An East Harlem Tale

by James Como (April 2016)

This was 121st Street, just west of Second Avenue, 1937. On the downtown side, stoops, alleys, and two or three stores. No housing projects or parking meters, plenty of fire escapes, many cases occupied as though another room in the apartment. And sidewalks perfect for craps. The kids would roll from the curb against the building. On the other side were the pushcarts filled with produce, bolts of cloth, clothing for all ages, hardware, and anything else a household might need.

"Kick in, kids. You don't want me mad." Everybody had seen Big Guy – that was his name – take two, three guys down in one mix-up. He was that big – must have been six foot six and two eighty – and even tougher than he was huge, like King Kong, a comparison he enjoyed four years earlier when the movie came out. But he still wasn't as tough as his boss Louie (Bronx Tommy's cousin) on Pleasant Avenue, two blocks east, right by the river.

Big Guy kept the cash he scooped from penny ante games like sidewalk craps and backroom poker. He called it a tax. But his real job was to line up the bookies for Louie who, among other things, ran the numbers bank. Once the bookies told Big Guy the number least chosen in East Harlem for a given day, he would tell Louie, who would call the track and tell them what the last three numbers would show as the total handle; say, $242,61*8.32*. So 832 would be the number. That's how the daily number was decided: no chance involved.

When Big Guy stepped into the game one kid, Giacomo, held out at first, until the other five guys told him to wise up. So he forked over a buck ten from his winnings. Big Guy smacked him anyway. "That's for hesitatin'." When he crossed the street he took an apple off Randone's pushcart and kept walking, king of the sidewalk.

All six of these kids would go to war, but as far as they were concerned they were already fighting. Gangsters. Hunger. Boredom. And especially the police, especially the Irish cops, who were most of the police. But what held them together most was their club, The Cavaliers, the main purpose of which was to

run dances. Every now and then Killer Joe Piro would show up, the best dancer anybody had ever seen or could see. If word that he was in the house made it to Lenox Avenue soon enough even black jitterbuggers would show up to watch him. And that was okay. He was that good, and, like boxing, dancing transcended race. The hall behind the bowling alley would be packed.

The six kids were Joey and Carlie Carfagna, Giacomo, Fat (the smallest kid and the skinniest anybody had ever seen), and the Dragone twins. Joey was the boxer, and he was good. One time Louie wanted him to throw a fight – it was on the roof of the settlement house because the Boys Club wouldn't touch it – but Joey said no and the next day he took his lumps. It would have been worse, but Joey's father, a small guy, and peaceful, but who took no shit, weighed in with two door knobs and cracked a few skulls. The real problem for Joey was explaining to his old man why those hoodlums were beating him. He couldn't tell the truth because the old man hated boxing almost as much as he hated gambling, which was still less than he hated gangsters.

Two days after Big Guy shook the kids down they were back at it. A real hot day, so hot you thought the bricks would boil, the sidewalks shimmering, with everybody out on fire escapes, some old school Caruso playing from Mrs. Pucci's Victrola. This time a cop broke up the game and took the dice. But not only that. This particular cop, a real *gavone*, smacked some bones, too. Fat went to the hospital with a fractured skull. This, they all knew, was what cops did.

The Carfagna brothers didn't come out for four or five days. They didn't even go to the hospital to see Fat. A smack from Louie's guys was one thing, but the cops . . . they put you in the hospital. Especially if they thought you'd fink out one of them to Mango, the Commie congressman. Even the little kids didn't open the johnny pumps so they could cool down. They were all afraid of the cops. Even Joey Dragone hung back, but he and Carlie had jobs with the ice man, taking the low floors, so they had to go out.

But Giacomo? He made sure to hit all his favorite spots. He went to 120th Street for some stickball, to Moe's candy store near Third Avenue (Moe always threw a maraschino cherry into his cherry coke), and to Dave's stand for hot dogs and knishes. (Like his favorite uncle, Johnny, who had died from a blood disease, Giacomo couldn't resist Dave's Gabila knishes). And he hung out at the Manaco Brothers butcher shop with his friend Shorty, a five-foot-six-inch chunk of

muscle with no body fat who was the only human being to hit a softball onto the Triboro Bridge. He made the salami for Solomon Manaco (a Jew who took his Hebrew salami seriously) and always made sure Giacomo got one every couple of days. The two of them visited Fat everyday. Shorty brought him a few salamis too, with Solomon's compliments.

Giacomo's big problem was that he had no job. He wasn't a thief by nature, and he didn't like stealing. It's just that he had no choice. The day Fat was getting out of the hospital, Giacomo went to get him. He stole some aspirin because he knew Fat would need them for the next few days. Then on the way home he stole some carrots off Mr. Medina's pushcart. Finally – for that day, anyway – he took some rolls. Fat had distracted Mr. Carbone the baker, which he didn't mind doing because Carbone wasn't from the neighborhood.

That Saturday night, to celebrate Fat's getting out of the hospital, they all met up for a card game on the Carfagna stoop. Things had calmed down a lot, and even Louie's guys were going easy. Also there was a new cop on the beat. He chatted with people, made no special trouble, listened a lot, and got to know names. But he had no patience with gambling, so when he approached the kids they thought he was about to roust them.

He wasn't loud and didn't play his billy, but the kids were jittery. Another broken head? One Dragone bent down behind him on the top step and his brother pushed the cop over and down went the cop. And stayed down. They all scattered except Giacomo. When he saw blood on the sidewalk around the guy's red hair, he ran to Moe's and called an ambulance. Then he kept running.

Three nights later Giacomo was on his way to Mrs. Ratomski's. He wanted to see her daughter Margie who was beautiful and also the one girl good enough to play stickball with the boys. He was holding some carrots for Mrs. Ratomski to put in her chicken soup, the best anybody in that neighborhood or any other neighborhood had ever tasted.

That's when he saw that same cop coming around the corner, moving smooth, like a column of blue smoke gliding along the pavement. Giacomo recognized him right away, but still too late, because the cop had already seen him. "Come here a minute kid" he shouted, and Giacomo turned and ran. The cop chased him uptown for three blocks, then Giacomo turned into an alley where he knew there was a

door to the coal cellar of Margie's building. But the door was stuck, and the cop had him cornered. "I got news for you kid." He was standing easy, kind of smiling. That smile scared Giacomo – scared him too much for him to mouth off.

"What do you want?" Where were those old snoops on fire escapes when you needed them? Or the pushcart guys? Or the Carfagnas? Or the twins? The cop stayed put but held his hand way out. Giacomo didn't move. The smell of onions cooking reminded him how hungry he was. Mrs. Ratomski could make much more than a great chicken soup.

"Here kid, take this paper. Show up at that address tomorrow at seven in the morning. Rico, that shoemaker on a-hun-fifteenth, he needs somebody to help out. I told him about you. He's expecting you." Then the cop put the piece of paper on the lid of a garbage can and walked away, just like that.

The next morning Giacomo showed up at the shoemaker, twenty minutes early, which impressed the old man, and the two hit it off. The old man showed him around the shop, saw his intelligence, got the feeling that he was honest, and hired him on the spot. A dollar a day three hours each day on Tuesdays and Thursdays; two dollars more for all day Saturday. Rico had even given him a buck in advance. Giacomo couldn't remember being happier.

This time on his way back to his own block he would buy the carrots for Mrs. Ratomski's soup, and when he ran into the cop he'd say thanks. But at Aldo's pushcart, that's when he heard the news. Twenty minutes ago, while he was at the store, the cop had been shot dead on Pleasant Avenue. Everybody would learn quick that Big Guy had done it, but nobody ever found out why and nobody said a word.

By the time Giacomo was drafted in '42 he and the old man were close, and Giacomo had a small piece of the business. He had never learned the cop's name, and he was sorry about that, but he would never forget him either. Or Big Guy. Every time he killed a German – and as it happened he killed enough of them to get a medal – that's who he thought of, Big Guy. Once the war was over – as his unit crossed the Rhine they all knew that would be soon – he would look him up.

Louie too.

[NOTE: The reader should know that this story is in memory of my brother, whose commentary and extraordinary memory of the details of this time and place were invaluable to its composition.]

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James Como is the author, most recently, of *here*.

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