

# SUNNY'S NIGHTS

Lost and Found  
at a Bar on the  
Edge of the World

TIM SULTAN



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on the Edge of the World*

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# Contents

*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

Chapter 1: Antonio

Chapter 2: Divine Athambia

Chapter 3: The Last Small Town in New York City

Chapter 4: Arcadia

Chapter 5: Two Rivers

Chapter 6: The Aleph

Chapter 7: Balzanos and Traviias

Chapter 8: The Japanese Zero That Sank in the Mississippi-Hudson River

Chapter 9: Young Virginia Woolf

Chapter 10: Speakeasy

Chapter 11: That's the Way It Was Around Here

Chapter 12: Enrico

Chapter 13: Radio Days

Chapter 14: Cézanne's Fruit

Chapter 15: Ivory-Billed Woodpeckers

Chapter 16: Two Roses

Chapter 17: Samsara

Chapter 18: Two Joes

Chapter 19: Kennedy

Chapter 20: No Guru, No Method, No Teacher

Chapter 21: Good Friday

Chapter 22: The Great Criminal Hugh Hefner

Chapter 23: The Heart of the Matter

Chapter 24: Francisco

Chapter 25: Christina's World

Chapter 26: Exposition Fermée

Chapter 27: Disappearances

Chapter 28: Sometimes a Great Notion

Chapter 29: All Summer in a Day

*Dedication*



## Antonio

There is a corner turned, a direction taken. There is a door opened in everyone's history that they can identify as the moment life, for better or worse, took a different course. Eve bit an apple. Dante saw Beatrice. Jack met Neal. For me, that corner, that direction, that door appeared late in the winter of 1995. The place was Red Hook, Brooklyn, the hour late, the mood desolate. I had gone to the night's last showing of Woody Allen's *Bullets Over Broadway* and while driving home from the theater, mulling over the movie, I had half-absentmindedly continued straight where I usually took a left, slipping beneath an overpass and entering a neighborhood I knew only by its forbidding reputation. There were no other cars and no people and long stretches of shadow between the streetlamps. I drove on. Deliberately getting lost had been a pastime of mine since early childhood. I was raised by parents who only asked that I be home before sundown. By adolescence, I had lost my bearings in Laotian rice paddies, German forests, and a West African city where the practice of naming streets had not yet been widely adopted. In college one autumn, I courted a woman by inventing a game in which one of us would close our eyes and pretend to be blind, while the other made believe they were mute, and the mute person would lead the blind one by the hand on late evening ambles through professors' backyards and frosty Ohio pastures. By winter, we could have written dissertations on the merits of disorientation but we merely fell in love instead.

That Friday night in Red Hook I was twenty-seven years old, and again I found myself taking left and right turns seemingly at random, unsure whether I was sightseeing or soul-searching. A succession of low-slung industrial warehouses and towering fuel tanks gave way to darkened fields and from behind them the silhouette of an enormous building rose up, as still and monstrous as a pyramid. Bare trees bordering the road were the only living beings in sight. More turns. The pavement soon gave way to cobblestones and I slowed the car to a walking pace. Another building, vaguely Georgian, came into view. Its doorways and arched windows were sealed with bricks giving it the look of an asylum or prison or school, irrevocably shuttered. I deciphered white letters near the top: *Shipyards Corporation*.

Other lone structures appeared and melted away in my headlamps. I continued straight until I could go straight no farther. I had come to another corner. *Conover Street*, read the sign. Ahead behind a rusty gate, stretched a barren lot and beyond that the water of the harbor shimmered faintly. To my right stood several satellite dishes, so immense they seemed capable of beaming the messages not only to New Jersey but to new planets. To the left more signs appeared in the gloom, or

profoundly weird (*Animal Hair Manufacturing Company*) and the other weirdly spare (*Bar*). I pulled over and turned off the engine. I looked up and down the cobblestone street. There was no movement, no sound. I was alone and the sense of solitude that descended on me was as absolute as that usually only found in dreams. I wavered but a few moments before getting out of my car. Where bars were concerned, my spirit of inquiry always seemed to prevail over a sense of caution. I paused at the first building, *Animal Hair Manufacturing Company*. What could it mean? I walked on toward the next sign, *Bar*. I knew of a bar called the No Name Bar but I had never seen a bar that literally had no name. I had come to a place, it seemed, where the world was returning to its most elemental properties.

I took a few more tentative steps until I stood beneath one of two faded brown awnings. Between them was a simple wooden door containing three peephole windows ascending from left to right, though to accommodate lookouts of varying heights. Two more storefront windows on either side of the door emanated a faint light and in this glow I could see a wooden ship and a black-and-white photograph of a sailor from an earlier generation resting on a ledge inside. The picture might have been taken during the Second World War.

I considered the forlornness of the area and of the night. I had entered a lot of bars in my life and rarely with hesitation. An early bloomer of a sort, I had my first tavern beer at fourteen and graduated high school with the inglorious honor of being voted by my classmates as the student most likely to be found not in a bar—that distinction went to my best friend—but under a bar. While I had gotten dissipation out of my system by the time I was an adult, I still knew my way around bars in the way a person raised on a farm never forgets how to cross a livestock yard. I reached forward and pulled open the door and stepped inside. Every one of the two dozen faces in the room was turned toward me. Pale faces, male faces, their attention to my entrance so complete, I might as well have burst into act I, scene 2 at the Delacorte. It was too late to turn around and exit stage left without feeling the fool. And so, I let the door softly close behind me.

In the brief time it took for my eyes to adjust to the dim light, I realized that the collective gaze was directed not at me but a movie screen that hung to the left of the door. A projector hummed in the rear of the room, its beam cutting through the gloom like a locomotive headlight. On the screen opening credits were just beginning to appear. Martha Graham. Aaron Copland. Isamu Noguchi. Social dancers in pioneer dress were swirling in black and white. Tinny classical music played. To the right, stools lined the bar. I slid onto the third one in and swiveled toward the screen. Among the several scenarios I'd considered moments before as I had paused on the stoop outside—most involving a roomful of repeat offenders as glad to see me as their parole officers—a collection of men quietly smoking and watching a classic of modern dance had not been one of them. Encouraged, I waved to a figure leaning back against a counter behind the bar and, in a low voice, asked for a beer.

“How about a Rheingold?” whispered the shadowy form.

“Sure. Rheingold,” I replied, and returned to the dancers.

My neighbors up and down the length of the bar and dotting the room were as absorbed by the show as an orchestra-row audience. Following suit, I, too, let myself be drawn in to the story of newlyweds starting out life on the American frontier. *Appalachian Spring*, like all of Copland's cheerful music, had always had the approximate effect on me of sour milk, but after a few minutes I decided that beer and a crude sound system improved him. Ballet, too, was made more tolerable when observed from a barstool. The pangs of torment I usually began to feel at such performances didn't begin to set in even as I watched for a good twenty minutes. After the screen at last went dark,

middle-aged, bookish-looking man with a trimmed white beard and glasses quickly began exchanging reels. ~~Before anyone had much chance to stir, the projector started up again and we were watching~~ documentary on Brooklyn bakeries that was narrated with the earnestness of a middle-school social studies film on the catacombs of Rome and appeared to have been made around the last time a general was president of the United States. As bread baked and yeast rose, seemingly in real time, I wondered a little where this night was headed. Not two hours earlier I had been sitting in an ordinary movie theater in a familiar part of town, taking in a light crime caper with a bucket of popcorn in my lap. Now I found myself in the dark of an entirely different kind of theater, one where the program seemed to have been chosen with the help of a roulette wheel. By the time the next selection, an abstract show by Stan Brakhage made with moth wings and leaves, was under way, I began to speculate whether there wasn't a method to the madness. Ballet, bakeries, Brakhage—if we remained in our seats long enough, would we eventually move on to cabalism, calligraphy, Caligula...

But the final movies of the night were several silent cityscapes of 1970s New York, shot, our curator explained between reels, when he was with a girl who had a peyote habit. The girl appeared several times, sitting mutely on a couch, as the camera swung from one window to another, each a framed portrait of the city skyline.

The whirring projector stopped for good and a few yellow lights were turned on. I gestured down the bar for another round. As I waited for my beer and gazed around the room, a spindly, hollow-eyed man with a guitar in hand suddenly stood up and announced he was going to sing a song he had written in a Texas basement. His voice was resolutely unmusical and his guitar playing paid a debt to clanging radiators but the song's refrain would have made greater and lesser poets despair with envy: "She's not a vixen, she voted for Richard Nixon." What a line!

I sat on the stool, twirling my now empty bottle, taking it all in.

The films. The singer. The nautical farrago that cluttered the walls and shelves. The trio of coffee urns the size of fire hydrants near the front door, the Blatz Beer boiled-egg dispenser, the plastic mannequins of stars of the silver screen—Bogart, Fields, Durante, Marx (Groucho), West, Marlon (Harpo)—mingling in various corners. The bar counter was charred in places where cigarettes had been stubbed out. A painting of a horse hung on one wall in a spot where over time just enough sunlight must have fallen to bleach the head out: a headless horse in a nameless bar. A hook, which looked as though it once served as someone's prosthetic hand, dangled from a chain of Christmas lights. And high above the bar sat several model ships in glass cases. There were no pinball chimes, no televisions turned to hockey, no machines at all (other than the projector and the stereo tucked somewhere behind the counter on which Julie London was now singing). The letters *Avenue P* pointed the way to the bathroom, but there was no signage that would give away the year or the decade we were in. Only the clothes of the customers revealed the era, and then only fitfully. The bar looked old and worn but not in the overly careful manner of certain New York saloons where amber beer seems to take on a whole new meaning.

My eyes came to rest on the barkeep. He was laughing, chatting, smoking as he made his way along his side of the bar with my next Rheingold. From a distance, he looked vaguely Native American, like Chief Dan George of *Little Big Man* fame. But he also resembled Tony Bennett, Tony Bennett had last seen a barber in 1957. Up close, I decided that if one took Tiny Tim's hair and put it on Gertrude Stein's face, one would get a very good likeness of this man. From what little I had heard of his voice, he sounded kind of Irish, but when my beer arrived and I introduced myself, he said, "My real name is Antonio. Antonio Raffaele Balzano. But please. Call me Sunny." He gripped



my hand in both of his and leaned across the bar.

He was tall and very slim but the features on his face were large and rounded as a ship's weathered figurehead. His eyebrows were two silver caterpillars that had come to a halt while walking an Indian file across his brow. His fingers were as thick as a stout woman's wrists. In the shadows, he had appeared a little otherworldly and a little epicene—less the ghost of the Ancient Mariner than that of the Mariner's sister. But now he grasped my hand with the vigor and enthusiasm and curiosity of a man coming upon a compatriot after months lost in the jungle. It was a greeting startling in its sincerity and intensity, and one that I would come to see made to others many times. It expressed, "You belong." To say that he exuded charisma would be like saying Mussolini liked to hear himself talk.

—

ANTONIO—SUNNY—EVENTUALLY continued on, stopping to speak with each person or party seated at the bar. I watched him and I watched how everyone else kept an eye on him, as if awaiting a turn to be in his company. He kept a cigarette continuously lit and often tilted his head back to blow plumes of smoke in the air. He sipped whiskey out of shot glasses that looked like thimbles in his hands while telling stories about rats he had slain at various times in his life. Though I only heard snatches, I assumed he meant the kind with whiskers and tails. He recited several lines of what I took to be Shakespeare. He pronounced words in a way I had never heard before. He might say, "I ate a plate of ersters and then I slipped on some erl on my way to the terlet." He used strange words rarely heard in casual conversation, like "verbiage" and "personage." And he used words strangely, saying for instance, "Within the framework that it is that it is that we're existing in."

I was certain that I had never encountered a more arresting presence.

I stayed awhile longer in the hope Sunny would come back over to where I was sitting but he was so deeply engrossed in conversation that eventually, I put my jacket and cap on and slipped out the door as quietly as I had come in, knowing I would be back.

But the next time I returned—and the one or two times after that—I found the bar dark, the door locked, the street deserted. I cupped my face against the window and peered into the inky darkness inside but there was no sign of Sunny, of the projector's flicker, or of any of the drinking, smoking men who had been there that first night. The sailor in the photograph in the window was the only witness who could corroborate that the night had taken place at all.

Months passed, until one evening in September I was returning from a quiet dinner with a onetime flame in Manhattan and feeling that restive curiosity again. I decided to give Sunny and his bar one more try. I slowly drove down his block and as I passed the two shabby awnings, I thought I could detect a glow coming from inside. I parked by the Animal Hair Manufacturing Company. I walked to the front door and I saw that the colored Christmas lights strung up behind the bar were lit again and I entered and sat at the same spot, three rickety barstools in. Many of the same faces were there. When Sunny saw me, he strolled over, cried, "Timmy! How are you, my buddy?" and leaned across the bar to embrace me.

"You remember my name?"

"Of course I do. How could I not?"

And so our friendship began.

## Divine Athambia

I soon learned that this bar of Sunny's, the bar with no name and therefore no listing in the phone book, had been in his family since the beginning and he himself had practically been born there. I also learned that it was only open every seventh day, like a roadhouse in the Old Testament. This struck me as less than sound business practice, but the business of running a bar did not appear to be the business that Sunny was in. I couldn't remember ever meeting someone so free of worry about making money, about rules, about doing things in the accustomed way. I noticed that Sunny carried remarkably spare stock—a few staples, Romanian vodka, peach and blackberry brandies. Wino liquor. He served wine from cartons, strongly reminiscent of communion wine (though any priest serving Holy Communion with this stuff would quickly have a dwindling parish on his hands). Although there were vestiges of taps, there was no actual draft beer to be had; Sunny explained that he opened to infrequently to keep it fresh. If one was nevertheless dead set on having a beer, he leisurely reached behind him into a wooden cooler built into the back counter, not overly concerned whether it was Budweiser, Rheingold, Heineken, or Schlitz that he fished out. All beers—all drinks, for that matter—were three dollars at Sunny's. He showed even less concern if a customer, impatient for service, came around the bar and simply helped himself.

Sunny was not in the least proprietary, at least not overtly. If a person expressed admiration or fidelity to his bar, he would say, "My bar? This isn't my bar any more than it's anyone else's bar. I don't belong to me. It belongs to each of you who have come here and have served to make it what it is that it is. It's our bar, aye?" He appeared to mean this in the most sincere way. It was an outlook that emboldened customers to make whatever contribution to the humanities they wished. They weren't always obscure films being projected or ingenious songs being sung, though a bakery-truck driver with a guitar and a Maine accent thicker than Edmund Muskie's usually got up once a Friday and sang of his Long Island route, "You can have it all / Any way you like / You can have it all / On the Jericho Turnpike!"—perhaps the most hopeful sentiment about a stretch of road since Nat King Cole first crooned, "You can get your kicks / On Route 66."

There was a sense that one was off the leash here. The culture that I came upon at Sunny's was distinct and self-generated one, as you might expect to find on an island far from any shore. If a stocky biker named Ross wanted to stand in the middle of the room and play two trumpets simultaneously, sounding less like Rahsaan Roland Kirk than a subway car's brakes thirsting for oil,

Sunny was unperturbed. If a chauffeur wanted to noisily recite Harold Pinter (“You have a wonderful casserole...I mean wife”), Sunny was appreciative. If the rare woman patron, and an adult entertainer no less, wanted to perform an interpretive dance of Aphrodite’s birth wearing something less than pasties, Sunny was understanding. And if a tugboat captain, addressed as Captain Ritchie both on and off the water, decided abruptly to yodel, and yodel very ably at that, Sunny loved it. He loved because he seemed to love people in an absolutist manner that I had rarely seen. His affection for them, his curiosity about their histories, and his appreciation for their customs and eccentricities were apparent in the way he engaged his patrons and in his habit of extolling their virtues and their vices. He particularly loved vices. He always seemed to be exalting people, whether to their faces, behind their backs, or, as he often did, indirectly while telling a story.

One night in those first few months at the bar, Sunny, looking into the middle distance, had begun reciting Lucky’s monologue from *Waiting for Godot* (he had, I would learn, an intense interest in theater). “Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann,” he intoned, “of a personal God quaquaquaqu with white beard quaquaquaqu outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions...” And a customer, conceivably better acquainted with Ireland’s whiskey than Irish playwrights, confused as to why Sunny was now referring to himself as Lucky, asked, “Well, which is it now? Sunny or Lucky?”

“Can’t I be both?”

“I don’t know,” said the man, an elderly widower named Frankie Brown who drove over regularly from Staten Island, mostly for the company since he always brought his own beer. “I’ve seen the kind of attention you get from women so you might say you’re lucky in love. How ’bout cards? You lucky in cards?”

“I might play the lotto now and then,” Sunny replied. “And I like to gamble in the sense that I take chances in life but I don’t really gamble in the conventional sense that it is you’re referring to.”

Frankie Brown blinked at Sunny and seemed to be searching his mind for another explanation as to why Sunny might be calling himself lucky.

“Although now that you mention it, I do remember this one time,” Sunny continued after pausing on his cigarette. “I was traveling cross-country with a friend of mine and we stopped in Reno. He had to make some calls so I said, ‘I’ll call home.’ I put the kern in the phone and it spits out like two, three bucks. I put another kern in the phone and out comes more money. I was playing the phones! That was my Reno gambling experience. I played the phones and I came out ahead.”

“Well, so you really are lucky,” said Frankie, brightening. “Lucky Balzano. Lucky like Luciano. You oughtta make a phone call more often.”

“Nye, the truth of the matter is that I am probably the unluckiest gambler that there ever has been,” Sunny said. “I am the gambler that has known the near miss.”

“How you mean, Sunny?” Frankie asked. (As I would very soon figure out for myself, “How you mean, Sunny?” was the sort of thing one asked when one had plenty of time on one’s hands.)

“Well, I’ll tell you why. There was this friend of mine. You may remember him, Frankie, because his name was Frankie, too, only you’re Frankie Brown and this Frankie they called ‘Blackjack’ because he’d be in a bar and a fight would break out and he’d pull out a blackjack and conk people over the head with it.

“Anyway, Frankie liked to take me to Atlantic City every once in a while. As I said, I never wa

much of a gambler and I went really just to give him company. He used to be with a girl named Mary Ann who lived around the corner and when I'd go over to his house to pick him up, he would shout up the stairs as we were leaving, 'MARY ANN. WE'RE GOING TO GO. WE'LL SEE YOU IN A COUPLE OF WEEKS!' Because our intention was that if we won, we were going to stay. We were going to stay until we'd used up all of the money.

"So this one time, we got into the casino and there's a wall there with slot machines and there's a wall here. Catty-corner. Now, Frankie's working a machine on one side and I'm sitting over by the other wall and the others are mostly taken. Meantime, I didn't know that I could use two slot machines at once. And I say, 'Frankie, can I use this?' And he says, 'Yeah, you can use as many as you want.' I say, 'Why don't you come over and use this one?' and I pernt to the one next to me. And he says, 'But I'm hitting, Sunny. I'm doin' okay. You go ahead and play it.' We were playing dollar chips. So, I'm putting chips here and I'm putting chips there and this woman comes over with a group of her friends. Elderly. She says to me, 'Are you using this machine?' and pernts to the machine next to where I'm sitting—the machine I had invited Frankie to play. So I say, 'I am but you can use it if you like.' And son of a bitch, she sticks in her kern and fuckin' bells start going! I didn't know what the hell was happening. Frankie didn't know what was happening. He might'a thought it was me. She hit the jackpot! I think it was eighty-four thousand dollars. The guards come and do the whole thing that they do and she walks away and turns to me and says, 'Thank you' and waves. One kern away from the jackpot! 'WE'LL SEE YOU IN A COUPLE OF WEEKS!' That one time, that one time we came close to those couple of weeks. So, no. Not Lucky. You better just call me Sunny."

Sunny was equally at home speaking Beckettese and Brooklynese. In his gravelly voice, he enunciated words with a *Masterpiece Theatre* formality that made one think of John Gielgud or William F. Buckley introducing an episode of *Brideshead Revisited*, while also allowing several "fuhgeddaboutits" into every half-hour of conversation—though when he did so, he was no more aware that he was engaging in vernacularism than a French bulldog is aware of being French.

Indeed, he seemed to be unsuspecting that there was anything remarkable about himself at all.

## The Last Small Town in New York City

The Red Hook I'd found myself in that first night at Sunny's was a ghost town. Not in the way of a forsaken mining town in the Southwest, more like the abandoned vicinities of former industrial cities: Baltimore, Schenectady, Cleveland, Flint—places where industry boomed, industry died, and the people that served that industry have vanished. Had one taken a man from 1854, when Red Hook had one of the great settlements of the Irish in Brooklyn, or 1884, when the expansion of the large dry dock in the country had just been completed there, or 1934, the year of Sunny's birth, and deposited him on the corner of any two streets along the Red Hook waterfront in 1994, he would have looked around and asked, "Where'd everyone go?"

Where dockworkers had once crowded shape-ups, where labor racketeers had ruled, where bouncers hid, bootleggers distilled, arsonists lit, nuns crossed, longshoremen hauled, unions agitated, kids pelted, gangs brawled, it was now so quiet you could hear the bell buoys in the harbor clanging like church bells calling truant parishioners. Brick warehouses dating to Reconstruction, and some row and frame houses older still, stood amidst empty grassy lots, but there were no restaurants, no bars. There was Sunny's place and a VFW post and a few small sandwich shops and bodegas. Most of the population that remained was clustered in a sprawling public housing project on the eastern side of the neighborhood, an area known locally as "the Front" to distinguish it from the waterfront quarter around Sunny's, which was referred to as "the Back." It was a division that dated to the previous century, long before such a thing as public housing existed, when the boundary line was said to follow the path of a creek. Though the creek eventually dried up and the bed was paved over and became a street, the border remained, now delineated in asphalt.

I knew nothing then about this unofficial partition of the neighborhood, but I did already know about invisible boundaries. Since moving to New York in 1991, I had lived in Park Slope, a leafy neighborhood of fin de siècle brownstones just minutes away by car, but I had only dimly been aware of Red Hook in all that time. Surrounded on three sides by water and on the fourth by an expressway, the neighborhood was isolated and strangely remote. It was a corner of the city that rarely made the news. And when it did, it was mostly in connection with crime, tragedy, or municipal neglect. Red Hook was where the local elementary school principal was shot and killed while out looking for an absentee student a couple years earlier. It was where the previous summer a turf soccer field—donated by the government of Norway to coincide with the World Cup—was set on fire by teenagers days after

being installed. At the time, a city official simply mocked the Scandinavians' naiveté for putting the field in Red Hook. "Red Hook isn't Norway."

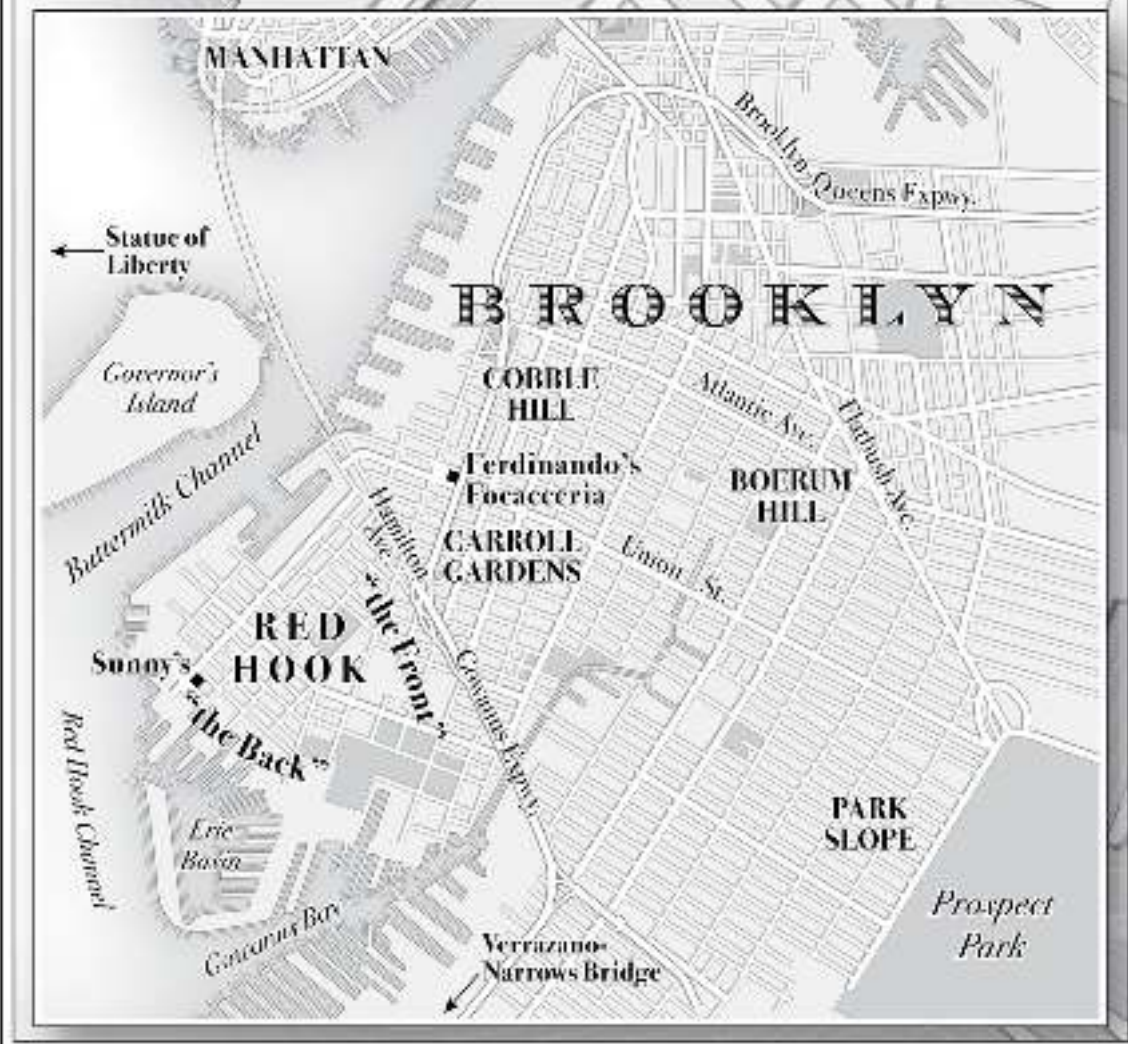
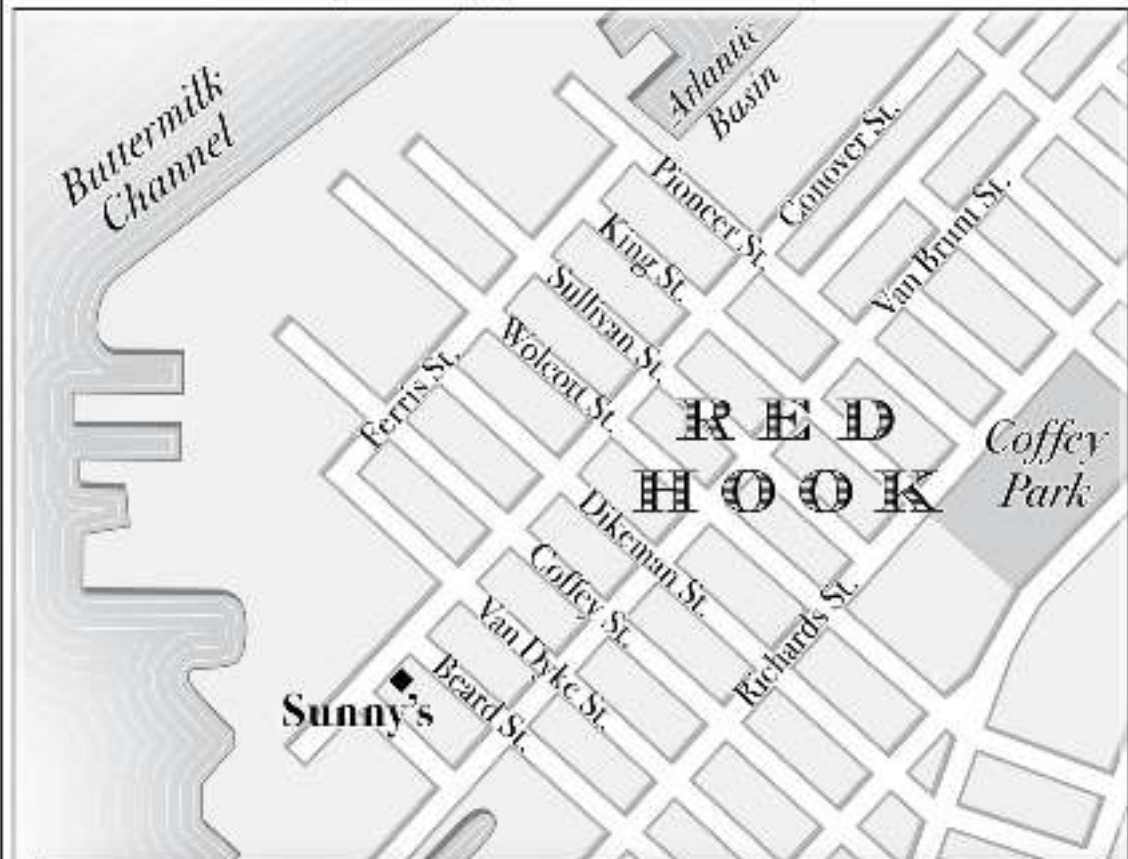
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Red Hook was notorious. A place to take garbage and corpses. Dead Hook. At least that had been my own very vague sense of the place before coming to Sunny's: hearsay and gangster mythology. *Wasn't that where Al Capone earned the nickname Scarface? Didn't On the Waterfront have something to do with Red Hook? Isn't that where Joey Gallo kept a lion in his basement?*

—

AT ONE TIME, the name "Red Hook" had encompassed a far larger neighborhood, stretching north to Atlantic Avenue and the edge of Brooklyn Heights and east to the foothills of Park Slope. It was Robert Moses, New York City's unofficial master planner, who, in the 1940s, had an elevated expressway built over what was then the neighborhood's main commercial street, and later connected that expressway with another to its north, creating a river of cars through the center of the old Red Hook and cleaving the harborside half from the rest of the borough of Brooklyn. In his influence over thousands of mid-century Brooklynites, Moses must have seemed more powerful than his ancient namesake, parting not mere water but land.

*"The Pioneer King Sullivan told Wolcott to tell Dikeman to spill Coffey all over Van Dyke's Beard."*



What now lay to the north and east of this concrete moat soon took on new names—Carroll Gardens, Cobble Hill, and Boerum Hill—as if to disavow any relation to their past during a time when the word “red” itself was viewed with suspicion.

But for those who lived in the low-lying areas close to the water, there was no escaping “Red Hook.” In this area—known at least since the 1880s as Red Hook Point, its inhabitants called Pointe—there was a sense of separateness, not only from the rest of Brooklyn but from the northern half of the neighborhood, had existed long before Robert Moses rose to prominence. Those who had lived below Hamilton Avenue and closer to the harbor had always held the view that they were the true Red Hookers, while those who lived above this line would just as soon have referred to themselves as living in South Brooklyn or Old Brooklyn. Robert Moses had merely set in stone a border that had already existed between Red Hook Point and greater Brooklyn for generations.

As early as the 1840s, when the first great wave of Irish immigration hit New York, Red Hook Point was thought of as an alien enclave within the city of Brooklyn—though less San Marino than Devil’s Island. A home for fugitives, bootleggers, and rumrunners; a vicinity where, in 1842, people were advised to do their marketing during daylight hours so as to avoid the knives of thieves hiding in the marshes. Sensational accounts of bodies found in various states of decomposition in Red Hook’s fetid swamps filled the crime blotters of nineteenth-century tabloids, and the hometown newspaper *The Brooklyn Eagle*, variously described Red Hook Point as “a strange and odious place,” “an unknown region,” and a place where “some of the worst murders that have ever been recorded took place.”

A full half-century before the macabre H. P. Lovecraft would describe his neighborhood as a cauldron of deviance and iniquity in “The Horror at Red Hook,” the *Eagle* wrote:

There is scarcely a ward in Brooklyn that does not contain within its precincts dens so infamous in their character, and in the character of the inhabitants, that the more respectable portion of the community would start back in horror at the idea of breathing the atmosphere tainted by their proximity. In some immorality, unbridled and unfettered, bears sway; in some thieving and dishonesty prevail, while in others the pallid faces, tattered garments, bleared eyes, and shriveled bodies, bear unerring testimony to the degrading effects of dissipation, and in more than one case can be found the assassin and murderer, ignoring altogether petty crimes as beneath their notice....Red Hook Point stands out in bold relief as being the grand central and amalgamated cesspool and sink of low life in Brooklyn.

If nineteenth-century Red Hook appeared to outsiders to be a vile settlement, twentieth-century Red Hook would become synonymous with criminal gangs, extortionists, black marketeers, skirmishes between the Irish and the Italians, longshoremen’s union corruption, and internecine Mafia wars. It was here in 1903 that the Black Hand made its first appearance in America. A now-forgotten phenomenon, the Black Hand was widely believed to be a sinister criminal fraternity, with origins in Sicily, that fanned out from Red Hook across New York and to Italian communities in other cities. Extortion letters and bombings were its calling card. Newspaper readers were told that the Black Hand was worldwide and that its adherents had arrived on American shores to set up cells and plunder the wealth.

It was in Red Hook, too, that the White Hand, an Irish gang whose territory and source of income



were the piers that stretched from the southeastern end of the neighborhood to the Manhattan Bridge ruled for much of the 1920s. The White Hand specialized in protection rackets, taxation of the docks and simple theft, in sum an operation that netted enough income to make gang boss a sought-after position. There was one catch to being the White Hand's chief executive officer—one's tenure was sure to be short and one would suffer a violent death at the hands of one's successor. The rise and demise of White Handers such as Dinny Meehan, Peg-Leg Lonergan, Garry Barry, Wild Bill Lovett, Cinders Connolly, Red Donnelly, and the eleven other known heads of the gang were given dramatic coverage in the press. The shortest stint as leader of the White Hand was that of Eddie McGuire, who in 1928 foolishly agreed to roll dice against Red Donnelly for supremacy of the gang. Minutes after McGuire rolled a winning three and four, Donnelly shot him dead on a dark pier.

By 1926, the juvenile delinquency rate in Red Hook was five times greater than that of any other district in Brooklyn and the New York State Crime Commission chose the neighborhood for a study on the causes of crime. Describing Red Hook as "an unusually provincial district tucked away in a large city, with most of its residents neither knowing nor caring about what goes on beyond the section's narrow bounds," the commission concluded that the children's concept of adult life came from "watching the men of Red Hook engage freely in drinking, gambling, brawling, shooting, and stabbing matches."

Robert Moses must have thought he was doing the rest of Brooklyn a favor when he built his expressway and sealed Red Hook away.

My own father, who grew up in Depression-era East New York, Brooklyn, then the home of Murder Inc. killers like Bugsy Goldstein and Mendy Weiss, looked shaken when I told him over dinner where I had begun spending my Friday nights.

"Red Hook!" he exclaimed. "That was no-man's-land when I was a kid. Nobody went to Red Hook!"

—

NO DOUBT RED Hookers of the time didn't think of themselves as living in a *True Detective* tale or an Elia Kazan movie. But Red Hook was home to enough criminals to fill its own wing of the rogue gallery. In addition to the White Handers, mob eminences like Frankie Yale, Al Capone, Albert Anastasia and his brother Anthony "Tough Tony" Anastasio, Joey Gallo, and in more recent times, the unsung men and boys who fought territorial battles for the street corners in the shadows of the housing projects, all contributed to the notion of Red Hook as a place of mayhem and thuggery that persisted nearly to this day. Some social commentators wondered whether there wasn't a geographic determinism at work, the very words "red" and "hook" bringing to mind blood passion, butcher aggression. Impalement by gaff. No self-respecting lowlife would want to admit to being raised in a place called "Park Slope," "Carroll Gardens," or "Windsor Terrace."

Can a sense of criminality linger in a neighborhood like mercury in groundwater? Most New Yorkers would scoff at this. It is the matter-of-fact nature of modern cities to be ever-changing: buildings razed, buildings erected, expressways inserted through the very space once occupied by families sitting down at the dinner table and couples talking in their beds, erasing all but the most notable events and personalities of an era. Many moments in our New York lifetimes, we step on the same pavement where precious life once bled out and we are, of course, unfazed. Nobody now walks along East 108th Street and feels a chill when they pass the spot where Ignazio Lupo was said to keep

bodies on meat hooks at his infamous Murder Stable. Coney Island's late Half Moon Hotel, from whose sixth-floor window mob turncoat Abe Reles ("the canary that sang but couldn't fly") took fatal plunge, is mainly recalled only by the Jewish senior citizens who live in the retirement home that was built in its place. Whoever resides at 152 20th Street in Brooklyn, onetime home to Al Capone hangout the Adonis Social Club and scene of the 1925 Christmas Day Massacre, presumably does not sense Scarface's spirit there. There are no haunted places in New York because no one can afford depreciating the real estate for such darkly sentimental reasons.

But my new friend Sunny believed karma existed for neighborhoods as surely as for people. Accordingly, Red Hook, in its dereliction, was still suffering the consequences of misdeeds that had taken place long ago. Or, as Sunny would put it, "The residue of these actions is experienced by the children of their children."

There was a more prosaic reason for Red Hook's current state, too: the late ripples of the Industrial Revolution. Containerization in shipping and the automation of the docks eliminated most of the unskilled port jobs by the 1960s, and thirty years later nearly all the remaining maritime industry had moved to Port Newark-Elizabeth in New Jersey. The century-and-a-half-long tide of families that had arrived first from Holland, Ireland, Germany, Portugal, Scandinavia, Italy, and eventually Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic had come to an end, and when their descendants decamped elsewhere, following jobs and fleeing circumstances, they left behind untended houses and crumbling piers. Nearly all of the eleven thousand people who remained in Red Hook lived in the public housing towers of "The Front," while the few who remained in the homes near the harbor enjoyed a backwater existence scarcely still found in New York. Its inaccessibility, its insularity, the residue of a violent past—whatever the cause, Red Hook was quiet as a neglected cemetery in the spring of 1995 when I arrived. Sunny once described the provincialism of his youth to me by saying "Red Hook never left Red Hook." But in the present day, the inverse was true—the rest of Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Manhattan never entered Red Hook and looking across the harbor at Staten Island at night was like looking across the Strait of Gibraltar at the coastline of an unknown continent.

With scant industry, few stores, little traffic—the occasional car was usually either being driven by a student driver lurching down the empty streets or being towed to the neighborhood's impound lot—much of Red Hook had even been forsaken by the criminals. There was no one left to rob. Instead of bodies, it was torched cars that were dumped on the cobblestones (the unaccountably beautiful sight of a joyride left ablaze in the middle of an intersection during a snowstorm one night has never left me). The last time anyone at the bar could recall a body being ditched, it had been spotted by a customer smoking his cigar out front. But, in this case, the body was still alive. Beaten and naked, the man ducked and crouched, trying to cover himself as he crept from the unlit dead end of the street toward the glow of the bar windows. When the customers inside learned what had happened they took up a collection of clothes—a shirt, a sweater, socks (no one remembers which selfless souls donated the pants and shoes)—and Sunny called a cab and stuck enough money into the stranger's pocket for the ride back to wherever he came from. In the course of an evening, the wretch experienced the truth of the words of sixth-century Roman philosopher (and hero of mine) Boethius, who wrote of Lady Fortune: "This is the way she amuses herself; this is the way she shows her power. She shows her servants the marvel of a man despairing and happy within the single hour."

The neighborhood was so quiet that Sunny once impulsively bought a Central Park horse carriage with the idea that he would rent a horse and driver when the urge to ride around the neighborhood hit him. This was a typical thing for Sunny to do; he lived life sumptuously though he never had much

money.

Sunny never actually got around to hiring a horse. Eventually—and impulsively—Sunny bought a dark green 1951 Jeep Willys that he saw idle and friendless in front of a gas station. For a couple years he even drove it, though rarely more than a quarter mile from the bar and at a speed somewhere between a trot and gallop. Nowadays it is parked permanently out front of the bar, where the cab is used as a smoking room or, when it's raining, as a phone booth.

## Arcadia

I know now that I was lucky to arrive when I did—when Red Hook was still sleepy and beautiful and cut off from the rest of the world in ways that are hard to imagine anymore. The rest of the world was where I came from. I would never actually say this, of course, when asked during a conversation. For a time, I simply answered, “I’m from Park Slope.” This didn’t always go over very well at Sunny’s. I was informed by one man that the women of Park Slope had more periods than Hemingway novel. Another said he had been to a bar in Park Slope for a drink recently and that he hadn’t slept so well since church.

Eventually, I began telling something closer to the truth.

“I’m from no place.”

I had no hometown and I was raised in somewhat nomadic circumstances. By age eleven, I was on my third continent. Born in Bangkok in the fall of 1967, within a week I boarded a plane with my mother, bound for Laos where my father, a Foreign Service officer, and three brothers were waiting. Our home was an American enclave outside the capital, Vientiane, a kind of Levittown transplanted to a tropical countryside. I would spend my first seven years there, a montage of paddy and jungle, water buffaloes and elephants, monks and candles, comic books and cookouts, geckos and cobras, dry and rainy seasons, monsoon floods and makeshift boats. I pummeled tethered balls and shot marbles with my American companions and hunted bare-handed for crabs and fish with Laotian families who visited from nearby farms. I was deputized by the women who arrived in the evening carrying baskets to collect cicadas that had singed their wings on the streetlights and dropped to the street. Each Buddhist New Year began with a days-long water balloon fight that seemingly the entire country took part in. Holidays took us every summer to a stretch of Malaysian coast where snake charming competed for my attention with seaside ice-cream men. It was an existence that was the closest thing to Arcadia a child could know. There was a distant war in the mountains but it would be years before I knew what the words “Pathet Lao” and “Vietcong” meant.

After an abrupt exodus and my father’s transfer to Saigon, my older brothers were sent to English boarding schools while my mother and I moved to Germany, her birth country. We lived in a village above the Rhine River chosen solely for its proximity to the forest. Our new home was at the foot of a mountain named after the biblical Mount of Olives, on whose flanks I seemed to spend endless afternoons, searching for mushrooms, evading Cheyenne and Lakota warriors, and hunting game with

bow and arrow and a make-believe rifle, never killing anything but time. I attended a village school, learned German, and, by means of a newfound talent with a soccer ball, made friends in the schoolyard though I would always be known as “the American.” I was never sure what being American required since I had only ever been to Florida on brief visits to a set of paternal grandparents. However, I accepted my title as an honorific since I was the only one to bear it.

After three years, I was told by my mother that we would be moving again, rejoining my father in a West African city which, I quickly discovered, was located only four degrees from the equator. The detail impressed me very much; I was at an age when the equator was a place of distinction. It was like being told that we would be living next door to the North Pole or in the vicinity of the Mariana Trench. I expected pitiless sunshine by day and intolerable steaminess at night, colossal insects below and oscillating primates above. To my dismay the climate turned out to be wholly bearable and rather than being in the bush, our new house was in an outlying district of ranch-style homes concealed by lush gardens and concrete walls and occupied mostly by French, Lebanese, and middle-class West Africans. The only wildlife I regularly encountered were a neighbor’s pet antelopes, a bushbuck and a duiker, whose front legs had been purposefully broken and deformed as calves to slow any escape attempts and who came over periodically for their share of my breakfast cereal. After they were killed and eaten by local road builders, I took my revenge with bottle rockets fired at eye level.

I was a tireless reader in a way I never would be again and during the hottest hours of the day, I retreated to a wall in our yard shaded by pines and lost myself in L’Engle, London, L’Amour, Grey, Steinbeck, Cornelius Ryan, and John Hersey as well as the Montgomery Ward Christmas catalog, which I examined and reexamined for much of the year, entranced by its skateboard and bicycle and Daisy rifle treasures. Thomas Berger’s *Little Big Man* was my vade mecum for much of the seventh grade, read aloud one night by flashlight in tents pitched along the ocean to a multinational audience of fellow Scouts. I studied my father’s whereabouts—he was forever traveling, it seemed—in a C. Hammond world atlas. Nouakchott, Niamey, N’Djamena, Ouagadougou, Lomé, Timbuktu, Dakar.

My nearest friends, two brothers from Bremen, lived a mile away and the shortcut to their home took me along a dirt path that descended into a shrubby valley. All the trees here had been cut down for firewood, leaving behind hillsides of red clay and patchy brushland, divided by a muddy gulch. A single wooden plank bridged the two sides.

Occasionally on my travels, I would be spotted and chased by a group of local boys. There was no reason for these pursuits other than the one imposed by custom everywhere: I was the outsider and they were the pack. I was a fast runner and vigilant enough never to have been caught, always reaching the safety of my destination in time. But one afternoon my luck ran out. I fled down the footpath with several silent boys not far behind. When I neared the trench, I realized that what on other days had been a routine sprint, my legs against theirs, had become an ambush. The plank, my bridge to safety, had been shoved aside and I was momentarily trapped. Turning, I pulled out the slingshot that I carried by habit, loaded it with a stone, and pointed it at my nearest pursuer, crying “*Arrête!*” By the time he was only steps away, a boy my age, ahead of the rest. I said that I would shoot if he came closer. We were like any two children, both unsure if this was still a game. Whether he took another step or whether I intentionally released my grip, I couldn’t say for certain, but the stone hit him in the forehead point-blank. We stood stunned, by the blow, by the act. A tear slid down his cheek. “*Il faut m’emmener avec vous à New York,*” he said. *You will have to take me with you to New York.*

I escaped that day, scrambling across the muddy channel to the far side of the ravine as the other boys arrived. In the remaining year that I spent there, I never again saw the boy who believed that a

Americans lived somewhere called New York, but the core idea behind his words stayed lodged in my mind. New York was a place one wanted to reach.

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Although my father was born and raised in East New York, he never talked about his childhood; its scarcities still a source of embarrassment rather than pride at how far he had come. The first emissaries from New York that I met were two Harlem Globetrotters who were on a tour of West Africa with the team. (There wasn't a basketball court in the entire country so a swimming pool was drained and put into service.) I was worldly enough to know that New York wasn't a place entirely inhabited by dazzling giants, but also starry-eyed enough to begin to muse about a future lived not on the Western prairies that I so often read and daydreamed about but high above skyscraper canyons. And after a record called *Rapper's Delight* made its way across the Atlantic into my hands, the desire was more or less sealed.

It would take another decade before I made my way to New York with the misty ambition of becoming a writer. In the years between, I returned to Germany, where I was admitted to the realms of puberty and taverns at the same age, and then attended college in the Midwest. My first apartment wasn't an aerie above Manhattan, as I once imagined it would be, but instead, a ground-level arrangement on a quiet outer-borough street. A good word from a family friend landed me a job with literary lion George Plimpton of *The Paris Review*. In a strange coincidence, at about my age, my father, a top-of-his-class graduate of Yale Law School, had arrived for a job interview with Plimpton's father, the renowned attorney Francis Plimpton, only to be summarily dismissed for the blunder of showing up bareheaded. Happily, this Plimpton didn't stand on such ceremony. He would treat me with unexpected regard, giving more weight to my judgment than it deserved. And after I hit a game-winning home run at last light during a Central Park softball game against a crosstown rival, he looked at me with another kind of respect: the next time a former First Lady, twice-widowed and notorious in private, came over for pizza at the end of the workday, he invited me to stay for dinner.

The first bona fide writer that I met through my work with George Plimpton displayed a gun and offered me a drink when I arrived to deliver him his edited manuscript mid-morning; the second proposed oral pleasure. Another fooled around with my girlfriend (an occupational hazard in the literary field). I politely turned down the first two and threatened the third. Despite my bravado, I was reserved by temperament and I would sometimes think that I was in over my head in New York, an immigrant from the provinces. It was an impression that wouldn't entirely disappear for several years—at least until I met Sunny. He made one feel as though one had been waiting all one's life to arrive here.

After a year with Plimpton, I moved on to work at Columbia University as an aide-de-camp to a professor who was once the world's authority on Raymond Chandler but was now entering his senescence. I traveled an hour by subway twice a day, carried along as if by underground river (the 4 and 3 lines being stand-ins for Acheron and Styx, respectively), and from time to time, in the close quarters of our cars, I would look up from Philip Marlowe's troubles and notice a distant kinsman by the familiar afro-francophone accent or the tribal cheek scars once so common in that part of the world. I'd often think of my encounter by the ravine and of the two boys who wanted to come to New York. Only one of us made it here, so far as I knew and could ever know.

## Two Rivers

“You don’t get a second chance to make a first impression. And the impression I had of him was ‘What an asshole.’”

I had just taken what was fast becoming my usual seat, a somewhat secluded spot in the deeper recess of the bar from which one could watch the entire room. Not far from me, Sunny was in conversation with two men, both named Richard. They belonged to a certain breed of homesteaders which there were then no more than about a dozen in Red Hook—middle-aged painters and sculptors who had been drawn by the rock-bottom housing prices and the promise of a laid-back lifestyle. Art seemed to be at the bar every Friday night.

“Who’s an asshole?” I called out. In those early days it was often so quiet at Sunny’s that one could both overhear and take part in every conversation that was occurring.

“Larry Rivers, Timmy.”

Sunny was one of those men who added a “y” to names whenever he could. All Sals were Sallys. Bobs were Bobby. I was Timmy. Larry Rivers didn’t need it.

I looked at him blankly, the name not immediately registering.

“He’s an artist,” Sunny added, not condescendingly.

“Yes, I know who he is.” I had actually once met the so-called grandfather of pop art in Plimpton’s living room. “What did Larry Rivers ever do to cross you?”

In our brief friendship, I had already learned that Sunny not only had a passion for acting and theater (he kept a copy of his favorite play, John Guare’s *The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year*, on a shelf behind the bar and during lulls he would sometimes put on his reading glasses and study the underlined passages), but that he also devoted much of his day to painting. Self-taught, he had taken up in his twenties and from our conversations, I surmised that he had probably spent more time painting than he had engaged in any other single calling. He acknowledged he had never sold a painting, though—it seemed to be a matter of pride, as he was unwilling to put a price on his work. The closest he came was a bartering arrangement early in his career with the owner of an Upper East Side restaurant where he spent a year painting murals in exchange for French dinners. The restaurant and murals were still there. But one didn’t have to go all the way uptown to see a Sunny Balzano. He had converted a storeroom in the rear of the bar into his studio and when I went to visit him there one

afternoon, I saw large abstract paintings whose overlapping lines and dismembered figures were reminiscent of Willem de Kooning. His greatest influence, he told me that day, just ahead of Picasso and Cézanne. There was nothing amateurish about his art, but I had assumed that he had always worked in the same monkish isolation that he presently found himself in. I hadn't imagined him rubbing elbows with the likes of Larry Rivers.

"He must have been a real son of a bitch, Sunny," one of the Richards added. "You're usually as genial as the goddamn Dalai Lama."

I nodded my head in agreement. I had yet to hear Sunny be outright contemptuous of anyone. The one instance in which I saw him lose his patience, he addressed a self-appointed avant-gardist who was being a drunken nuisance with "Listen, you fuckin' banana," and the man looked equally stricken and dumbfounded.

"Well, it wasn't anything he did to me personally," he said, turning to include me. "What happened was, I was hired as a teaching assistant to Larry Rivers, who had been appointed to teach a summer workshop at Southampton College. It was the 1960s and a period in which I was quite involved in the downtown Manhattan art world and I was just beginning to make a name for myself."

One of the Richards must have given him a surprised look. "I don't want to make it sound like I'm blowing my own horn," Sunny quickly added. "Understand, I took my art very seriously for a long time."

"Anyway," he continued, "Larry Rivers would come in once a week on his motorcycle, like he was James Dean—a middle-aged James Dean—and critique the students' work. But the reality of it was he didn't teach a damn thing. A lot of people enrolled in the class and mostly the students were dabblers and they were always going to remain that way, aye? And these poor students were there because they admired him, but whatever talent they had, Larry Rivers would destroy them. He was so shameful in his manner he would even cause people to cry."

A customer beckoned Sunny from down the bar and he excused himself. They exchanged a few words and Sunny reached into a drawer to sell the man a pack of black market Marlboros, but not before undoing the wrapper and slipping one out as his commission. Sunny smoked a great deal, being one of those people who considers a drink diminished without an accompanying cigarette and a story not properly told without one of each in hand.

"I'll never forget this older woman," he resumed after he returned, puffing on his commission. "Her husband had died, she had raised a family, and her kids were off on their own and she wanted to rededicate her life. Her paintings were simple, Grandma Moses-like. And Larry Rivers, he tells her, 'You're eighty years old, you've raised a family, you probably bake a great apple pie. Why don't you go home and bake pies?'"

He looked at each of us in turn, his expression deeply indignant.

"Isn't that *crass*? Isn't that *cruel*? Isn't that *terrible*?"

We all agreed that it was.

"What would it have taken for him to say, 'You know, you're doing very nice. Your space is this, your color is this, it has a charm, you've captured something really unique in the subject matter.' Or could say a million things just to give her the feeling that what she was doing was worth continuing. After all, when you're eighty years old, you're not really doing this to make it in the art world. Like most people who paint, who play an instrument, who write, you do it because you love it. This is something she is going to do until the day she dies—if you treat her properly. But he put tears in his



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