

## Look Out for Flying Meatballs!

Let's go back in time to New York City in the 1950s. I can set the scene for you in just a few sentences.

The Borough of Queens (yes, in New York City, counties are called boroughs) was where my family called home. The Guise family lived in a two family house located ten miles east of Manhattan, which is the “real New York City” to the rest of the world. Queens has a personality of its own. Back then, it was home to over 900,000 residents making it larger than all but six of the nation's most populous cities (and if you are really picky, Brooklyn had over 1,000,000 residents ranking it just above Queens in that hierarchy). It is connected to “the city” by two bridges and a tunnel that enable automobile and truck traffic to cross the East River. Perhaps the most famous of those bridges is the Queensboro Bridge, which was the subject of a popular song by Simon and Garfunkel in 1966 – *The 59<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge Song*.

### US Census in 1950

New York	New York	7,891,957
Chicago	Illinois	3,620,962
Philadelphia	Pennsylvania	2,071,605
Los Angeles	California	1,970,358
Detroit	Michigan	1,849,568
Baltimore	Maryland	949,708
Cleveland	Ohio	914,808

Each morning, subway trains opened their doors to hundreds of thousands of work-bound commuters and shuttled them via a network of underground tunnels to their jobs in Manhattan. The subway was the easiest and the most convenient way to commute from Queens to Manhattan. Eight hours later, the same trains were crowded again as

they transported those commuters back home at the end of the day. People rarely complained about those crowds because the cost of a subway token was only fifteen cents! Why drive, even though gas was somewhere around twenty-nine cents per gallon?



My father was the sole income source for our family during those years. While he didn't precisely work in “the City,” his place of employment was close. Each morning, he would leave our house at 6:30 a.m. and walk the two blocks to the subway's easternmost location (the 179<sup>th</sup> Street Station) and board the westbound “E” Train to the last stop before the train went under the river and emerged in Manhattan. He would exit at 23<sup>rd</sup> Street and Ely Avenue in Long Island City, which was a stone's throw from the East River that served as a common border for the Boroughs of Manhattan and Queens. He would walk the

two blocks to “Five Points” and the building that housed the Neptune Meter Company, his employer for over thirty-five years.

During the hours my father was at work, we could have been considered a single parent family. My mother was in charge of all decisions during the day. While this was the situation during most of the school year, it was especially true during the summer when my sister and I were off from school. She would get up early, guide us through our breakfast decisions (which usually included our choice of any one of the cereal boxes in our pantry), what we would wear, and the discussion of our plans for the day.

### **The adventure called breakfast**

At times, breakfast at our house could be an adventure. Our mother would set the table in the kitchen and put our cereal bowls and spoons in their proper places. Despite the fact that there were three of us on these mornings, she only set two places, one for me, and the other for my sister. From an early age, I was conditioned to believe that mothers were in constant motion during mealtime and actually ate standing up. Breakfast, lunch and dinner became patterns of conditioned reflex; we sat in the same chairs and in exactly the same position at our kitchen table. Jan and I were placed as far apart as possible by design. This was done to minimize any mischievous acts of teasing or taunting (usually on my part) that would occur between us. Those large cereal boxes could also serve as improvised privacy walls, and had served that purpose on many occasions. Since necessity is the mother of invention, these sessions contributed directly to my sister inventing the most powerful and effective word in her never ending battle with her other brother, “Stoooooooooooooooooop!”

On this particularly warm July morning, our daily routine had begun. As a ten year old, I stood next to my mother and my eight-year old sister at the pantry looking at our inventory of cereal boxes.

“OK kids, what would you like?” she said to us.

I scanned the four or so boxes on the shelf until I saw what I wanted.

“Alpha Bits. That’s what I’m having,” I said. So my mother stretched her five-foot frame (measured from the top of her head to the bottom of her feet when she wore heels), reached up and grabbed my cereal box. I took it and started running towards the table.

“Rob, slow down. Don’t run in the house!” she said.

“OK, mom” I said, knowing that sometime within the next hour or two I would again run in the house. I think my sister chose Cheerios, or some other not-so-exciting cereal. We sat down at our places and began to eat. I always thought that Alpha Bits was a pretty cool cereal to have for



breakfast. If you were lucky, you could find enough letters to spell out all sorts of words, especially the ones that could annoy your younger sister.

“Hey, JTP (which stood for the pet name I had for my sister . . . Janet the Planet), I just wrote your name with Alpha Bits.” As usual, she ignored me. Knowing her usual pattern of not acknowledging this type of silly behavior, I would then say out loud, “Yep, I had enough letters to spell J-E-R-K!”

I knew that would get her attention. She then peered around her Cheerios box to see that I had masterfully placed the letters J-E-R-K upside down to me but facing her on the table.

“Stoooooooooooooooooop!” she said in a raised voice that was certain to attract the attention of our mother who was temporarily out of our sight. I knew from experience that the next sound we would hear would be our mother’s



footsteps as she hurriedly marched back to the kitchen to see what was going on. I had to act quickly. Looking into my bowl of Alpha Bits, I quickly retrieved the letters A and N. My next move required near perfect timing as well as the expressionless face of a professional poker player. Quickly I picked up the E, R, and the K and put them in my

mouth with one hand as I placed the A and N after the J on the table with the other.

As usual, my mother’s voice arrived a few seconds before she did. “What’s going on in there?”

“Rob called me a jerk,” said Jan, playing up the situation as best she could.

“No, I didn’t” I said innocently but with some degree of defiance. “I just told her that I spelled her name with Alpha Bits. See!” as I pointed to the three letters I had quickly arranged on the table.

“Mom, he changed the letters,” said my sister.

The look my mother gave me told me that she wasn’t fooled, even for a minute! Mothers know everything!

## Stickball

We were almost done with breakfast when our doorbell rang. Mom told us to stay where we were and she would answer the door.

“Oh hi” she said cheerfully to my friends Anthony, Joey and Larry.

“Hi Mrs. G, can Rob come out and play? We’re trying to get enough guys for stickball,” said Anthony.

She answered, “He’s eating now, but he’ll be done soon. When he’s finished, I’ll send him out.”

Larry chimed in, “And tell him to bring his new Spaldeen.”

Mom looked quizzically at him and said, “His what?”

“His Spaldeen . . . you know, the pink ball we use for stickball. Yesterday, he hit mine into Wong-ee’s yard and I think his dog swallowed it,” said Anthony.

Hearing this conversation, I accelerated my pace, finishing my Alpha Bits in record time. I then picked up the bowl, held it at an angle and drank whatever milk was left directly from the bowl. My mother closed the door and walked over to me. I was just putting my spoon and empty cereal bowl in the sink.

“What’s a Spaldeen?” she said looking at me with a somewhat confused expression.

Without answering, I ran into my room and returned with a brand-new, never used pink rubber ball and bounced it once. “This is a Spaldeen, mom,” as I handed it to her.



She slowly turned it around in her hands and inspected it curiously. With a bemused look, she said, “The name on the ball says Spalding . . . not Spaldeen.”

“Oh mom, that’s what everyone calls them. Can I go out now? ‘Ant-nee,’ Joey, and ‘Fat Larry’ are waiting for me to get started,” I said impatiently.

She turned and gave me one of her motherly looks and said, “I wish you would call your friends by their right names. ‘Ant-nee’ and ‘Fat Larry’ aren’t nice names. Also, you and your friends shouldn’t call Mr. Wong ‘Wong-ee.’”

As I was going through the door, I turned and said, “What’s wrong with calling Anthony ‘Ant-nee?’ That’s how his mother calls him for dinner every night. Just listen and you’ll hear her say it. And Larry, well, he’s fat!” With that, I opened the door and ran down the street to catch up with Ant-nee, Joey, Fat Larry, and Angelo “Guadalup the Poop” Guadalupe.

Stickball was truly a “city” game. While it is a derivative of baseball, it is quite different. The game is played on city streets using improvised bases, not on a field of grass. It required only two tools: a rubber ball and a broomstick. No gloves were allowed. Bases could be fenders of cars, someone’s sweater or jacket, or if you were lucky and one of your friends happened to have a piece of chalk, you could actually draw bases in the street. These “fields” were narrow and long, at least from our perspective, and hitting to center field was encouraged because houses and rooftops to the left or to the right resulted in foul balls, or in a worst case scenario, “Spaldeens” that couldn’t be retrieved at all.

It was somewhere around ten o’clock in the morning and the five of us were standing on the corner. “Ant-nee” was the first to speak.

“We only have five guys. Who else can we get that doesn’t stink?” he said.

I thought for a second and said, what about the Dolans? Richie and Bobby should be home. Let’s call on them.”

With Angelo holding the “bat” and me with the “Spaldeen” stuffed in my front pocket, we marched the half block along 91<sup>st</sup> Avenue to the Dolan’s house. I ran up the three-step brick stoop that led to their front door and knocked. Mrs. Dolan must have seen us coming because I had barely finished with my third knock when the door opened.

“Hi boys, come in,” she said cheerfully. Mrs. Dolan was always nice to us. She looked like one of the mothers we used to see on TV. June Cleaver of “Leave it to Beaver” always came to mind. She was wearing a dress with an apron covering the front and she had a dish towel in her hand. “Bobby is running an errand for me and won’t be back for a while, but Richie is here.” She then turned facing the stairway that led to their upstairs rooms and called, “Richie, your friends are here!”

Waiting at the Dolan’s house usually resulted in a donut, a cookie, or some other type of food from Mrs. Dolan. Within five minutes, we left with a nice snack, and our sixth stickball player, Richie. Now we had enough for a game.

## Choosing sides

Stickball played in the streets of Queens was never an exact science. Two “captains,” who were usually the two best players picked the teams. That day, those captains were “Ant-nee” and Richie. Choosing who would go first could take the form of several options. The one that we used most frequently was “odds or evens.” Both captains would stand facing each other with their right hand balled into a fist. On the count of three, each would show either one or two fingers.

Richie was quicker this morning and shouted, “I got odds!” And with that, he showed two fingers while “Ant-nee” held out one. Richie won the first pick. “I got the ‘Poop!’” he said as he pointed to Angelo.

“Ant-nee” went next and chose me. “I got ‘Gizzy.’” (Now I really dug deep into the archives of my past to reveal this unflattering nickname that was thrust upon me during the formative years of my life. It stemmed from the numerous mispronunciations of my last name.)

Richie rounded out his team by picking “Ant-nee’s” younger brother, Joey. That meant it was “Ant-nee,” me, and “Fat Larry” against Richie, “the Poop,” and Joey. (I often wondered why some of our group had nicknames and others didn’t. How did Richie, Joey, and Phillip get away for so long without dumb nicknames?)

The six of us gathered in the middle of the street at the manhole cover that would serve as home plate. Joey had a piece of chalk that was big enough to draw the outlines of three bases, so there was no need to use car fenders that always resulted in uneven distances between bases. It was also important that the rules for today’s game were discussed.

- If someone yells “car,” everything stops and you clear the street until that car drives away.
- If you hit a ball into someone’s yard, you have to get it. If it meant hopping a fence, you had to do it.





- If you catch a fly ball that goes off a tree, a wire, or someone's roof and it hasn't hit the ground, the batter is out.
- If you were on base and it was your turn to hit, there would be an "imaginary" runner on the base you just left, and you had to keep track of him.
- During a play, if a fielder threw the ball and it crossed "home" before a runner scored, that runner was out and the other runners had to go back to the last base they touched.

Our version of stickball was "self pitch" meaning that the batter had the "Spaldeen." If he chose, he could throw it up with one hand, let it bounce, and then hit it, or do as "Ant-nee" did . . . throw the ball up and hit it before it bounced. The defense in a three-on-three game was simple; everyone played up the middle. The closest player lined up someplace between first and third in the center of the street. He would cover those bases (particularly first after a weakly hit ball) while the others were in similar positions, but proportionately further away from the batter. The outfielder had the largest area to cover, especially if guys like "Fat Larry," Richie or "Ant-Nee" were hitting.

### Wong-ee's yard

One of the problems with playing stickball on a city street, especially if you only had one "Spaldeen" was keeping it in play. Rarely would we start a game with more than one ball. "Spaldeens" and "Pennsylvania Pinkys" cost a quarter (or the equivalent of almost thirteen empty soda bottles returned for their two cent deposits). Even though our version of the game involved self-pitching, balls



were frequently hit into someone's fenced-in yard or landed in a rooftop rain gutter. 91<sup>st</sup> Avenue provided the widest and clearest street (it had fewer trees and parked cars than neighboring streets), but it also had Mr. Wong's fenced in yard.

Mr. Wong was born in China and immigrated to this country shortly after World War II. He and his American born wife, Virginia, had a daughter, Jacqueline. Their house was always neat and meticulously landscaped. It was one of the few homes in our neighborhood that actually had a lawn, flowers, and shrubbery. It was also protected by a four-foot high chain-linked fence that surrounded their property. The Wongs had a dog . . . a boxer named Taiwan, and during most days he stayed outside and patrolled their yard. As ten year olds, we saw that Taiwan was almost as big as us when he stood up and put his front paws on the chain link fence. What we didn't know at the time was that boxers, and Taiwan in particular, were friendly, and classic examples of that old adage, "All bark and no bite."

As our game progressed that day, we did a pretty good job of keeping our “Spaldeen” in play. I remember playing outfield and Richie hitting a long fly ball that I thought would never come down. Not because it was hit far; it wasn’t. It was hit high and somehow caught a tree branch that changed its trajectory about four times. Like a real-life pinball game, the ball bounced off several branches to the roof of Mr. Grant’s house to a telephone wire and finally into my outstretched hand for an out. Richie was pretty competitive, and by the time I had the ball in my hands, he was already heading for third. Shocked by the fact that his “home run” was now an out, he looked at me and said mockingly, “Giz, do that again and I’ll *clobberate* you!” Richie was always inventing words. *Clobberate* was a word he used all the time, as was *policideecop*, his term for a police officer. None of us questioned what he meant. The words he invented always made sense to us.

Stickball games can end in a number of ways; the most common reason is a lost ball. Several innings later, “Fat Larry” was hitting. He always took hitting seriously. This time, he bounced the ball, set his feet, and swung as hard as he could. The unmistakable sound of wood hitting rubber was next as the ball seemed to rocket in the direction of 182<sup>nd</sup> Street. Angelo “Guadalup the Poop” was playing outfield and he knew that this one was over his head. He stopped his run when he saw a car approaching through his peripheral vision.

“Car!” yelled Angelo, but it didn’t matter. Although that word automatically stopped play until the car drove by, Larry’s ball hit the car’s windshield on the fly. That impact changed the ball’s trajectory and direction, and caused it to land in the middle of Mr. Wong’s yard.

“Way to go Larry,” said Richie. “Now you’ve got to hop Wong-ee’s fence and get the ball.”

Looking nervous, Larry said, “I’m not going in there with that dog!”

As he spoke, Taiwan, noticing the new toy in his yard, trotted over and picked up our ball. He walked towards the fence with my doggie-slobbered “Spaldeen” in his mouth and wagged his small stub of a tail. When he got to the edge of the fence, he dropped the ball, looked at us and barked loudly.

All of us were somewhat fearful of Taiwan, but not as much as Larry. We never saw that dog bite anyone, but he was big, and barked at everything. He always seemed to have streams of slobber dribbling from his mouth. Richie had a plan.

“OK, Larry, here’s what we’ll do so you can get the ball. Poop, Giz, Ant-nee and me will start running along the fence towards the back of Wong-ee’s yard. The dog will chase after us. Once we get around the corner, you jump the



fence and get the 'Spaldeen.' Old Taiwan won't even know you're in the yard. Got it?"

"I think so . . . but no tricks. I don't trust that dog!" said Larry.

Richie chimed in, "Don't worry, we've done this before, but don't take too long. I'm not sure how long we can keep that dog chasing us and . . . well, you know. Just hop the fence, get the ball, and climb back over. It shouldn't take you more than five seconds tops." Just then, Taiwan started barking at us, and in the bright sunlight we could see droplets of spittle flying through the air in our direction.

"Are you ready, Larry?" said Richie. Then he looked at us and said, "Come on, guys, let's go!" On his count of three we started running, making lots of noise. Predictably, Taiwan started sprinting along his side of the fence and followed us. We got to the corner, but instead of continuing our run around the side of the Wong property, Richie stopped suddenly. We knew what he was doing, but poor Larry didn't. Upon hearing the rattling of the chain link fence and then the sound of Larry's feet as he landed on the grass and reached for the "Spaldeen," Taiwan skidded to a stop. He immediately changed direction as he spotted a new friend in his yard. Larry, fearing for his life, or at least for the seat of his pants, dropped the saliva-coated ball and practically jumped over the fence in one motion. We laughed as we watched his arms and legs scramble as he scaled the links of the fence in a fit of panic. Amid the sounds of the fence clattering and the dog barking, he finally made it over and landed back on the sidewalk.

Larry looked like he was about to cry. He was frantically gasping for air, but he was also furious. "That's not funny. You guys are real jerks!"

Richie pointed to the pink and very wet object lying in the grass just inside the fence and said, "Look at the 'Spaldeen!' That dog 'slobberated' it. Yuck! I guess our game is over for today."

### **Wednesday is spaghetti night**

On most nights, dinner at our house was predictable. On Mondays we had chicken, Tuesdays usually meant leftover chicken, fish or tuna sandwiches was on the menu for Fridays, but Wednesdays, they were spaghetti nights. The Italian side of my genetic makeup came from my mother. My maternal grandparents were born in Italy and came to this country in the early 1900s. Our family always



it could be served *al dente*.

upheld the tradition of long Sunday afternoon dinners and real homemade spaghetti on Wednesdays. By homemade I meant that our sauce started with tomato paste, not a can of tomato sauce, and that precise mixture of ingredients simmered on our stove for hours. At just the right moment, the spaghetti was put into a pot of boiling water and removed at precisely the right moment so



No spaghetti dinner at our house would be complete without meatballs, and my mother had perfected the art of making them. There were many afternoons I stood at my mother's side as she prepared our Wednesday night dinner. You could learn quite a bit just from watching, and I did. To this day, I can remember the ingredients she used to prepare those tasty meatballs. That list included olive oil, "lean" ground beef, eggs, breadcrumbs, oregano, and of course, her special tomato sauce. She would mix the ingredients and form each meatball by pressing the mixture together with her hands in the same manner you would pack a snowball. Once the meatballs were shaped, she would put them in the oven. Twenty minutes later, she would remove them and place them on a paper towel to remove the excess grease. The aroma that filled the room at that point would always drive my sister and me crazy!



This was a typical Wednesday. It was 4:00 in the afternoon, and the spaghetti sauce had been simmering on the stove for a while. This was the time my mother would begin preparing the meatballs so everything would be ready in time. My father usually came home at 5:30, and she always had dinner ready by then.

On this particular afternoon, my sister was sitting on the living room floor watching one of her favorite programs on television, *My Friend Flicka*. This TV series was about a boy and his horse set somewhere out west in Montana or Wyoming. I could never understand the appeal of this show, but Jan loved it, and would make a point of watching every episode she could.



Our kitchen was situated in the center of our long but narrow house. If you were to travel from the front of our house to the back, you would start with our front porch, then you would come to our living room, dining room, kitchen, bathroom, and finally to our bedrooms at the far end. This afternoon, while my mother was preparing the meatballs for dinner, my sister (who was minding her own business) was two rooms away watching her show. I was bored. Knowing that my mother was busy and would have her hands full at least for the next ten minutes, I decided to wander into the living room and hassle my sister. While there were a number of ways to do this, that day I decided to walk slowly back and forth between her and the TV screen. Annoying? Yes. Her response was predictable.

"Rob . . . stoooooooooooooooooop! You're blocking the TV!" she shrieked.

Again, in another predictable response, my mother turned her head from her meatball making, glared at me and said sternly, "Robert, (she always formalized my name when she was upset at something I did), what are you doing to her?"

By that time, I had moved slightly to the side and was clearly not standing between my sister and “My Friend Flicka.” I responded, “I’m just standing here, mom.” Before I finished my fabricated excuse, my mother already turned away from us and went back to her task at the kitchen sink. Knowing that she was two rooms away, I took a few steps towards my sister and stopped in front of the television set.

“Mom, he’s doing it again!” she said, only a bit louder this time.

Glancing at the kitchen, I could see my mother’s back. She was still making meatballs. Good, I’m safe. Then from the kitchen, I heard my mother say in a progressively more resounding tone, “Don’t give me a reason to come in there!”

Now my sister was genuinely aggravated and I knew that if I kept it up, my mother would stop what she was doing and storm into the living room wielding a wooden spoon or some other object capable of delivering a form of corporal punishment to my well deserving posterior. However, I could still hear the water running, so I knew I could probably get away with one more bit of childish behavior. I stepped in front of her again, but this time, I jumped back quickly so when she said something, as I knew she would, my mother would clearly see that I was just standing there minding my own business, but I was wrong.

As I looked towards the kitchen to see if my mother had reacted to my sister’s latest shriek, I felt something cold and wet slap against the side of my face. The force and speed of the object was a shock! It took a moment, but it soon became evident that my mother had hurled a wad of chop meat . . . an almost-formed meatball about twenty-five feet from the kitchen to the living room, and it hit me right in the side of my face!

### **Pushing the “Grow Up” button**

Later that evening, I was sitting on the bed in my room playing with one of my model airplanes. Since the door was open, my father walked in. He stood in the doorway with his arms folded, and with a disappointed look said to me, “Rob, when are you going to grow up and stop teasing your sister? Your mother told me what you did today, and she said you were acting like a five year old.” Even at age ten, I knew that one of the worst things you could say to someone who was ten was that he was acting like a five year old. An indicator that my father was in a “no nonsense” mood was that he had his arms folded across his chest. Those were the times I knew that I shouldn’t even attempt to say something funny or clever. So I went right into my defense mode.

“Dad, I was just having some fun.” I said, now knowing that he was really upset with me. My father was a man of few words, especially when he was angry. “Jan was making a big deal out of nothing” I replied.

“Well, you can think about it right here in your room tonight,” he said. “No TV!” With that, he walked out of my room, closing the door as he left.

When you are confined to your room for the night, you don’t have many choices. My ten by twelve foot room contained the bare necessities . . . my bed,

a dresser, a night table with a lamp, a small closet and a window that provided a view of our small back yard. From my seat on the bed, I could see the lights house directly behind ours, but because of a large tree in their yard, I could not see any activity. The sun would be setting soon, and I knew I would have plenty of time to think.

Generally speaking, ten year olds don't have deep, philosophical thoughts. I know I never did, but there were times, especially after being reprimanded by my parents for something they thought was much more of a problem than I did, that I would begin to question certain things. I also knew that this was not the first time I was told by an adult to "grow up," so there had to be something to it. What would it take for me to grow up?

I walked across the room to my closet door. There I could see my personal growth chart. It wasn't really a chart; it was simply a series of pencil marks etched on my door's wooden frame that marked progressions of my height. The last mark was done about two months ago with my mother standing next to me with a ruler in one hand and a pencil in the other. I stood against the door and she held the ruler at the top of my head and drew a small line and marked it with a date. I was growing! But that's not what my father meant. One thing was certain; I had to do something.



Suddenly it hit me. My name . . . it's got to be my name! I started thinking. My grandfather, my father, and I all had the same first name . . . Robert, so why were they called Bob and me Robert? Well, they were adults . . . grown-ups, and I was just a kid who everyone called Robert. What would happen if starting tomorrow, I made everyone call me Bob?

### **The following day**

During breakfast I was especially careful not to do anything that would be considered childish. I chose Wheaties as my cereal of choice and finished my bowl without incident. Since I knew that we were going to play touch football as soon as we could get enough guys, I told my mother that I would be going to hang out with Joey and "Ant-nee."

It wasn't until later in the day that we were able to get enough for a football game. Once Vinnie "Gadget" Gajkowski and Phillip showed up, we had five to a team. Even Edwin got to play.

Edwin Graf was perhaps the least athletic kid in our neighborhood. He was a year younger than me, and physically, he was much smaller. Edwin sported almost pure white hair and had piercing blue eyes. He was literally a genius in school, and even at age nine, it was rumored that he knew all about cars and engines from working on them with his father. We called him "Ed

Weiner Schnitzel.” Both of his parents were born in Germany and spoke with heavy accents. When dinner time came, you would hear his mother calling, “Ed-Vinn . . . come to dinner!”

During our preliminary “choosing sides” routine, I told everyone to call me Bob. I received a number of strange looks and a few laughs. I was sure that everyone heard me, but nobody listened. I was and always would be “Gizzy” to this group.

“Sure, Giz, we’ll call you Bob,” said Joey, but he didn’t. Neither did anyone else. Maybe my logically flawed plan to grow up fast wasn’t going to work.

From what I remember, that day’s touch football game was pretty much uneventful, and before we knew it, dinnertime had arrived. While none of us wore watches, all of us witnessed our game break up as the first of many choruses of mothers calling their sons to dinner began. The first was usually Mrs. Pollio calling her two boys. “Joseph, Ant-nee, time to eat!”

Within ten minutes, Richie and Bobby Dolan, Phillip Grant, and “Fat Larry” Cataldo heard their names. Once they left, there was no sense in trying to play any more football, so the rest of us started heading home.

I was walking with Edwin, who lived about five houses up the street from me, when he looked at me and said, “Robert, why do we have to call you Bob?” Perhaps if it were anyone other than “Ed Weiner Schnitzel” asking, I might have offered an explanation, but I didn’t.

“Because I said so!” I replied emphatically. We walked a few more steps in silence until that quietness was shattered by the most untimely announcement my mother could have possibly made.

“Robert . . . it’s time to eat!”

No sooner had she finished the last syllable when Edwin looked at me, smiled and said in a mocking tone, “Robert . . . it’s time to eat!” As he said it, he started to laugh. “Robert, Robert, Robert, *your* name is Robert. That’s what your mother calls you, Robert.”

Looking quizzically at Edwin, I couldn’t believe what he was saying, but more importantly, I didn’t like hearing it, especially from him. But he didn’t stop. Then he started to run towards his house, and as he ran, I could hear him saying “Robert, Robert, Robert . . . *your* name is Robert!”



That last outburst must have flipped a switch somewhere inside me, and I immediately started running. I caught up with him just before he got to his house. I jumped him and wrestled him to the ground and in doing so, pinned him there. As I sat on his chest I said to him, “Now, what’s my name?”

Without fear or hesitation, he said, “Robert. That’s what your mother calls you,” he said defiantly. I couldn’t believe it, but by then I



had a solution. Since it was trash pickup day, most of the neighborhood's garbage cans were still in front of their respective houses. In the 1950s, our trash cans were metal and contained metallic tops. Back then, nobody used garbage bags; you simply dumped your trash into that metal can and the trash men picked those cans up, dumped their contents into the bin on their truck and noisily dropped them back on the sidewalk. It was also one of our chores to take a hose to those garbage cans each week and rinse out any debris that did not make it into the garbage truck.

Not more than five feet from where we were was an empty garbage can lying on its side. I picked up Edwin and put him into the can, and before he could get out, I closed the lid. Within a few seconds, he toppled the can and got out. By then, I was five houses away and climbing the three-step brick stoop that marked the entrance to my house.



### **The dinner I never had**

I ran into the house to see the table set and my father and sister already seated.

"Wash up," my mother said to me as she started walking towards the table with a hot plate of soup in her hands. So, I rushed into the bathroom and started running the water in the sink. Then I heard the sound of our door bell.

My mother walked over and answered the door. Standing there was Mrs. Graf and her disheveled son, Edwin.

Mrs. Graf appeared to be very upset as she started the conversation. "Look what your son did to my Edwin. He forced him into a dirty garbage can. He is filthy . . . Look!"

Just then, I walked out of the bathroom. I saw both my mother and father standing in the doorway with Mrs. Graf. Her son, Edwin was hidden behind that wall of adults, but when my father stepped back and turned to call me, what I saw made me want to laugh even though I knew I shouldn't. There was Edwin, bits and pieces of garbage all over him, looking like he never had a bath in his life. I knew I was in trouble . . . big trouble.

Angrily, my father turned and said to me, "Did you do this to him?"

Amid my shock to see three adults and one very dirty boy standing at my front door, I had no choice but to admit that I had done it. The evidence was clear and incontrovertible.

"Yes, dad, but he kept calling me Robert and he wouldn't stop," I replied, although not convincingly.

Edwin spoke up, "But that's your name, isn't it?"

My parents were pretty much dumbfounded, not only by that action, but by my answer as well. They were trying to understand exactly what happened. Their neighbor's son, Edwin, got stuffed into a garbage can for calling their son, Robert by his proper and given name.

My father looked at me and said, "You need to apologize to Edwin and Mrs. Graf right now. Do you understand?"

With my eyes looking down to the floor, I sheepishly said, "Yes, dad."

I shook hands with Edwin, and as I did, I couldn't help but see the beginning of a smile start to form on his lips.

Within a minute, the front door closed and both of my parents turned towards me. It was my mother who spoke first.

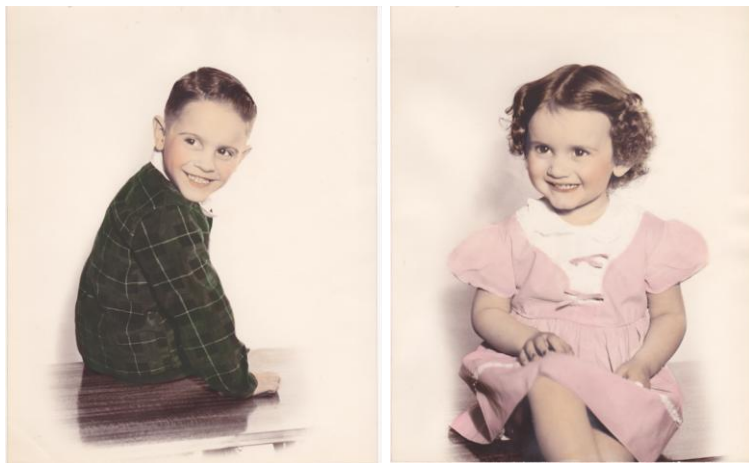
"That was stupid. You could have really hurt that boy. What were you thinking?" she said.

My father then took over, not giving me a chance to answer my mother's question. "Get in your room . . . now! No supper, no television, and no toys! I want you to think about all of this and I'll let you know when you can come out." I slowly started to turn and walk towards my room when he spoke again, "I thought after last night that you would have grown up a bit, but I can see that you haven't."

## **My Room**

That evening, I was back in my room, and it wouldn't be the last time. I never would get used to nights of no supper, no television and no toys. Those were lessons in life that I had to learn the hard way. It would take until 1981 for Jimmy Buffett to write a song featured in his *Coconut Telegraph* album that perhaps best describes me:

*I'm growing older but not up.  
My metabolic rate is pleasantly stuck!*



Me

“JTP”

### **The Characters**

Anthony “Ant-nee” Pollio  
Joey Pollio  
Richie Dolan  
Bobby Dolan  
Angelo “Guadalup the Poop” Guadalupe  
Vinnie “Gadget” Gajkowski  
Phillip Grant  
Larry “Fat Larry” Cataldo  
Edwin “Ed Wiener Schnitzel” Graf  
Robert “Gizzy” Guise  
Janet “JTP” Guise  
Mrs. Dolan  
Mrs. Graf  
Mom and Dad  
Mr. Wong  
Jacqueline Wong  
Taiwan