

Lessons

by
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"Well," Uncle Paul said across the breakfast table. "You have a girlfriend?"

"No," I said, shyly.

"Come on. There's got to be someone? A little red-head perhaps?" He smiled to entice a response. He was a thin man with a tight face, and when he smiled his cheeks pushed up his horned-rimmed glasses and his skin looked like it would tear.

"No." Then I said, "there's a girl I like, but I think she likes my friend Matt. I don't want a girlfriend now anyway. Brian has one and she bugs me."

"What's her name, this girl you like?"

"Mary."

"Mary? Good Catholic girl?"

"I don't know."

"Probably."

"These are good bagels," I said, trying to change the topic. I felt exposed and out of my element.

"Yes, they are. Do they eat bagels in New Castle?"

"No." There was more silence. "They eat a lot of hot dogs. But not for breakfast."

"The kids in your school, what do they do for fun?"

"I don't know," I said. "We skateboard and stuff."

"Do you ever do drugs?"

I stared at him. I was 12. No one had ever asked me that question before, not even another 12 year old.

"No," I said quizzically.

"Do you know anyone who does drugs?" he said. Then he added, "you can tell me, I won't tell your parents."

He was sincere, but it was the kind of question that makes a kid feel guilty for a crime regardless of whether he committed it.

"No. No one I know does drugs."

"No one? Maybe not your friends, but do you ever see any kids in school using drugs." His tone was one of curiosity, not concern. It was altogether different than if my mother were asking the questions.

"Well, you see it, you know. Some of the kids -- the older ones in the parking lot -- they do drugs."

"They do drugs in the parking lot?"

"No. But you know they do drugs. You can tell"

"I've something I want to show you today," he said.

Ever since I was old enough to drool, we went to visit Uncle Paul in Manhattan at least twice a year. And for as long as I can remember, I always felt dirty there. It wasn't Uncle Paul that made me feel dirty. Nor was it his apartment -- he was a successful journalist living in a very posh building. Rather, it was the gray color of everything else in New York -- the buildings, the people -- and the fact that everything in New York was dirty. But that afternoon, alone with my uncle, I got to see what real dirt looked like.

Uncle Paul drove me into Brooklyn. As he drove, I watched the scenery. There were cars parked in strange places and missing obvious parts. There were red brick buildings squeezed between other red brick buildings with windows stacked upon windows and clotheslines stacked upon clotheslines. There was trash. So much trash. And fences and gates with locks. And the dirtier things got, the less people we saw.

"The place we're going," he said, "it's not nice." I could tell that. I said nothing. "I don't want you to tell your parents I took you here, OK?" My parents were on vacation in Paris. I nodded. "OK?"

"Yes," I said.

Uncle Paul parked next to a corner mom and pop store. Trash lined the sidewalk, accumulated under the bus stop bench, piled up next to the store's stoop, and filled the street gutters. I saw empty beer bottles, broken beer bottles, cellophane, newspapers, cigarette butts, lottery tickets, brown bags, candy wrappers, and banana peels. I thought I saw a condom, but I was not sure because I had never really seen one before. There were four men sitting on the stoop drinking from paper bags. They stared at us as we got out of the car. They were black. We weren't. I felt anxious.

My uncle walked around the car, took my hand and walked me up the street. I looked down at the ground as we passed the four men. We turned the corner and walked up a hill. "Look at that," my uncle said. He pointed to a pile of trash in the alley behind the mom and pop. On top of the trash were three rats, each the size of my dog.

"Ewww," I said, and squeezed his hand tighter.

Most of the buildings on this street were lifeless. Some were boarded up, some were burnt out, and some were just empty. There were no cars, and there was more trash than ever. Up ahead, I saw three people in front of a small row house. They were black and they were watching us with threatening glares. I got more scared. Two of them were standing, one was sitting on the stoop, and they all shared a marijuana cigarette. "This ain't the 'Pire State Building," one of them said as we approached.

"I know," replied my uncle, and to my dismay, we walked right through them, up the stoop and in the door.

We entered into a relatively large, empty room. The smell was putrid: shit, burnt skin, mildew. The floorboards bent as we walked on them. Some were missing. The windows were boarded and the only light in the room came through the front door. There was trash in all the corners. We walked through the room into a small hallway with a staircase. Two men sat on the steps, focusing on us. Lying on the floor next to the staircase was a man with no shirt, torn jeans and no shoes. He was skinny and sleeping. A woman sat on the floor in the corner four feet from me. She looked like she was going to puke. Her shirt collar was ripped and I could see most of her saggy breasts. "I'll suck your little prick for ten bucks," she told me. Upstairs I could hear muddled voices. Occasionally, I would hear a loud thump. Otherwise, the building was eerily silent.

"Wha '*chu* want?" one of the staircase men asked my uncle.

"I'm here to see Bones," he replied.

"And who tha fuck are you?" said the other staircase man.

"Tell him it's the reporter," my uncle said. The first staircase man walked up the steps and disappeared. The second just stared like he was going to eat us.

Moments later, the first reappeared at the top of the steps. "S'okay.," he said. My uncle tugged my hand and we started up the steps. There was no railing on the staircase. Some of the steps were missing and I could see nothing but dark emptiness through the holes. I thought of the rats.

Upstairs things smelled a little different. Not better, but chemical. We entered a smoke filled room, presumably a former bedroom. Inside were four men. Two stood by the door as guards and two sat at a card table in the middle of the room. Behind them was a suitcase. Scattered on the floor were many small empty glass bottles. Both men smoked. "Sup?" said Bones from the card table.

"This is my nephew," said my uncle. "I wanna teach him about drugs."

"Funny lookin' white boy," said the man sitting next to Bones.

"This is the reporter," Bones explained in response. My uncle, I found out later, was writing a human interest story about a new drug called crack, and Bones was his anonymous source of information.

With Bones' permission, we left the room and walked down the hall, stopping at each doorway. In the first room, two men were lying on the floor, passed out. Newspapers covered one of them like a blanket. A woman sat against the wall lighting a pipe. Another man sat next to her, staring absently at the opposite wall and holding a lunch-sized bag of Fritos. In the next room, there were four people. A woman sat against the wall with the same missing look as the Frito man. Next to her, playing with one of those small empty glass bottles, was a baby in diapers. In the center of the room a woman gave a man a blow job. The room smelled like baby shit. In the last room were three kids. They were not much older than me. Two of them watched with anticipation as the third, sitting on the window sill, lit a small pipe.

My uncle and I left as quietly as we came. I had learned the tragedy of drugs that day. But the real tragedy was that I ignored it all when I got to college.