

Goldie

by G. Murphy Donovan (January 2014)

“No one has ever become poor by giving.” – Anne Frank



Marc Chagall

Goldie was Sam’s face; or more precisely, the public face of the small grocery store at the corner of White Plains Road and Rhineland Avenue in the East Bronx. Sam’s was a literal mom-and-pop operation that hung by a fiscal thread after the Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company (A&P) opened a supermarket a mere two blocks away on Morris Park Avenue. Sam’s little corner shop survived longer than most small retailers for two reasons, the hero sandwich and wife Goldie.

Namesake Sam West was a laconic presence, quietly stocking shelves or laboring in the back room, while Goldie dealt with customers. Both were first generation naturalized Americans, immigrants from Eastern Europe, part of the human flotsam that came to the US during and after WWII. Sam’s wife probably had two assumed names, Goldie and West. The two were refugees from a world where obvious ethnic or religious affiliations could be lethal.

The store carried a small eclectic inventory: mostly milk, bread, eggs, canned goods, soft drinks, newspapers, and tobacco. Packaged goods were complimented by a small delicatessen where Goldie made sandwiches, not just any sandwich, but heroes.

“How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”

– AF

The hero was named for its proportions; made from an entire loaf of Italian bread crammed with a variety of deli meats and cheeses. Unlike the French baguette, an Italian loaf was about 15 inches long. Eating an entire hero was indeed heroic.

In the Bronx, good bread invariably came from an Italian bakery. There were no such things as

baguettes in the east Bronx, the French imitation of the Italian loaf. You had to go to Montreal or Manhattan for effete baked goods like croissants too. The Italian loaf fit in a bag also; you didn't have to carry it on a sling like a partisan carbine. Italian bread was substantial, broader at the shoulder and thicker at the waist; not unlike Goldie and Sam.

The authentic hero may have originated in the Bronx, but the idea of such lunch largesse spread far and wide. Other American cities would call it a hoagie, a submarine, a torpedo, or even a grinder. Still, if they were not made with a whole loaf of fresh baked crusty Italian bread, a sandwich could never merit the accolade "hero." Nonetheless, imitators still abound under all those aforementioned pseudonyms.

The most notorious fake is the so-called Philadelphia cheese steak, a sandwich which is supposed to be made from a tubular hard roll, sliced Delmonico, sautéed onions, and provolone cheese. In fact, most cheese steaks are made from undercooked play dough, mystery meat, and a crypto-dairy concoction called "cheese wiz." Pennsylvania gourmards like to think of the Philly cheese steak sandwich as "mystic meat wid wiz." Cheese softened in, and dispensed from, a plastic squeeze bottle is one of the culinary marvels of 20th century science.

Of course sandwiches, even the good ones, were not invented in the Bronx or anywhere else in America. Bread infused with other comestibles surely accompanied the cultivation of wheat, the advent of bakeries and aprons. The latter may have been, after the fig leaf, the second creation of Cro-Magnon dress makers.

"Memories mean more to me than dresses."- AF

Any baker, before the age of knickers, barbers and bikini waxes, standing in front of a waist-high oven was in danger of spontaneous combustion. Leather skirts were surely the original fire prophylactics for the hirsute tribes of Europe.

Given that the 'hero' is a kind of culinary hyperbole in the portable lunch world, that species of sandwich was probably, like drama in general and opera in particular, cultivated by Romans and then brought to the Bronx by Italian missionaries. An Englishman might dispute this version of history. Indeed, meat with bread bookends is named after the Earl of Sandwich, a family with several other quirky British distinctions.

A more varied selection of meats and cheeses might be had at a bigger deli, but no one out did Goldie's portions. Her signature hero was ham and Swiss cheese; mayo on one side, mustard on the other, a loaf engineered to be shared. Goldie would sell a half hero, but she usually drew the line at quartering.

A sandwich from Sam's was always served with a side of eccentricity or humor. Mayonnaise was an example. In Manhattan you shouldn't wear white after Labor Day. In the Bronx you shouldn't eat mayo between June and September. Summer and mayonnaise were bad news according to Mrs. West. If a customer insisted on mayo in the wrong month, Goldie would invariably serve lunch with a caveat: "OK, dahlink, but remember, too old too soon, too smart too late!"

"In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart." – AF

Mrs. West knew everybody, but she seldom troubled herself with names. All children were either "dahlink" or "sweetie," generous salutations because most kids from the Van Nest neighborhood were neither.

Sandwich making began early at Sam's. Mrs. West had several groups of regulars: the guys from the firehouse down the street, Consolidated Edison crews, tipplers from the Step Inn next door, neighborhood kids, and almost any family within a five block radius that lived from paycheck to paycheck. This latter demographic was not bound by affection so much as debt.

Much to Sam's dismay, his wife extended zero interest credit to a legion of deficit spending homemakers. Then as now, no one ran a tab for you at the super market. Friday was payday, so Saturday morning was settlement day at Sam's; indeed, probably the only day of the week when Sam risked a smile – or balanced his books.

Credit was not the only thing that made Goldie unique.

She was the nucleus of the neighborhood gossip constellation. Her local area network had three feeds; cash register chat, folding chair seminars, and stoop symposiums. Store chat was a daily constant. Folding chairs were deployed out front when the sun was off the street. The action moved to a stoop cluster at dusk. When neighborhood women sat outdoors they could catch up, police the misdemeanors of children, and "catch a breath." Weather was the inevitable opener for any Bronx mother cluster.

"I don't think of all the misery, but of the beauty that still remains." – AF

Adeline Collins might begin with, "Whew, there's never a breeze on the avenue."

To which Goldie would reply, "It's the buses, they use all the air."

"Buses, yes, then they leave a stink too!" Rosa Biaggi would complain.

"You would think a great city like New York could give you air that doesn't smell like a truck fart," Goldie opined. "There's always a breeze on the hill," she continued.

Such an observation was invariably a signal to adjourn to Marge Hickey's porch which was indeed on a hill at the top of Rhineland Avenue. There you could catch a breeze.

Here conversation would continue until dusk or the kids came home. Politics, race, or religion seldom made an appearance at stoop seminars. No politics because there was only one political party in Van Nest. Then as now, nomination was election. No religious discussions because the majority of neighbors were Catholics with a spritz of Jews. What's to argue about?

Comity is the only mandatory condiment for an ethnic or religious stew.

The ladies of Van Nest avoided touchy subjects as women are inclined to do everywhere. Social filters seem to be part of a mother's kit. Not so much with men or children, however. Men too often say what they shouldn't and kids pretty much say anything.

"Why do you have writing on your arm?" some urchin would often ask Goldie West. Sam had a tattoo too, but he always wore a long-sleeved shirt. Such questions would always render all adults mute – except Goldie.

Mrs. West would variably say that the tattoo was a phone number, an address, or her social security number; a kind of reminder, skin glyphs to assist a bad memory. Bad memory indeed, Goldie never spoke of her forearm tattoo voluntarily, nor did she discuss her early life in Europe. Mrs. West didn't say and nobody but children ever asked. Survivors seldom see themselves as victims.

“Look at how a single candle can both defy and define the darkness.” – AF

Sam’s was a hangout for kids because Goldie was a cipher to children – and a purveyor of Mission Orange and Yoo-hoo, beverages of choice for those too young to be corrupted by Pabst Blue Ribbon. Mister West was a mite cranky and would usually encourage any kid clutch of more than three children to go loiter in front of the firehouse. On the coldest of sunny days you could sit with your back against the red bricks of the firehouse, share a hero, and be warm.

Goldie was more constructive than dismissive; she was fond of singing the praises of her adopted land and regularly saluted the east Bronx as the “land of opportunity” (sic). Sunday was a day to hang out, the other six days of the week were “another chance” according to Sam’s wife. The grocery was closed on Sunday.

Nonetheless, most neighborhood kids were entrepreneurs. Allowances were unknown to east Bronx households. If you wanted some jingle in your jeans, you worked. The energy of poverty was the road up – and out of the Bronx.

Some child labor was seasonal; leaf raking and snow shoveling for instance. Car washing was always slack because few families owned an auto. Newspaper delivery and grocery hauling were steady year round gigs where any kid with enough moxie could make enough change for one of Goldie’s heroes once or twice a week.

Carts would rally outside of the A&P on Friday night and Saturday morning. There were no set fees. Kids would depend on the generosity of patrons. The hard work wasn’t distance. Most residents of Van Nest didn’t have autos but they did have stairs. A five story walk-up was a workout with two to four grocery bags.

All children had a wagon or cart of some sort; usually built from found wood and wheels from old skates or derelict prams. Little Tommy Donovan would rent to or build a cart for any kid willing to share their hauling profits. Lord knows his family could use the money. The Donovans were one of many that had a busy page in Goldie’s debit ledger.

The Wests didn’t have any kids of their own. Or none that anyone knew about. Goldie was a kind of a surrogate mother to younger mothers who struggled daily to manage too many kids and too few responsible husbands. Mrs. West literally kept the neighborhood books.

She better than any Bureau of Labor Statistics, understood poverty in the micro-culture that was Van Nest. If you had an account with Goldie, you were poor. Alas, poverty, then as now,

was never an absolute and even less of an occupation.

“Where there's hope, there's life. It fills us with fresh courage and makes us strong again.”

– AF

Frances O’Grady Donovan was one of Goldie’s accounts; “Frankie” to the neighborhood gals. Mrs. Donovan had four kids and half a husband. Frank Patrick Donovan was a functional drunk, never missed a day of work or an opportunity to buy the next round. He might have been just another blue color drone were it not for his diet. Donovan senior preferred to drink his paycheck rather than pay the bills. These were the days before selfishness was elevated to sickness.

When wife Frankie owed too much at Sam’s, she was too embarrassed to shop and often one or more of the kids became intermediaries. If a quart of milk was to be put on account, Mrs. West would often throw in a loaf of day-old. Sam’s wife refused to sell day old bread on principle. She gave it away.

Often the Donovan boys would show up at Sam’s after a good day at the A&P to put some money on mom’s account. Goldie would insist that the kids give their change to their mother rather than pay down the family marker. The boys would counter with an order for half a hero and a Mission Orange. Mrs. West would often produce a whole hero, quartered.

If the boys protested that they had asked for a half hero, Goldie would loudly proclaim:

“Sam, do you believe this? They ask for half and I made a whole. My mistake, right Sam? Four kids, four pieces, I was thinking. You get a whole for the price of a half, Dahlinks. Children should never have to pay for adult mistakes – from my lips to God’s ears!”

Goldie had a rare talent for saving your face without diminishing your worth.

“I have a religion and love...people who have a religion should be glad, for not everyone has the gift of believing in heavenly things.” –AF

Mrs. West was a contemporary of a more famous fictional Jewish matron, Molly Goldberg. The

radio and television show of the same name celebrated another raucous family in the Bronx where all obstacles might be overcome by patience, humor, kindness, and a nosh. Molly Goldberg was the quintessential Jewish mother with a heart as big as Bronx Park. With *The Goldbergs*, chicken soup and brisket became therapy.

Adeline Collins would often say that CBS could keep the Molly Goldberg fairy tale because Rhineland Avenue had the real deal, Goldie West. Mrs. West was sure to reply that she would be happy to trade Sam's grocery for just one of Molly's fur coats – or a train ticket to Florida. *The Goldbergs* may have been fiction, but those shows on radio and television may have done more for post-war defamation than a thousand books about Jewish history.

Alas, the Bronx is more Darwinian rumble than fairytale. One breezy September afternoon, Frankie Donovan and her four children found themselves and their belongings on the curb in front of 686 Rhineland, evicted as it turned out for the last time. There were no folding chair symposiums or stoop seminars that day on Rhineland Avenue. At sunset, Goldie closed her shop and carried a wax paper wrapped sandwich up to Frankie Donovan – the last hero the Donovan children would see for years.

Goldie sat with Frankie until after dark when Mister Donovan made an appearance. Frank Donovan didn't say anything to wife, kids, or Goldie West except: "Where's my suits?" He gathered his apparel and departed for parts unknown.

As Donovan turned the corner onto White Plains Road; Goldie, tears streaming down her face, shrieked at the darkness: "Frankie, Frankie, my Got, my Got! What happens to us? Too old too soon, too smart too late! Got, forgive us."

"Boys will be boys. And even that wouldn't matter if only we could prevent girls from being girls." – AF

Frances O'Grady, Frank Donovan, and their four children never again lived as a family. Mrs. Donovan became a permanent patient and her children became wards of the state. Goldie and Sam eventually folded their shop in the east Bronx and bought that ticket to South Beach, Florida.

Epilogue



Molly Goldberg (Gertrude Berg) died wealthy, surrounded by a loving family in 1966. Goldie West died peacefully in a South Beach studio apartment ten years later. She never got, nor ever again needed, a fur coat.

Anne Frank celebrated the culture of Molly and Goldie where fact is often more unbelievable than fiction: "If we bear all this suffering and if there are still Jews left, when it is over, then Jews, instead of being doomed, will be held up as an example."

Anne Frank, age 15, was murdered by Nazis at Bergen Belsen in 1945. She became the example of which she wrote.

The Donovan children thrived on the energy of poverty, eventually overcame the Bronx, and never forgot Goldie – or the true meaning of heroes.

G. Murphy Donovan writes about the politics of national security.

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