

LITTLE HEROES OF DECATUR STREET

By Michael Ventura

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There was me, about 11. My brothers, Aldo and Vinnie, identical twins, about 6. Joe Bennezzzi, a little younger than me. Italian Joe (from the old country, he still had an accent), maybe 9. And Italian Joe's kid brother, Little Tony, who was so little he may have been 5. We lived on Decatur Street, in Brooklyn, off Knickerbocker Avenue. Few streets were as tough or as poor, but poverty was nothing special for us, we didn't know people who weren't poor. It was nothing special to have little to eat, or for the electricity to be turned off for nonpayment, or for your parents to be crazy with it all -- if you had parents. By that time, there was just Ma. So much for poor. As for tough -- depends on what you mean. Everybody on that street was tough because everybody dealt every day with a level of fear and uncertainty that comfortable people would find hard to imagine. You had to be tough just to walk down the block. Springsteen sang it: Walk tall -- or baby don't walk at all. Which doesn't mean you can fight; but if you can't, you need an angle. I couldn't fight worth a damn, but my angle was that I never gave up. Once the bullies learned you wouldn't give up, they'd rather pick on someone who would. Scraps were common; real fights, where somebody got damaged, were rare. But there was an unwritten law: Once a fight started, nobody stopped it until the loser gave up or the winner got tired. Geopolitics writ small.

Our play dates were summed up in a phrase the grownups often repeated: Go play in traffic. Where else could we play? Stickball on narrow Decatur Street -- dodging the cars was part of the game, and not one kid on that block got run over while we lived there. Since adult supervision was not possible in our world, the only rule was: Don't come in too much after dark. In the summer that left a lot of time for unsupervised mayhem -- you hit the street early and didn't come back until 8:30 or 9pm at night, except to grab some food sometimes. I'm hungry, Mama. Have some bread and butter. I'm not hungry for bread and butter. Then you're not hungry. (Some days, when you were hungry enough, bread and butter seemed a feast.)

And there were special days when we'd be given (or earn or steal) what seemed like a lot of money -- maybe two dollars between me and my brothers, and Bennezzzi would have a dollar, and Italian Joe and Little Tony might have a couple. Then we'd go Beyond Beyond, we called it -- anyplace far from Decatur Street. Ma, I'm taking the kids to the museum. That meant a long subway ride into Manhattan, change trains at Union Square, change again at Grand Central, change again at 42nd Street, then up to 81st Street at Central Park. Mama knew that I knew the way. I was expected to know the way. And if I didn't know it, I was expected to find it. None of this was said, it didn't have to be; it was simply expected. I was expected to know the way, and to protect my brothers, and we were all expected to survive. That was the big deal: survive. Get out of this fucking neighborhood, this screwed-up cycle of life, any way you can. But get out, eventually. And survive. Our excursions Beyond Beyond were a kind of rehearsal for that.

A subway ride was 15 cents. Thirty cents round-trip. For me and my brothers that took care of one dollar. (Often we snuck onto the train and saved that dollar.) The other dollar bought sodas and hotdogs. The rest of the gang had similar provisions. So off we went. On the subway to Manhattan, to the Museum of Natural History, across the street

from Central Park. An 11-year-old, two 6-year-olds, a 10-year-old, a 9-year-old, and a 5-year-old. On our own.

I'm kind of amazed as I write this, amazed at the audacity of us kids and the recklessness of our parents. But it paid off. We were never pushovers, we knew how to survive. I know lots of parents now with small children, and none of them, not one, would sanction an expedition like Beyond Beyond. What will their kids do if the rug is ever pulled out from under them and they no longer have their privileges, comforts, security? Their kids are not expected to know the way, or to find it — by themselves — if they don't know it. They don't grow up with parental body language that says, You'd better be prepared to survive alone — this afternoon, maybe. The Street was always telling us, You worthless piece of shit, what are you doing here? And we were always telling the Street, I'm surviving, muthafucka. Try and stop me.

Some got stopped. Dead in their tracks, as the old saying goes. But the rest of us ... how can you scare kids from Decatur Street or Myrtle Avenue or Palmetto or Woodbine or Hart — how can you come up with any crap they haven't seen before they were 10? Poverty, insanity, violence, a chaos that didn't last for hours or weeks or months, but years. Short of outright war, plagues, and the Apocalypse, what was left to throw at us? Our own tumultuous psyches, that's what. Learning to live with what we've seen, that's what. But aside from that, what else?

There we are, Beyond Beyond, running all around the Museum of Natural History, driving the guards crazy. Towering skeletons of dinosaurs with Do Not Touch signs on their trillion-year-old bones. We touched. The guards chased. Sometimes they'd catch us and throw us out. Other times we got away. We'd've pushed the fucking skeletons over if they'd hadn't interrupted our fun, we'd've invited those dragons to Decatur Street, we rooted for King Kong: Tear town the goddamn city, we're on your side, Kong, what have we got to lose?

But we were also stunned with awe. After we'd expended our energy, and if we managed not to get thrown out, we'd walk those halls of dinosaurs, whales, bears, Neanderthals, meteorites, and more stars on the dome of the planetarium than you could ever see from the rooftops of Brooklyn, amazed at the hugeness of the universe, feeling its invitation to live, to *really* live. I don't know what happened to Bennezzi, Italian Joe, and Little Tony, but my brothers and I, and my sister and my cousins (most of them) — we never forgot that invitation. Years later Vinnie would say, That's what life really is, an invitation to really fucking *live*.

After we'd exhausted the Museum of Natural History we'd cross the street to Central Park where, atop a huge mound of rock, there was (and is) a small castle. To this day I don't know what it's doing there. We clambered over its ramparts, climbed up the rocks — one misstep would mean broken bones. But fortune favors the brave (usually). I'd come with five kids, I'd return with five kids — that was my 11-year-old responsibility, that's what was expected of me, and I delivered. (Not by any virtue of mine. Nobody slipped on the rocks, is all.) And we didn't even know we were brave, for a certain kind of bravery was a given. Our parents expected us to be resourceful and brave, and we expected that of each other. That expectation was the only way to defend ourselves against a hostile and impersonal city. That's what Springsteen means in that song: Johnny was sitting on the fire escape watching the kids playing down in the street. He called down, 'Hey, little heroes, summer's long but I guess it ain't very sweet around here anymore.' It never was. But those kids really are little heroes — because they have to be.

So ... some weeks ago I went back to Decatur Street for the first time in nearly half a century.

Nothing had changed! All the news is about change, change, change, but ... not on places like Decatur Street. Darker skins, different accents, Spanish instead of Italian, but that's not much of a change (we were fairly dark, and our accents were strange for that time). The buildings, the garbage, the mood, the danger, how people carried themselves – - that was all the same. There's me, about 11 years old, sitting on a stoop smoking a cigarette just like I used to. I wanted to go up to that kid and say, Do you know that you're me? Listen, little hero, Mr. Me – you can get out of here. Don't do the drugs they give you to keep you here. And read, read like a muthafucka. It's tedious at first but then it's not. And watch those old black-and-white movies on TV – they'll teach you more than you're getting at school, they'll teach you how to move among anybody, teach you good manners and how to speak. Learn the language as well as you've learned to fight, because language is a way to fight. And go to the museums, it's just a subway away, find out how huge the world really is. And as soon as you're old enough, leave, it doesn't matter where, one thing will lead to another, use what you've learned and learn more and don't stop. And don't depend on anybody else for anything important. And ... Oh, I'd have told that little hero everything I know about getting out of there, if I only spoke his language.

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