

Stomping Ground

Growing Up On The Streets of The South Village

by

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with Charles Messina

Chapter 15: **The Riot**

On the evening of September 8th, 1976, a group of young men armed with baseball bats, clubs, table legs and other weapons, stormed into Washington Square Park in New York City, apparently hellbent on driving out a particular group of people from that area. During the brief course of events several persons were attacked, resulting in a homicide and injuries to many others. Were the attackers Vigilantes? Racists? Or was there another reason for what they did. This is the true story of the Washington Square Riot.

The neighborhood was something worth protecting. That's how a generation before us had grown up. Keep the outsiders out. Keep to your own rules. Take care of your own problems. What the first Italian settlers had created in the South Village was a community governed by its own old world mentality. They did this through their sense of duty and commitment to family and order, and of course through their religion, Roman Catholicism, which bred a specific morality. Right and wrong were not always consistent but it was understood by all. Even though many of the worshipers back then were Buffet Catholics - they took what they liked, a little bit of this, a little bit of that, and they left the rest - they still went to church, said their prayers and believed in God. But the governing body which would dole out justice and settle disputes in the community wasn't local law enforcement. In the ethereal realm, God ruled. In the home, it was the father and the mother. Out on the streets, it was the wiseguys.

Italian immigrants came to America with only a few cents in their pockets but with plenty of sense in their heads. They had a sense of hard work and a willingness to assimilate to get what they needed - a job and a better way of life. They spoke little

English initially, so they would do menial labor that required minimal mastery of the language: construction, shoemaking, fish mongering, haircutting. To cut hair all you needed to understand were two words, "long" and "short."

What the Italians retained from the motherland was the value of community and a tribal sense of loyalty. They felt safer among their own. They felt understood. Not just because of the language but because of the customs and the belief system. America could be a scary place for foreigners. It was at once open and unwelcoming. Immigration was an invitation for unskilled workers. They were needed to help build a growing nation; a necessary nuisance to be tolerated by the Anglos, the Dutch and the Irish before them. The Italians were brought to the party but they weren't given a seat at the table. What was not offered to them they learned to take, and what was took was kept. When they didn't have a church that welcomed them they built one. Two actually. St. Anthony's of Padua on Sullivan and Houston and Our Lady of Pompeii on Bleecker and Carmine. When they didn't have an area to call their own, they established it. They created a community where they felt at home, with their own kind, and their own traditions. Their tribal bonds, established in the old country, were now a part of daily life in the streets. Their small businesses sold specialty products that were at first only enjoyed by other Italians: fresh pasta shops, pork stores, bakeries. These businesses and their patrons became the foundation for the neighborhood. To this day, some of these places still stand and flourish in the Village - Faicco's on Bleecker, Raffetto's on Houston, Vesuvio's on Prince. These businesses are now destinations for so-called "foodies." Back then, they were Mom and Pop stores serving a community that longed for a taste of the old country.

The South Village Italians were set in their ways, and that was a quality that made them strong in their convictions but also made them intolerant of change. They were creatures of habit in the ways that they thought and worshipped and lived. They had surrendered most of their language to assimilate publicly for the sake of work, while still speaking Italian at home. There were few accommodations made for those who did not speak English. No signs or announcements in Italian. It was English or bust. Italian immigrants learned to speak English by necessity without any formal education. They picked it up on the street. They learned the ways of their new country as a way to survive. They respected their new land and wanted to be a part of it, while retaining their own culture and traditions.

The neighborhood became a reflection of their values. It became their domain. Their home. They developed a fierce devotion to it and became protective of it, sometimes in a violently possessive way.

The Italians had a good 50 year run all to themselves in the Village, where their way of seeing the world was the dominant cultural influence on the neighborhood. In the late 1950s the bohemian counter culture movement began to encroach on the neighborhood. The 60s brought protests, flower power, free love, and drug use. Then the 70s came in, and introduced to the world an illicit drug culture that infiltrated the area and threatened the safety and security that had taken a generation to create. With the advent of this drug culture, Village inhabitants such as Beatniks, NYU students and even some neighborhood kids began buying and using drugs from the small army of drug dealers that began to crop up, mostly in and around Washington Square Park. A park that had been for families and children, students studying under trees, and pushcart vendors selling their wares, had turned into an open air drug den. A cesspool. Brazen pushers openly solicited and sold marijuana, pills and heroin to users. Non-users were harassed as they walked through. It got so bad that you could not get from one end of the park to the other without being asked to buy drugs. Police were nowhere to be found. The dealers controlled the park.

Joey had enlisted in the Air Force because of a sense of duty to country, and to get away from bad influences in the neighborhood and keep outta trouble. When he returned home, with an honorable discharge, he walked through the park and was taken aback by the aggressiveness of the drug dealers. He was in his twenties but still old enough to remember the neighborhood when stuff like that never existed. Not out in the open at least. He was pissed off to think of the women in the neighborhood, mothers, sisters, wives, girlfriends, having to walk through there and being accosted by these predatory pushers. He thought somebody should do something about it. A lot of people in the neighborhood thought something should be done. But who was gonna step up and do it?

There were some obvious choices who you'd think would take control of the situation. Take these lowlife pushers and chase them out of the neighborhood. The police were not one of them. No one expected that. By the mid 70s law enforcement had essentially given up on whole areas of the city and were reduced

to advising residents not to ride the subways after 6pm. Very helpful for those who worked nights! But the usual protectors, the ones that everybody looked to for order and justice, the so-called wiseguys, didn't seem to care. Why would they allow this garbage to go on in their own neighborhood? It was a question that baffled some, especially the old timers who wanted to know how this could be. How could they let these lowlives intimidate and threaten neighborhood people? That's not the way it's supposed to be. But that's the way it was. Why?

The answer hurt too much for many in the neighborhood to really accept. But it was plain and simple. The wiseguys, who were respected and feared, and in some circles even venerated, just didn't give a fuck. Because in the end, the wiseguys never gave a fuck about anybody but themselves and what was good for them and for their pockets. That's a hard fact that people in the neighborhood had to accept. That their heroes, the ones who had cars when nobody had cars, who ate in restaurants when everybody else ate leftovers at home, and who wore fancy suits when everybody else was in t-shirts, those same guys, didn't give two shits about anybody, except for themselves. The people in the neighborhood found it easy to hate the scumbag drug dealer on the corner, but didn't take the next step and ask: who put that scumbag on the corner? Who was making money off of that scumbag's sales? Whose wallet was getting fat from what that scumbag was doing? The answer was clear, if anybody cared to see it. There was a scumbag behind teh scumbag, and he was black or hispanic. He was Italian. But it's hard to hate your own. Much easier to blame the stranger, the interloper, the pusher on the corner.

There's no supply without demand. If you set up a lemonade stand and two weeks later you haven't sold one glass of lemonade, you kinda take the hint. And that's the end of your lemonade business. Drug pushers exist because drug users exist. It's plain and simple. Those aggressive dealers were strategically positioned on those corners around the park and inside the park because students, hippies, artists, professors, and yes, even neighborhood kids wanted drugs. They bought drugs from them. From recreational users to stone cold junkies, these dealers had a strong and consistent clientele. They were emboldened by their customers and the lack of law enforcement. The territory in and around the park became theirs. It was clear to Joey, and to other guys from the neighborhood, that their was no justice. There was *just us*. And something had to be done.

It all came to a head when a drug deal involving a kid from the neighborhood went bad. This kid Frankie, a lovable guy from Morton St, who was what we used to call 'slow minded', nowadays he'd probably be considered autistic, had a problem when he went to cop himself some dope. Like I said, Frankie was a little slow on the uptake. He was hooked on junk. I don't know if the drugs turned his brain to mush or if he was like that even before, but he wasn't right in the head. He'd make a few dollars delivering groceries or helping one of the supers take out the garbage, and then quickly deposit it with a dealer for his fix. Frankie was a junkie. But he was our junkie, a neighborhood junkie. And like I said, it's different when it's one of your own.

One day Frankie caught a beatin' at the hands of the pushers in the park. They took his money, slapped him around and sent him on his way without his stuff. Embarrassed, bruised and desperate, he went to Joey, who everyone knew had it up to here with the park and its inhabitants. When Joey saw Frankie, poor, hapless, helpless Frankie a victim at the hands of the dregs in the park, he blew his top.

Joey was waiting for a reason to put a hurtin' on the pushers in the park. He hated them with an abiding hatred, with a passion, as we used to say. He talked about it. Fixated. He did everything short of planning. Until Frankie came to him with a busted face. Then he was ready to put a plan in motion.

Joey stood over the dining room table in his tenement apartment on Thompson Street, with a large slab of paper on it -- battle plans. This sick bastard, ex soldier, neighborhood kid, was ready for out and out war. Frankie's face was swollen and puffy. Joey gave him an ice pack and told him to hold it to his cheek. One, to reduce the swelling and two, because it would keep Frankie from talking. Since he wasn't all there mentally, Frankie would tend to repeat himself. Especially when he was nervous. Doyle, a tough Irish kid from uptown, gripped a Louisville Slugger. Baseball bats, pipes, table legs and sticks were strewn about the room. Heavy artillery for an ensuing battle.

Joey was ready to go that night. His fury was clouding his reason. There was a knock at the door and Frankie was hoping it was Mikey, who Joey sent on a reconnaissance mission in the park. It wasn't him. It was Sanchez. Puerto Rican kid from the

Fulton Houses in Chelsea. Joey was recruiting. Building an army for this fight, pulling guys from wherever he could, making unlikely allies. On this day, everybody was a neighborhood kid. It was all hands on deck. Joey wanted to take down a drug dealer named Blue. Blue ran the show in the park and was in charge of all the other pushers. Blue was the target. But he was a bad ass motherfucker, surrounded by an army of his own - a legion of two bit pushers - who were on guard duty 24/7.

There was no love lost between Sanchez and Doyle. Spics and Micks don't mix. But sometimes my enemy's enemy is my friend. This was one of those times. Blue was the enemy, not tan, as Sanchez reminded Doyle. Everybody wanted to know why Blue and his boys jumped Frankie. Frankie held fast to his story that it was Blue and it was from outta the blue. Nobody believed that. Didn't matter. This was Joey's war now. It could not stand that a kid can't walk through a park in his own neighborhood without a bunch of fuckin' yoms startin' shit with him. They were gonna oay this time. Joey handed out the sawed off table legs and the chains. Sanchez was bringing a crew. Joey was waiting on other crews from the Sixth Ward and Chinatown too. A veritable United Nations of street warriors assembled to take down Blue and his drug dealers. Frankie swore up and down that Blue was always on the west end of the park. Except when he wasn't. Mikey was checking on that. Joey's plans were to seal off every entrance and exit point in the park to trap Blue and to corner him like the filthy rat he was.

The plan was for everyone to assemble at 7pm on the corner of MacDougal and Washington Square South. Then from there they would disperse to cover the eight entrance points into the park. Frankie was getting more and more nervous that Mikey hadn't come back. He was supposed to locate Blue and report back with his whereabouts. But the plans were in motion and there was no stopping them now. They'd push into the park, 50 strong at least, and they'd get Blue and his pushers and they'd avenge Frankie's beatin'. By the time word spread on the street, it was more like 100 guys, of all ages, creeds and colors, chomping at the bit to hit someone, most of them not really sure why. But once a train leaves the station and works up a head of steam, inertia takes over, and it pushes forward with great force, and speed, requiring a much stronger counter force to stop it.

The top of the Washington Square Arch has an inscription that reads:

"Let us raise a standard to which the wise and the honest can repair. The event is in the hand of God."

This event, this Riot, as it was called in hindsight, was a long time coming. Things in the park had gotten so bad, the city did nothing, nobody did anything. Much like the rest of the city at the time, it had descended into chaos. Vigilantism was the flavor the day, with films like *Death Wish* illuminating the problem of urban crime and the everyman's secret desire to take matters into his own hands. Vengeance was presented as a virtue. So while the media took the case and ran with it, calling it a Riot and Racism, the only thing they had right about was the first letter in those words, the "R." This incident was about revenge. Revenge for Frankie. Revenge from a group of guys who wanted the drug dealers out and wanted their neighborhood back. Another "R" word comes to mind, a Rumble. This was, in theory, a good old fashioned rumble. Unfortunately, like all acts of violence, things usually get out of control, especially when there is a large group of people involved.

Once the gathering of guys from the neighborhood and beyond stormed the park, all hell broke loose. They bashed everyone and everything in their path. Innocent bystanders were pummeled. It was no longer a search and destroy mission for Blue and his Boys, whose exact whereabouts were never confirmed by Mikey. It was a free for all. Instead of a drug dealer being hurt, a guy enjoying an ice cream cone on a warm September evening was beaten to death. It only lasted minutes but the result was horrific. The repercussions were also long lasting. Joey was arrested and labeled the ring leader. So were a bunch of the other guys. They were made an example of. The media ran with the story of white guys, Italian guys, driven by racism, who wanted these black guys out of the neighborhood. The only problem with that narrative is that, if racism were the motivating factor, how do you explain that of the guys who stormed the park that night, some were Italian, some Irish, and Latin, and Asian, and black. That never came up in court. So the word spread that Joey and the others were railroaded. Two years later, in 1978, the first state hate-crime statute was passed in the United States. It provided for penalty enhancement in cases where violence was motivated by prejudice against four "protected status" categories: race, religion, color and national origin. That same year, Johnny and 4 others involved were convicted of manslaughter in the first degree, conspiracy in the second degree, two counts of assault in the

second degree and riot in the first degree for their part in what was labeled The Washington Square Park Riot.

The wrongheaded nature of the actions taken that night in 1976 stem back to a very basic misunderstanding of property. Public spaces, streets, neighborhoods, don't belong to any one group. They're shared spaces, that no one group has a right to over any other group. The park didn't belong to the neighborhood kids anymore than it belonged to the drug dealers. Or the gays on Christopher. Or the artists on West Broadway. Or the transvestites on 8th Street. It was their neighborhood too. All of them.

Joey and the Italians may have felt a proprietary sense of ownership, a "We were here first" feeling of entitlement, but it wasn't theirs. Just ask the Indians about being there first and how much that really matters. Their Italian grandmothers and grandfathers may have built the neighborhood, may have put their blood, sweat and tears into it, may have made it a safe place where people would want to live and raise their kids, but in the end, it didn't matter. In the end, what did they get for it? A kick up in their ass. In the end, it wasn't theirs. It wasn't theirs to have or to protect. It didn't belong to them. They couldn't protect the neighborhood from the drug pushers anymore than they could protect it from the wiseguys who allowed the pushers there in the first place or who shook down local business owners for fake protection payments. When in reality the only people those proprietors needed protection from was the wiseguys themselves. And no one could protect the neighborhood from greedy developers who saw a gold mine in the old tenement real estate and turned it into a proliferation of chichi luxury condos and overpriced micro apartments. The old timers couldn't have predicted that, anymore than they could have imagined drug dealers roaming freely around their neighborhood and nobody doing anything about it. Until that one night, when somebody did. Joey and the rest of them. And then they paid the price for it.

The story of the Riot grew into urban legend and neighborhood folklore, with Joey being hailed a hero in some circles, and it being said that he was railroaded. Put on a cross for the sin of wanting to protect his neighborhood. Maybe so. Maybe his intentions were right. Maybe he was the only neighborhood kid willing to stand up to the pushers, and maybe that stands for something. Just maybe.