

The Devil Comes to the City

Sure is getting cold out here, Bill thought to himself as he pulled the old parka closer around his skinny, chilled frame, the frigid November winds whirling around him. His mother told him that he had to wear more on his body than just his thin Three Dog Night t-shirt, and fortunately, she had enforced the donning of the coat before allowing him outside. Mom was always right about how cold it might be, especially around Lawrence Ave and Broadway Street, famously known as one of the windiest intersections in both the uptown area and the city itself.

Bill decided that he sure could use a hot chocolate. He pushed against the winds to get through the double glass door set entrance of Mar's Restaurant, a favorite place he liked to go when not attending Saturday afternoon western movies at the Uptown Theater or Riviera Palace.

Carefully he slipped past the assortment of Juicy Fruit, Doublemint, and assorted Life Savers candies available behind the glass case at the restaurant's steely cash register. Bill claimed a seat at the soda bar, next to a crowd of burly area workers, dirty and gruff in their worn-in sweatshirts and unshaven faces, slopping away their sizzling portions of scrambled eggs and greasy bacon.

"And what can I get for you today, young man?" the woman behind the soda bar asked as she smiled in relief, for she knew that Bill was no challenge to her day-to-day duties, nothing like the aggressive men sitting close by. Bill reminded her of her own children, whom she cared for without spouse.

He checked the supply of coins in his one worn pants pocket that did not have holes. Happily, he discovered that a large helping of the warm elixir was affordable.

As the waitress wrote down his order and turned to accommodate it, Bill spotted the jukebox control at the edge of the bar. It was impressive how things were advancing; here, a patron controlled the music, which piped through the restaurant, without having to address the jukebox itself. Turning through the selection plates, he found "Love Child" by the Supremes, one of his favorites from the latter part of the previous decade. Nevertheless, the price had risen from one dime to two, and now he debated whether he really wanted to pay for the new technology. Loretta Lynn currently resonated through the air, and the others at the bar might object to his changing the venue from country to Motown.

No, he decided through his meticulous analysis as the waitress returned with his order; he would just listen to their selections.

"Here you are," she replied, returning with his hot chocolate. Bill smiled at her as he received the drink. She had relieved him of his latest deliberating quandary.

"What you doing, man?" Bill's good friend from down the block, Hank, asked as he arrived at the soda bar, bringing with him his brusque demeanor.

"Hey, man. Just warming up." Bill returned the inquisitive greeting, ensuring he correctly used the current slang.

"Can I get some of that hot chocolate?" Hank pleaded, the mouth-watering swirl of white whipped cream still standing on top of the smooth, blistering beverage.

"Sure, just a minute ..." Bill promised as he slurped selfishly on the cup, destroying the integrity of the velvety whipped topping. Hank smirked in dismay, for Bill had gotten the first share of the steamy drink before he could.

Bill smiled at Hank's displeased reaction. It was always a spectacle to watch Hank fall into his

own fretfulness.

When delivered to his home after an evening of street shenanigans, Hank's mother always awaited to inspect him in his waywardness.

"Hank, you've been smoking that God-damned marijuana again!" his mother declared in her hillbilly accent, chasing her son around the kitchen table with a broom. She was clearly prepared to knock some sense into the young man. His friends laughed themselves to tears about this, rolling down the concrete-stepped entrance of the brownstone apartment building where he lived.

The brick building Bill and his family called home was one of four in a surrounding cluster, which formed a huge concrete play area. The neighborhood often engaged in a challenge of pinner there, a game played by bouncing a rubber ball against a window ledge, fielded with baseball-style rules. Many a window shattered this way, but due to the spirit of Ernie Banks and the (almost) pennant-contending Cubs, janitors sworn to the upholding of these structures merely replaced the broken glass with plywood sheets, not disrupting the spirit of competition that the game produced.

Two boys in the neighborhood were Michael and Larry, fair-haired Irish brothers who lived with their grandmother Gobby in a building outside Bill's cluster. Gobby's cries of "La-r-r-e-e-y! M-i-c-h-a-e-l!" were famous on that concrete block of Glenwood Avenue. She often sat at the edge of her second floor apartment window, calling her boys back home for dinner, her shrill voice piercing each late afternoon's dimming sky.

An old game the boys liked to play, named "Stretch", mimicked the famous board game called Twister. The sport required a switchblade knife, thrown into the grass, marking a spot where a contender was obligated to place their foot. One girl from the neighborhood was famous for tossing the blade into the most undesirable places, soiling both the knife and bringing great disorder to the game. No other person would do that to another guy's blade, so she retained a distinct advantage in this regard, revered as the Stretch champion of the block.

For the older boys in the neighborhood, their blades were the sign of their manhood, enabling them to join the gangs of the street. The founders of those gangs were now members of the military, supporting the overseas conflict in Indochina.

Many a youth had gotten into trouble with these gangs, and the mothers of the neighborhood did what they could to prevent their young from falling into allegiance with such sinister groups.

For Bill, this meant that the sting of his deceased father's belt was the result of any breach of behavior, despite the harshness of this punishment. Swearing, showing disrespect, and causing conflict with the other children were all actions that brought about Mom's wrath and rage. There was much frustration and loneliness to raising three kids as a single person, and she easily lost patience with those she most deeply loved.