

Never Had a Chance!

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It was 1956, Brooklyn , NYC, the year after our beloved Dodgers had finally won a World Series from those Damn Yankees. We kids on Dahill Road were ' The Children of Howdy Doody' , for that was the show that all five, six and seven year olds cherished each afternoon. I can still remember playing outside on Roy Edelstein's perfect baseball diamond stoop, a game I invented to mimic our Dodger heroes.

As we slid around on that concrete slab on many an afternoon, at a designated time the windows would open up and a symphony of Moms would yell out ' It's Howdy Doody time!' Kids throughout the block would scramble into their two family homes... everyone it seemed except Richie D. No, for some reason he would not retreat around the corner of Ave P to his walk- up apartment above John's Superette. He just hung out by himself. Richie was one year older than Roy, Johnny M. and me, which was a big thing then.

Richie was also much taller and more ' robust' than the three of us, and we all feared him. I guess he would be in the category of a ' Semi bully' , for Richie was not that mean, rather, looking back, Richie was a very angry kid. We knew from what he did tell us that he lived with his mom and baby brother. He never spoke of a father, and we knew enough not to pry. As is the case in most urban areas or small towns, gossip travels faster than the common cold. The gossip was that his father was in jail, and had been for a long time.

I can remember one incident that somehow lingers in my memory bank all these 60+ years. It was one of those 'perfect ' Spring Saturday afternoons, when just about the whole block of neighbors were out on their stoops, or washing cars or doing some fixing up of their homes. Of course, half of the families on Dahill Road were renters, like my family. Still, it seemed that this bright sunny day had a myriad of folks enjoying the afternoon. You could hear the many portable radios playing either different types of music, or perhaps one of NYC's three major league baseball teams' games. Roy, Johnny and me were out there playing with our air rifles, and I believe Roy and I were wearing those coonskin hats, like Fess Parker wore (as Davy Crockett) from the popular television show. Suddenly a car screeched right within inches of Richie D. as he apparently tried to dodge across the middle of the highly trafficked street . The driver got out and was yelling at Richie, and then a few neighbors began yelling at Richie to ' Go the hell home where you belong!' Richie looked frightened and that quickly turned into rage, as he cursed everyone out and ran up Dahill Road.

I think it was perhaps a short time later when Richie approached me in front of my house. " Ya wanna come to my birthday party Saturday?" I just said " Sure" and asked what time. I told my Mom, and with all the faults she may have had, my Mom always liked the underdog and the vulnerable. I can remember her always feeding the birds in our backyard with all the scraps of bread that we did not finish at dinner. She *never* wanted to waste anything, always

giving leftover pies and cakes, or dishes that my Dad cooked (he was a gourmet cook) to her two next door neighbors, Molly and Shirley. She told me she would get a present for Richie, and a card to give him . When Saturday came she made me put on a nice pair of pants and a clean shirt and reminded me to be polite to Richie’s mom. She knew, as did most of the women on the block, that Richie did not have a dad. She then walked me to the corner of Ave P and across the street. ” Call me when you are finished and I’ll come and get you.”

That was one of her faults, being way *overprotective*. I went to the doorway next to John’s Superette and rang the bell inside the hallway. The buzzer rang and I went in. Richie was waiting for me at the top of the stairs. I went up and handed him his present and card. He had this rarely seen big smile on his face. We went inside the apartment and the first thing I noticed was how dark it was . Really ominous and very bleak . His mom stood there with Richie’s little four year old brother. She was a tall woman, much taller than my mom, and she had this pale, almost ghostly complexion. His brother had that same appearance. She was very nice to me, and sat me at the kitchen table, but there was no one else there. I mean no one, not even grandparents or aunts and uncles... NO ONE! My young seven year old heart was saddened by this. I could almost *touch* the forlorn look on all their faces.

Years later, when I went back to visit Dahill Road, where my grandparents still lived, I asked my grandfather whatever happened to Richie D. ” Oh, he died last year of an overdose or something. Bad kid.” I didn’t realize it then, as an eighteen year old college student, but perhaps if both Richie D. *and* his sad eyed mom had gotten counseling, who knows? He was a textbook case of a troubled boy, unable to be disciplined in school, with an equally troubled mom... both living on the edges. *Therapy* was for those who could afford it, then and now.

When *half* of our tax revenue goes for spending on phony wars and overkill weapons , there is not enough funding for a ‘ Safety Net’ for troubled souls. Every public school should have one psychologist on permanent staff, instead of having only one solitary psychologist to service a myriad of schools in a district. Women like Richie D.’s mom should have been able to get regular counseling for what ailed them. Nothing has changed... perhaps only for the worst! How many more Richie D.s do we have to see destroy their lives or others’ lives before we realize that they ‘ Never had a chance!’

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