

The Old Lady in the Window

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

There are so many diverse memories to a mind that has traveled through the decades like an endless wind. Being a 'baby boomer' who just cannot accept the utter surreal bad aftertaste of our current comic book empire, one desires to retreat into the distant past. This past of course had its own times of despair, but for a youth of those days it sure seemed better. Such is the nature of this nostalgic 'look back'.

The autumn of '65 found this writer living in what was then most likely the greatest place to be a youth. That would be Brooklyn, NYC, in the fabulous neighborhood called Sheepshead Bay. We didn't actually live by Sheepshead Bay, where the fishing boats and great seafood restaurants were. Yet, close enough to ride one's bicycle to it. Avenue U was my 'stomping grounds', filled with a slew of Mom and Pop shops of all kinds. My neighborhood consisted of a mix of Italian American families (my own), Irish American families, Jewish families and other ethnic groups of no great number. Looking back, segregation was in practice in those days (as still is the case now in most urban areas) and seeing a black face meant you saw either a cleaning lady, janitor or store helper. Sad but true.

When I got home from school each afternoon, I rushed around the corner to the World Telegram and Sun home delivery office to pick up my papers. I had secured one of the best routes, because I was now older than most of the other kids, being already 15 and soon to be 16. My route began right there, at the office, which was Bedford Ave and Avenue U, and strolled right down the alphabetical ladder to Quentin Road, which would have been Ave Q. Proudly, I rode a used but still in great condition *Schwinn Black Phantom*, which was big and powerful, replete with its own shock absorber. It did not travel as fast as the new 3 Speed English or Italian racers as they called them, but it was reliable and rode smooth as hell.

This one November afternoon the gray skies and chilly weather seemed to go right through you. I had my heavy jacket on, and my head was warmed by the old reliable woolen beanie cap, as they called them in those days. I had folded my papers at the office, so as to more easily toss them from my bike at the stoops of the one and two family homes on Bedford Ave. The quicker I finished the better to get home and start my homework, which usually took two hours each day. As I went up Bedford, really making good time, I came to this one family home near the corner of Ave S. In the front window sat this old lady by a desk, in full view from the street. She seemed to be lost in some deep concentration, with a pencil in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Figuring to get a better tip, I parked my Black Phantom and brought the paper to her doorway. She looked up and, waving her hand, invited me in. The door was open. Inside now, I handed her the paper. Man, it sure felt warm inside. "Why don't you sit down for a minute young man and warm yourself?" I did. I asked her what she was doing, a really stupid question as I could see she had a crossword puzzle in front of her. "The only reason I get the Sunday Times is for their crossword puzzle", she answered while still locked into it while slowly dragging on her Chesterfield plain tip. The manner in which she was apparently enjoying her smoke caused me to take the risk and ask

for one. Now, I really did not even *like* cigarettes, but at 15 my parents would go crazy if they saw me smoking, so why not give it a shot? I asked if I could have one and she said "Help yourself, but it is a nasty habit for someone as young as you." I lit up and sat there with her for what seemed an eternity to a young man like me. She liked it when I helped her with the puzzle and remarked at how clever I was.

"You must be good in school, I imagine." I nodded in the affirmative. When the phrase 'Taft Hartley' came up as a correct answer, the old lady turned to me. "Do you know what that means?" she asked. I did not. "Well Philip, the crazy conservative Congress, with that hat salesman Truman going along, made damn sure that striking workers got another roadblock in their efforts." Then she took a minute or two and gave me a quick education on labor matters. I jumped in by telling her about my dad, a longshoreman, and now that she mentioned it, he did use that phrase 'Taft Hartley' to explain to my Mom and Grandmother why his strike was delayed last year. Now it all made sense.

Well, the 10 minutes I had planned on staying there ran into a half hour as I noticed the skies getting a bit darker. My paper route was only half completed. I left most of the cigarette in her ashtray, thanked her as she thanked me again for bringing her paper in for her, and hustled out. As I rode on I was so *thrilled* that this old lady, much older than my parents, had treated me like an equal, even for but 10 minutes. From that first encounter with the lady in the window, we became friends. Each day I would park my bike and bring the paper in for her. We would sit and chat about whatever, share a smoke (which I never could inhale) and I would be on my way. As November moved into December, she and I would share information on our lives.

She had a great deal of anger for what was going on in Vietnam. "We just have no business being in some rice paddy and killing and being killed for what? Nothing!" Being 15, I honestly never really even noticed what was happening in Vietnam. That revelation would come about two or three years later. The old lady would also tell me about her son and what he was doing now, and I would do the same as to my parents etc. On most afternoons she would have a plate filled with cookies for me. On bitter cold days she would make a cup of tea as well. Interestingly, I *never* asked her first name, only knowing her last name from my route sheet. She called me Philip and that was that.

After the Christmas vacation I decided to find a part time job that would pay me better, and besides, paper delivery was for kids. I was now at the ripe old age of 16. I did miss my visits with the old lady, but sometimes 'out of sight, out of mind'. It must have been the following winter, January of '66, that I did find myself going by her house. We had a humongous snow storm, at least 15 inches, and there was money to be made shoveling snow. My pal Big Frank and I took to the streets (you had trouble anyhow walking the sidewalk) to make some money shoveling. I remember that day so well. It was a blue sky, sunny freezing cold Thursday that felt like a Saturday, and everybody was home. Not much work and schools closed as well. Big Frank and I figured we'd hit Bedford Ave, with those bigger homes and lots more driveway and stoop. When we got across from the old lady's house, I decided to go across and say hello. There was no one in her window, and a guy next door was shoveling his walk. I called out to him if he knew if the old lady next door was around. "Oh, Mrs. Nelson, no kid, she passed away nearly a year ago." I asked him how. "Well, if you knew her then you knew she practically went to bed with a ciggie hanging from her mouth. That's what did her in. Too bad. Nice old lady." As I crossed back to catch up with Big Frank, the *wet* from my eyes was beginning to crystalize.

As I grew up more, went to college and began to learn about things that they *don't* tell you on the TV or newspapers, I always thought of the old lady in the window. She was more than just *cool*, as we referred to people who were 'above the crowd'. That old lady smoking a Chesterfield plain tip with me was outright *exceptional!*

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