

Marty Kleinman

GETTING HIT

Back when New York was a fedora grey, shoe leather city, parents in working-class Bronx neighborhoods hit their kids. Children got the belt. Spanked. Slapped. Punched.

For bringing home a lousy report card, Johnny was ordered to kneel down on rock-hard split peas with his bare knees. Larry got his ears boxed for swiping a Spaldeen. In a little kid version of drawing-and-quartering, Joanne was first spanked for saying a naughty word then yanked by her hair to the bathroom, where her mouth was washed out with a big bar of Ivory soap.

Moms handled minor infractions. Butchy and Nancy's diet pill-powered mother laid into her kids with brio. What treason, what treachery could a ten-year old boy and six-year old girl do to warrant her black-beauty based tirades?

It couldn't have been spilled spaghetti sauce on the stovetop, could it? Oh, but it was indeed. "How. Many times. Do I Have. To Say: Be Careful?" she would shriek, punctuating each phrase with a sharp slap across each kid's tearful face.

And the dads? Kathleen was beaten with "the belt" because she lost track of time reading "Treasure Island" and forgot to walk her mutt, Cocoa, who pooped in the kitchen. Her mom, Deirdre, cried and wailed, but never interceded, as her husband, Willy, did his damage.

About Willy. He was a never-promoted beat cop in the three-oh of pre-gentrified Harlem. He was a mean guy, a drunk who, even when sober, was considered a prick by his fellow officers. It was bad at home when Kathleen was a very little kid, but things turned far worse the year she turned nine. One day, at the end of an otherwise ordinary midnight tour, Willy and his partner responded to a 10-52, domestic dispute.

Willy told his partner to wait in their green and white Plymouth NYPD cruiser. "I got this," he said, as Willy's partner, Dom, opened his brown bag breakfast from Louie's Deli, unwrapped his fried egg and cheese on a seeded roll, and cursed.

"Again he forgets the ketchup," Dom said.

"Yeah, well, don't even think about eating mine, ya fat fuck," Willy called back as he entered the apartment house.

Willy waddled up the stairs to apartment B47. All but a few of the hallway lights were out and the stairwell smelled like piss. Finally at the fourth floor landing, he turned in the direction of the screaming from behind the closed apartment door, tilted his cap back, knocked on the door with his flashlight and in a stern voice said, "Police! Open up!"

He picked at a loose hexagonal hallway tile with the tip of his black duty shoe. The shouting stopped, but the door did not open. "Police!" Willy said again. Knock knock. "Open up!"

From inside, light footsteps, most likely the wife, Willy correctly surmised. In sequence, Willy heard: the clunk, as the solid iron bar of a Fox police lock was removed. Then, the click of the Medeco lock. Then the Segal lock. Then the doorknob's snap lock. The door opened a crack. The safety chain was still engaged.

"What?" a middle-aged woman demanded. "Whatchoo want?"

“Police. Everything alright here? May I come in?”

The woman sucked her teeth, unfastened the chain, and stepped aside to grant Willy entry. He walked into the apartment. It was the last thing he remembered before waking up in the trauma unit of Columbia Pres, with a cracked skull from a lead pipe blow from the husband, who was hidden behind the door.

The injury was bad. It caused Willy to suffer from seizures, and his V.A. doctors prescribed powerful anticonvulsants. In time, he was assigned to limited duty while his disability case was reviewed. He handled court paperwork and answered phones for Emergency Services. He was in purgatory, benched, on the B-team. His .38 caliber Smith & Wesson service revolver was taken. His friends broke his chops. They called him Barney Fife. Or, worse, Willy No-Gun. Willy’s bile bubbled over with each passing month and, concurrently, his abuse of Kathleen got worse.

It got so bad that Kathleen called a little kid conference one steamy city day in July. A floor-standing fan blasted Baker’s Pride air around Gino’s Pizzeria, as the kids pounded Pepsi, loaded garlic powder and red pepper flakes onto their pepperoni slices, belched with gusto and blew their pizza breath into each other’s faces. Finally, their appetites sated, the mood grew somber, as each kid but one admitted how they would keep their heads down for days after each beating, their eyes downcast. They were unable to process why such pain was inflicted with such regularity, with such vitriol, with such precision. The kids, save for one, agreed that the pain was pretty bad, but it was the humiliation, the bottomless sense of defeat, of woe, that hurt most.

Only the kid who called the conference, Kathleen, was silent. “C’mon, Kathleen...tell!!!” Joanne begged. The pizza joint jukebox blared a favorite, “The Locomotion,” but the kids were transfixed, their eyes

agape, as tears rolled down Kathleen's freckled face, as Little Eva screamed, "There's never been a dance that's so easy to do...it even makes you happy when you're feeling blue..."

Ashamed, Kathleen told the gang in barely a whisper how she dropped a heavy book on the hardwood floor and said "crap." Remember: her pop, Willie the Cop, worked nights and slept during the day.

Willie woke with a start, and in a phenobarb haze, charged at Kathleen with his loaded back-up piece. Frozen with fear at the sight of her father's blue-black revolver aimed directly at her belly, she ran to the kitchen, involuntarily peed all over the linoleum and, for that transgression, Kathleen caught the beating of her life.

Kathleen is sixty-six now and, after three months of solitary, bikini bliss on Cape Cod, she welcomes the late afternoon onshore breeze that cools her shoulders. She opens her Yeti ice chest, cracks her last can of Cuervo margarita, and watches sandpipers on the water's edge pick at small shells. Her keen eyes spy a crippled sandpiper as it limps about. Its mates speed ahead. This one, the gimp with the injured leg, struggles but somehow manages to keep up.

The tide is high and it seems to Kathleen as if each incoming wave requires even more effort to wash up the steep shore and scrub the sand clean. As the sun dips, and with the heat of the day already a memory, she repositions her Tommy Bahama beach chair, stretches her legs and sighs. Sun, sand, waves in crescendo. This is the best part of the day, she reckons, when the entire Dennisport beach is hers.

Sometimes, she thinks, sipping her drink, *the good guys don't win. Sometimes, the cavalry doesn't come.* At Kathleen's age, few surprises remain. Humankind, to her, even here on this pristine Nantucket Sound

beach, is a species to be reviled, not glorified. Parents pass their poison down to their children. She sees kids here who taunt each other without mercy, only glee. Who learn to hurt, without guilt. Just this morning, she overheard two small kids discuss fishing technique at a nearby pond. The younger of the two, maybe five years old, recoiled at the thought of baiting a hook.

“Don’t worry,” the older child said, as he punctured a live baitfish from gullet to tail, which writhed in pain. “You get used to it.”

Kathleen laughs to think of Matthew 5:7-9: “Blessed are those who show mercy. They will be treated mercifully. Blessed are those whose thoughts are pure. They will see God. Blessed are those who make peace. They will be called God’s children.”

“Ha!” she snorts. She tilts the Cuervo can, finishes her drink, and hums “Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum” as the onshore breeze picks up. The sandpipers alight, even the crippled one, and Kathleen recalls Kierkegaard’s concept: “life is best understood backward, but must be experienced forward.” Here on the beach, far out into the Atlantic, she considers her decades. It was easier here than back in the Bronx, for Kathleen’s corner of the Cape is what the Celtic philosophers might call a “thin place”. That is, a place where one need only to squint to collapse the distance between earth and heaven, the temporal and the eternal, and discover life’s elemental truths.

As it turns out, Kathleen’s survival stems from the spirit force of her magic pen. There are those who suggest that Kathleen’s life story is a “secret miracle”, for her childhood punishments, which continued for years after her father’s first armed assault, punched her ticket to a wondrous life far from the Bronx of her youth. Kathleen is a writer, and a celebrated one, at that. She conjures countless stories. Every few months,

she unlocks her heart's lead-lined box, forever crammed full of Kryptonite, fends off the poison, and taps into tales from her life's curiosity shop.

Secret miracle indeed, she thinks. She gathers her beach belongings now, a week after Labor Day, and recalls her old Bronx buddy, Joanne, who very early one blue-sky morning decided to take a mental health day rather than go to work at Cantor on September 11, 2001. Kathleen writes about Joanne, who slept-in and made love that fateful day, while thousands were atomized. She writes about all of the old gang, in one way or another, and to this day is amazed that they all survived. "*I believe in miracles*," she muses, as she packs her gear, "*I just don't believe they come from God.*"

She folds her chair, hoists her beach umbrella, and involuntarily lurches from the pain that bolts down her back. She recalls the words of an elderly colleague from Dublin: "*I used to be able to*' is out the window," the woman said. "When you get old, you do what you can do, and that's the end of it."

To get to her car, a lovable but ratty VW bug convertible, Kathleen navigates swarms of screaming seagulls, hobbles across the beach and considers the dune's rickety wooden staircase. The dirty birds circle in search of food, and Kathleen swears at them like a sailor, unafraid, as they flap their white wings, hover, and stare at her savaged stomach, long-ago pierced by three police pistol bullets. With a death grip on the splintered handrail she limps up the stairs, right foot first, right foot first, and considers a fine bottle of Meursault for the steamed lobster and sweet corn dinner that awaits.