I ran around with when I stayed at my grandmother's in Brownsville. Those boys, the sons of working-class mothers and fathers, were also tough, but they didn't exhibit the same kind of gratuitous brutality.

The streets of Brownsville could be dangerous, nevertheless. And ethnic or racial tensions existed beyond South Brooklyn, no doubt about it.

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One night I was standing alone in the dark near my grandmother's building smoking a cigarette after all my friends on Herzl Street had gone home. By the time I noticed three dark figures walking toward me from up the block—with the characteristic dip and roll of the shoulder and a rhythmic bopping stride, which was the stylized body language of street aggression—it was too late to run without being chased down, and I knew not to show fear. Appearing to be afraid could be fatal.

The three Puerto Rican boys stopped in front of me as I was leaning against a parked car, smoking. One of them asked me for a cigarette. I gave one to each of them. But the kid doing the talking, as he looked into my eyes, held his cigarette between his thumb and forefinger and made a grandiose gesture of snapping it in two. Dropping the pieces to the sidewalk, he said, "Gimme another one." I refused, and the three of them instantly started to close in on me, so I said, "You should at least throw me a fair one" (a "fair fight," one on one, in the slang of the time). He said, "You want a fair one? Fight him," and he pointed to the biggest of the three of them, who was both heavier and taller than the rest of us.

We started to dance around one another, and I soon found I was able to hit him and block his punches. But my shots were mostly slaps, since, ironically, in practicing how to box with my friends when hanging around in the street or at school during the lunch hour, I had gotten into the habit of slapping rather than punching. I kept slapping him in the face, and the big kid started to cry as he danced around me, getting hit, looking more and more frustrated, first taking off his coat and tossing it behind him to the sidewalk, then his sweater. Finally the humiliation was too much for them. As I continued to dance, hitting him almost at will, I heard the rattle of a metal garbage can behind me and turned for a second to see the third boy quickly withdrawing his hand from a garbage can cover.

I turned back to the big kid and got slammed in the back of my head with the metal cover while the other two boys grabbed me from the front. I staggered backward, the three of them now pushing me into the side of the car. They started hitting me, all three at the same time. The ringleader, directly in front of me, was punching me and at the same time telling me that if they ever saw me in the neighborhood again they'd kill me, while the big guy, to his right, kept throwing roundhouse punches that landed on the side of my neck. The third kid, on the other side of me, seemed to be trying to jab me in the ribs; I put out my hand to block him, and he stuck it with what must have been a small knife.

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I told the ringleader, "Okay," and they let up on me, turned abruptly and, once the big kid had collected his coat and sweater from where he had thrown them, walked on down the block. They slowly disappeared, passing out of the glow of a street lamp and then turning the far corner onto the avenue. As I headed up to my grandmother's apartment, I was heartbroken and disgusted to have gotten my ass kicked. I would have to tell her and my mother what had happened, which I did as I stood at the kitchen sink, running cold water on my bleeding hand.

The fight with those Brownsville boys was perhaps predicated on me being Jewish and them being Puerto Rican, but down deep our difference was really more of an excuse for these boys to be tough, to vent their rage on someone. "You have inside you the thing that tells me you can be good," the prison boxing coach says to the young Rocky Graziano in the movie *Somebody up There Likes Me*, "and that thing is *hate*."

The changing complexion of the neighborhood had everything to do with a confrontation on my grandmother's block, though pure anger and cold-blooded animus were what caused the sudden explosion. A grown man we kids knew, Stanley, married and respectable, who would shoot the breeze with us kids once in a while, reached into the trunk of his car one day to grab a hammer he threw at a friend of mine, Hector. He aimed for the head as Hector was running off from where we were all standing together in the gutter, having made a joke at Stanley's expense. The man was Jewish, the boy Puerto Rican and one of the group of boys on the block, not a stranger. There was no hesitation on Stanley's part. Hector made his edgy, taunting crack, not really anything more than typical sidewalk banter, and as if on cue Stanley simply went for the hammer and flung it.

In South Brooklyn racism was especially intense. But something more basic determined what people did to each other. I was a Jew who was often taunted for being a Jew as I hung around on Fifth Avenue, yet I was ultimately accepted in the crowd I was running with—even though the boys in the crew were not averse to addressing me as "Burt the Jew" (they never would call me "Jew boy," which would have been a serious insult and a breach of friendship).

But Jewish was one thing. Being black was a whole other story. No black kid could have hung around in front of Joe Bush's candy store. In the South Brooklyn street gang there was one Puerto Rican, a hardened kid named Juvenile (his name always reminded me of the hit song by Frankie Lyman and the Teenagers, "I'm Not a Juvenile Delinquent"), who was in another crew of the gang, from about ten blocks away. But there was no gang like

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the Hollywood-fabricated Bowery Boys we used to watch on television and in the movie theaters, in which the black kid, Scruno, was a full-fledged member.

This fact makes what happened with the Carroll Capris nearly unbelievable. The core of the Capris was made up of boys from “the neighborhood,” but others were invited in. That was how I got involved, as I walked by them one evening at practice. They were running plays in a meadow, with two grown men—Mousey and Sonny Boy—standing by, yelling directions. One of the boys, Sally Caputo, must have noticed I was carrying football equipment and called out to ask if I wanted to play on the team. I had been practicing with a very disorganized team, the Metro Mustangs, in another part of the park and was now heading home, feeling dejected. Two other boys walking by with their equipment a few evenings later were also invited to play with us. Some members of the team may have been a little standoffish about them because the boys, Mickey and Ernie, were black, but once we saw how well they each ran with the football, everyone wanted them on the team.

Our team practiced in that meadow in Prospect Park. Each kid would show up with his pads and helmet in the early evening, and Mousey and Sonny Boy would arrange us into offensive and defensive squads. We would run plays with full contact and get instructed in football fundamentals until it got too dark to see.

This period was a dream come true for me. Not only did I need the harsh contact of football, but I also desired the orderliness of a well-run team. I yearned for physical banging because of the angers I harbored within me and because my emerging man’s body simply demanded it. I loved the sense of abandon that came over me when the ball was snapped and everything was happening all at once and I could hit someone with my entire body as hard as I could. A yearning for oblivion took me away from the anger, sadness and confusion that I awoke to every day. It may be an odd thing to say, but football can be a civilizing force in the lives of wayward boys—or at least it protects civilization from them.

We went on to have an undefeated season that year until a final game with a formidable team from Marine Park. The other team, also undefeated, beat us in a close score. But a couple of days later we were informed that the team’s quarterback, a tall Polish kid and a superb athlete, was a “ringer”; he was too old to be in our Parks Department league. We had become the league champs by default, and there was to be a presentation of a trophy.

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Then, a few days after we found out we had become the champs, Mousey got a phone call from the league officials telling him that our team also had to relinquish the championship trophy, even before we had set eyes on it: Ernie and Mickey were ringers too. Both were too old to be playing on our team.

A few of us were standing around in front of Joe Bush's when Mousey showed up to pass on the bad news. There was some astonished cursing. Someone blurted out angrily, "Those cocksuckers!" He wasn't referring to Ernie and Mickey but rather to the league officials.

Damnit, we had earned that championship! We had practiced nonstop the entire season, had played hard, and one guy had even broken his leg. While our skinny fullback, Terry Rush, always ran hard and blocked as best he could, Ernie, one of our halfbacks, short and compact, was unbelievably fast. Anytime he got into the open field he was gone. And Mickey, tall and lithe, more of a finesse back, ran like a gazelle. Would we have won all those games without them?

By the next night everyone in the neighborhood had heard about what had happened. As an act of defiance, someone suggested that we have a victory party for ourselves at the Capri A.C., and then someone came up with the idea of buying trophies for Ernie and Mickey and presenting them as a surprise to our ringers and stalwart ball carriers at the party. Mousey would phone them to let them know that we would gather at the club a week from the coming Friday.

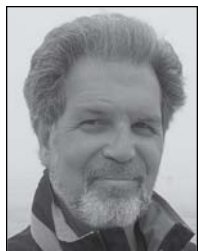
That Friday afternoon, as the darkness began to set in, we came together at the club to fix up the place with bunting and to set out bowls of popcorn, pretzels and potato chips and sodas. We were very excited. Except for our two honorees, we had all chipped in for the refreshments and of course for the trophies that Mousey had procured. They were stunningly beautiful, shiny and quite tall, each bearing one of the engraved names of our two star running backs. Mousey, the only adult in the room, presided over a bunch of raucous teenaged boys. He had hidden the trophies behind the bar, where he had taken up a position not long before the guests of honor were to arrive. Eventually they did, entering from the chilly darkness, looking slightly guarded and relieved to be off the streets of what they knew was a dangerous neighborhood for young black men. Soon they were smiling and joking with the rest of the team, grabbing popcorn, sipping a bottle of soda and listening to the 45-rpm records stacked up on the Victrola.

Mousey let the celebration go on for about ten or fifteen minutes and then called out to us to gather at the bar because he had something to say. I felt a sense of ceremony set in, something I had never known before among



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these guys. Mousey joked a little and recounted some of the great moments of our glorious season, and we laughed, remembering them with him, and then he paused, looking at Ernie and Mickey. “And you know,” he said, “it couldn’t have happened without you, and so”—he reached under the bar, and when his hands became visible again he was holding a trophy in each one—“we chipped in and got these for you to show our appreciation.” We all cheered, and I had to cut short the tears that began to well up in me. I didn’t dare look in anyone’s face.



### Burt Kimmelman

Burt Kimmelman has published six collections of poetry—*As if Free* (Talisman House, 2009) the latest—and a number of literary-critical books and essays as well as a brief memoir of his youth, “Mexico City,” in *College Hill Review* (online). He teaches at New Jersey Institute of Technology. Read more about him at [BurtKimmelman.com](http://BurtKimmelman.com).