



BROOKLYN BRIDGES

Ingimar DeRidder

Brooklyn Bridges
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Brooklyn Bridges

Everyone has seen the Brooklyn Bridge, either in person or in pictures. It is as famous as the Great Wall of China. Its two huge gothic arches look like church windows and seem as spiritual as architectural. The rope cables were a stroke of engineering genius and are as graceful as strings on an angel's harp. I grew up in Brooklyn during the 1950's. I thank God for my Brooklyn Bridges.

Life is series of bridge crossings. Bridges overcome impasses and traverse obstacles. Bridges connect people and expedite passage from where we are, to where we are going, and each contributes to who we have become. It is in its earliest stages of development that the human brain designs itself as neurons and synapses reach out and make connections over which electrical impulses will travel as ideas, images, dreams, and feelings. It is over these little neurological bridges that our personality shall walk like an apostle on a journey along the Appian way. Each experience is a bridge. Bridges sometimes span wide yawning crevices, and each crossing brings us closer to edge of our life, as we know it. Each bridge is an experience. Each experience is an important cable that suspends us or holds us and others up. Everytime we have the courage to cross a bridge we become a larger person. Some people never leave home. Some people refuse to cross over prejudice, fear, superstition, or ignorance. Others must get over to the other side, and for them the world becomes larger.

Some bridges need be crossed only once, others bring us back and forth so we can renew ourselves and remember where we came from. Some bridges are better burned, for we dare not go that way again. Some bridges are larger, longer, and more costly than others. Some are little and some, like the "Great" Bridge in Brooklyn, are inspiring and a glory to behold. While some great men have had experiences that are worthy of history books, and have constructed bridges that have spanned the chasms of war, and science, and human suffering; and some have connected cities, states, and nations, most of us have only worked on little bridges, those little bridges that have connected us to others one by one. These little stories are about those little bridges we all have crossed making us human, and helping us get from one side of life to the other.

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Stoops

Thank God for front stoops. The word stoop is a Dutch word. It is the little elevation, stairs and platform leading into a house. The Dutch, of course were the ones who bought Manhattan from the Indians for twenty four dollars. My ancestors drove a hard bargain. However, when they lost their battle with the British the name New Amsterdam was changed to New York. But stoops were still called stoops. It was on the front stoop that I had my first taste of independence. Stoops were a part of growing up in Brooklyn. Just as little birds must first learn about the perch before they learn how to fly, so little boys must first become familiar and comfortable with their own front steps.

Stoops were safe places. It was from such a safe place that I first began to study the world. Although I was only four years old, I was allowed to sit out on those front steps by myself. No, I did not travel far, but I was away from home without ever leaving. I was on our front stoop. My mother was only a holler away.

Not only was it safe, it was high. There were six steps if you counted the landing. From this elevation I could get a good view of the world. There I sat and watched with wonder and amazement as the world went by my front door. Ladies pushing baby carriages, children on bicycles, Sanitation workers and their enormous noisy truck, lifting heavy ash cans and then sending them crashing to the sidewalk where they rang out like cymbals and drums. There was the vegetable man, wearing a rumpled and sweat stained hat which was pushed back on his head snapping his whip near the animal's lowered head as if he were trying to keep his sleepy horse from dozing off as it slowly "cilp-clopped" down the middle of the street. I still find myself smiling warmly as I think of him calling out with his thick accent from the old country, "Water- mello," as he paraded his watermelons down the street like a captain passing his troops in review; while I, of course watched the parade from my private grandstand. Sometimes there was the fish monger, or the knife sharpener. Sometimes one of the "big kids" would ride by and, upon seeing this one little spectator, let go of the handle bars, while assuming a facial expression of nonchalance that cried out for attention saying "Look, no hands." Life came by my stoop and I became addicted to it. I wanted to see more, to follow the wagon and ride my own bike one day "without hands."

From time to time the street sweeper would come slowly pushing his barrel on wheels. He stopped at intervals to push a very large broom along the curb and then scooped up any trash with a shovel. He worked for the city and he kept the street clean. The stoop and the sidewalk in front of our house was our responsibility. Each morning someone would come out of each house with a broom and sweep the dirt away from their own stoop. It was a ritual. It was a religion. It was another lesson I learned about life. Everyone had to sweep his own stoop. I would sit there and watch as each of the neighbors took care of the little spot of earth in front of where they lived. It was also during those days that I received one of the many proverbs I inherited from my mother, who inherited it from someone else, "the world would be a cleaner place if everyone swept their own sidewalk, and minded their own business." Our stoop was very clean.

The front stoop was also a place of community. On hot summer nights it was a place of relief and refuge where we could usually count on an occasional breeze from the ocean that would be noticed by all and appreciated most by the one who would acknowledge it as it passed by saying, “Ah, that sure feels good.” On those sultry summer nights little family groups all up and down the street dotted the porches and stoops as slowly moving shadows, talking, laughing, and talking some more.

There was no air conditioner humming. Windows were open, not closed, and families were close. You had to be close if you sat on the front stoop. Parents did most of the talking, we kids did most of the listening. I discovered early in life that I learned more when I listened than when I talked. On that stoop I learned to listen. I studied my father’s and my mother’s heart as they talked with each other. They talked about concerns, their fears, their hopes and their dreams. Now and then I sensed some tension when they talked about money, or some “problem.” But they always talked in soft tones when we were sitting in the shadows of the night on that front step in Brooklyn.

The world has changed. Hot summer nights find people isolated from each other in air conditioned comfort. Few have time to sit around with long periods of silence, few have patience to talk softly in the unhurried peace of a summer sunset. The fish monger no longer drives by our houses, and even if he did more often than not, (what, with soccer practice, or health clubs, or trips to the mall) no one would be home.

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The Temple

When I was a child I remember visiting my father's work place. He managed a wholesale lumberyard near the Bohack Terminal. That lumberyard was the first temple I ever visited. It was the temple of the working man.

I still remember what it smelled like. Since then the scent of wood has always been an almost sacred incense of joy to me. To this day when I smell a freshly cut pine board I am immediately transported back to the innocence of my childhood looking up to my father with a faith and trust and peace that only a five year old can know.

Lumber was stacked up into mountains of Ponderosa pine. Mouldings, of every imaginable shape and form stood obediently in bins and sheds awaiting the call of some carpenter. I remember the sawdust, and the dawn of the work day when muscular stevedores would come with hardened resolve determined to do an honest man's work for an honest day's pay. I remember perspiration rolling down their faces as they wrestled to move train loads of timber, board by board.

I remember listening to my father talk the shop talk of the trade. He spoke in a jargon and shorthand I found fascinating. It was as if he spoke in an unknown tongue and he knew everything. He could count and calculate the running feet in an eighteen foot bundle of moulding in seconds. He could grade a box car of lumber with all the authority of judgment day. Seven AM was like a call to worship to my father who loved what he did more than any man I knew. And the five o'clock whistle sounded more beautiful than any note that ever came from any cathedrael's pipe organ and was greeted with a chorus of AMENS from men who had triumphed over another day. I thank God for the memories of visiting my father's work place, my father's business.

My father is gone now and I miss him greatly. Those times around the lumber yard will always be special too me, even though I, like little Samuel in the Temple at Jerusalem, did not "yet know the Lord." As the temple described by Moses was only a shadow of a greater temple in the heavens, these early temple life experiences are for me shadows of greater things to come. I was catechized there in the doctrines of life. I learned many a lesson there about living.

Hidden beneath the waters of the East river are the supports of the "Great Bridge." I am told large wooden caissons were sunk, the water was pumped out and foundations were set in secret. So it is with every great and noble life. There must be foundations. Some people call it faith. Some people call it hope. Some people call it love.

I believe going to work with my father and witnessing the energy of industry and the cables of commerce stretching out from life to life helped me dig my own deep foundations of honesty and integrity without which I would not be able to stand. It was first in Brooklyn I learned to think of God as a Father. I personally believe that the world is both a workshop and a temple. I also believe that happy is every child of God who realizes what a privilege it is to be able to go with him to work each day.

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The Cat Lady

She never knew it, but she was one of my teachers. To some she was one of the many neighborhood eccentrics. To others she was “odd” or just a plain “nuisance.” Again, because of a messy yard and poor hygiene, some must have deemed her a “health hazard.” But to us kids, she was the neighborhood “cat lady.” She lived in a yellow clapboard house which set back from the street. Even her house was different, as the front was at right angle or ninety degrees turned so that the side faced the street and the front faced the side. If the house was a non-conformist, so was its occupant. Yet she had a seemingly enormous capacity to care about and show affection to cats.

The word was out, no doubt, along Neptune Avenue, that there was a welfare program for the less fortunate felines and homeless kitties. Cats would appear each morning and they were never disappointed. There was milk for everyone. It seemed this charitable woman’s heart was a fountain of love that would never run dry. As the Almighty feed his children in the wilderness, this dear old lady was an angel of mercy for these little furry creatures of God.

I knew almost nothing of her except that she seemed to have some kind of heavenly calling to minister to a strange congregation. They were a most mixed-up and colorful multitude. I don’t remember her ever speaking a word. She might have, but her life was not of words, it was of deeds. I don’t remember what she looked like, but to the cats she must have been a real beauty. I don’t remember how she dressed except for a green colored sweater with a hole in the elbow. I do believe I have learned something about living from her example.

She did not talk about love, she loved. She demonstrated it, and the cats came. You can make a friend of a stray cat with a bowl of milk. That grateful creature will not forget you, but will return day after day.

No man or woman in this cold, cruel world is so full of love that they will not respond gratefully to the saucer of charity filled with the milk of human kindness. Those creatures did not return each day because they were mistreated or abused. No, they returned because of the kindness of a dear old woman with a capacity for giving.

The memory of this lesson reminds me that I must not allow a day to end without setting out the dish of kindness for others. See that man or woman with many friends? Those friendships must be fed with kind words and encouragement. Friendship that makes no demands and seeks no reward other than the joy of gathering empty saucers that have been licked clean by souls hungry for a little encouragement along the way. I must remember to set out a bowl of kindness today.

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Sandman

In 1954 there were over eight million people living in the five boroughs of New York. I lived in Brooklyn right off of Neptune Avenue. The summers of childhood seemed (in those days) to be eternal. Any given day might contain a number of small lifetimes, and the very next step might become the beginning of some great adventure.

I was eight years old and in business for myself. I did not know it at the time, but I was an entrepreneur.

That summer I was in the sand-sifting business. Hundreds of thousands of people rode the subways to Coney Island seeking relief from the sultry heat of the inner city. People were everywhere, in the water, stretched out on blankets, and under the boardwalk. Old ladies hung for dear life to the bay ropes, which were supported by floating barrels. Young children built sand castles, while the older ones played catch with pink Spauldings, teenagers, oblivious to the rest of the world, were lost in each other's embrace.

People usually arrived early. They would walk beneath the boardwalk, pause at the shadow's edge long enough to remove their shoes before walking barefoot in the sand until they found an acceptable "spot" which would be claimed as theirs for the next five or six hours. There they set down their coolers filled with lemon or Kool-Aid, spread out their towels (anchored on each corner with a shoe), and then folded their clothes neatly in a pile before running into the refreshing surf. The sand was fine, soft, and white. If someone dropped a coin, it would quickly be swallowed up by the earth, and sink out of sight.

At the end of the day, one by one, the crowd would gather up their things and make their way home tired but happy. Just beneath the surface there were pennies, dimes, nickels, and quarters. All an enterprising eight-year-old boy had to do was gather them up like manna from heaven. That's where I came in.

I built a sand sifter out of an old fruit crate procured from the local vegetable stand. Vegetable stands were the "building supply" house for every kid in the 1950's in Brooklyn. A set of baby carriage wheels and an axle obtained free of charge from the dump known as Lincoln lot (across the street from the high school of the same name) and some grid screen wire and tin for a scooper were transformed into a first rate money-making machine.

A dollar in change, in those days, was real money. A ride on the subway was a dime, a candy bar was a nickel, and twenty-five cents meant an afternoon in the Tuxedo movie theater which included two main feature movies and twelve cartoons a news reel and coming attractions. A trip to the movies was a social event as well as a ride on an emotional roller coaster guaranteed to make you laugh, cry, or be frightened out of your wits; and that, all for a quarter.

By many people's standards we would be considered poor. I never cared much for other people's

standards. As far as I was concerned I was doing quite well. Work was not an obsession, but a means to an end. I had neither the strength nor the ambition to find every coin or sift every grain. I worked for about an hour and a hand full of change.

I remember in particular one peculiar evening. It was at the end of the season. The weather had not cooperated very much, and it was slow going in the sifting business. As I worked as a lone figure in the sand, I drew the attention of several sets of eyes looking out from the ever-darkening shadow beneath the boardwalk. Then a lone figure began walking toward me. Feeling a little uneasy, I looked around. I was alone. Closer and closer the figure came. A man with long disheveled hair, rumpled seedy looking clothing, a face covered with graying stubble. Everyone who ever lived in New York could envision this individual in their own imaginations if I told them he looked much like the character who often graced the sports page of the Daily News that often touted “Luv dem Bums.”

He must have seen me picking up a coin here and there and putting it in my pocket. “How you doing?” He asked. I looked at him and then around and then back at him again. He must have read my tension. “Ok” I said. There was no way I was going to run with my sand sifter, and there was no way I was going to abandon my business. This was a situation that called for some diplomacy, both on his part and on mine. “I am the King of Coney Island,” he said- almost looking hurt that I did not recognize him. “That is my wife over there,” (he motioned over his shoulder to a woman guarding several shopping bags) in the distance. “How much have you found so far?” Because telling him what I really wanted to tell him, that the answer to that question was none of his business, might have made things turn very ugly, I made a vague reference about how bad business was. He began to tell this eight-year-old that he too was having some difficult times. “Let’s see what you found.” Had I been able to make myself scarce, I would have, but running away is not always practical or prudent. I slowly reached deep into my pocket and pulled out a shiny half-dollar (a rare find, even in those days). Something told me that that fifty-cent piece and I were about to part company. I was right. I was robbed. Yes, I was robbed in a most diplomatic way however. He did not have a gun, (although my imagination was sure the bulge I saw was a knife in his pocket). He took that coin out of my hand, rolled it between his dirty tobacco stained fingers, and put it in his pocket. I never see a magician roll a quarter without thinking about how my fifty-cent piece disappeared on that day.

He said, “Look, seeing I had some hard times and am need of some work, You and I will be partners. I’ll keep this here coin as my share and the next coin we find will be yours.” I said something about not really needing a partner, but it is hard to reason with a man who thinks he is a king. He took hold of my sifter and I was afraid it would disappear next, but my fears were unwarranted. A few sweeps, digging, pulling, shaking, dumping out worthless shells, broken glass, and Popsicle sticks, must have reminded his majesty that work was not for royals. He said look, “we’re still partners, I’ll just take this here fifty cent piece with me and you can have the rest.” And he walked away. I never saw the King of Coney Island again. It was the end of the summer season, and I retired my sifter for a while.

Life is not always easy and sifting sand takes many forms in the business world. I learned something that summer. There are those who want the coins, but not the calluses. There are some that want the success, but not the sacrifice. There are some who claim the title, but are not up to the task. Life will offer up tribute to those who are not afraid to dig, sift, and search for it. I had thought much about that incident through the years. A real monarch is not one who takes, but rather one who is rich enough to give. I did not really consider myself to have been robbed until reflecting upon what happened years later. Although I felt nervous during that encounter, I felt more sorry for this poor needy soul. If kindness counts for anything, it was not he but I, who was king that day.

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The Key

I admired Henry. To be more honest I must admit that I was jealous. I was not really jealous of all the toys and games he had (and he had more than anyone I knew). I was not jealous of this new Schwinn, with its clean white wall tires or his siren that worked when you pulled the string and made it engage the front tire. I was not even jealous of the fact that he had his own room. However, there was one thing Henry had that I wish I had. Henry had his own key to the front door of his house. It was a flat brass key. He wore it on a chain around his neck and it would be tucked under his shirt until he came home from school each day.

I can still see him now. We were both ten years old, but the key gave him a certain maturity and respect that goes along with having a key to the front door of your house. We would stop off at his house after school or during our lunch hour to get a baseball or bat or something. He would walk right up to the front door, stick his hand down his neck and pull out the chain and that big brass key.

Both Henry's parents worked. His two older brothers were grown and away in the Navy. We, therefore, would always enter an empty house. My own was so noisy it seemed (with my brother, sister and our German Shepherd named Colonel). And Henry's house was always so neat. His mother had nicknacks and lace doilies everywhere. His house never looked "lived in" like ours. Not only was his house always neat; Henry was neat. I never saw him with a hole in his sneakers like the rest of the kids I knew (like Richie, who always seemed to have a toe peeking through his worn out P.F. Flyers). But the thing that impressed me most about Henry was that key. When I asked my mother if I could have a key like Henry's she responded with a surprised, "What in the world for?" I was told that I didn't need one, and that made me all the more jealous of that big brass key.

As I now look back on that scene some forty years later I thank God I did not have, nor need a key. My mom was always there when we children came home from school. Her presence filled the house with a certain unexplainable happiness that comes with security. There would be a glass of milk and Graham crackers, (hot chocolate and toast in the winter) waiting for us. And there was noise, lots of noise. There was laughter (and tears), but most important there was life. There was never an abundance of things, but we never went without necessities. There was more- though it was never spoken of as such, and I was not able to put my finger on it then- there was love.

There came a day when Mom would go out into the working world, but it waited until we were older. Mom felt that she had a job in caring for her family. In these days, some may snicker at the thought of a mother giving up a career and fortune to heat hot chocolate or to dry snow-soaked clothing over steaming radiators on a winter day. I know times have changed. I know that there are day care centers and all kinds of substitutes and surrogates, but I would like to sing an "Ode of Praise" to my Mother, who was- - there. Her's was a thankless , glamorless job, hard and perhaps

unrewarding in many ways. But as I look back, maybe Henry was not so lucky after all.

It is only now, so many years later, after being grown and with a family of my own, that I realize that my mother had given me a key all along. It was fashioned on the anvil of sacrifice and dedication. It is a key that has opened many a locked door in my lifetime. It was not made of brass, but to me it is more valuable than gold. She gave me a key, not to wear around my neck, but to carry in my heart. She gave me love.

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Play Ball

Baseball was more than a game, it was a metaphor about life that a child could understand, and it was a curriculum about living. New York had three major league baseball teams. My world was not divided up into Democrats and Republicans, but the “Bombers,” the “Bums,” and the Giants. We carried pictures of our heroes around with us. Baseball cards taught us about personalities, and statistics, trading and value. Five cents would buy a pack of cards and a huge piece of chewing gum. The cards in those days were “flipped” (a match meant you confiscated the other guys card) or tossed (closest to the wall wins) and little did we realize that those cards would one day end up in collector’s albums and be worth hundreds and in some cases thousands of dollars. We never flipped or flung away our heroes, but somehow left them somewhere with our other childish things, and now they are gone.

But then they were stars. They did not make millions, but they made millions happy. The Yankees had Mickey Mantle, the Giants, Willie Mays, and the Dodgers had Duke Snider. A free pass from the PAL (Police Athletic League) on many occasions put me in the bleachers. I would not trade the memory of that experience in the bleachers of Flatbush for box seats in today’s greatest stadiums. I never saw grass so green. The sound of the organ still faintly echoes somewhere deep within the reservoir of my most happy memories. Yes, there were peanuts and cracker jacks. Those were beautiful days.

Years later I would sit in box seats at Shea, and it was not the same. I had told my Brazilian born wife about baseball with enthusiasm and excitement; after all, it was what America was all about. When I finally took her and my daughter I was embarrassed and disappointed. Although we were in box seats behind the third base dug out and I had come a long way from my poorer years, the experience was not as rich. People nearby were no longer innocent. They did not look as happy as I remember them to be. Several small groups around us were drunk, they were rowdy, and their language was foul and offensive. This was not baseball as I remembered it. I missed my favorite spot high in the bleachers of Ebbets. The Mets were ok, but I missed the Dodgers. I missed the “Duke,” and Pee Wee, and Jackie Robinson. Why did they have to move away anyhow? Why did we all have to grow up? My wife, my daughter and I left the stadium without saying much. They never saw the glory. They missed the game I knew by a generation.

But Baseball in Brooklyn was not all Ebbets Field. It was also West Second Street between Neptune Avenue and Sheepshead bay Road. It was stick ball on sultry summer evenings. It was local heroes named Joey, and Mike-y, and Johnny Boy who could hit a little ball straight down a column of apartment buildings and parked cars without touching a window. It was choosing up sides and belonging. It was about using what you had and making the most of it. There were no uniforms, no coaches, and no fancy equipment. Second base was a manhole cover that forever sat in the center of second street; first and third were sewer gratings. The poorest kid didn’t need a glove or a baseball bat. An old broomstick quickly appeared out of nowhere as soon as it was decided to play.

And anyone could have a shot at celebrity by making a difficult catch or running the bases well. Close calls were often disputed, arguments heated, and emotions ran high, but we always worked it out without a single adult. We learned about winning and we learned about losing. We learned to take our best swing at what life threw at us, and we learned that should we strike out, there would be another day and another game tomorrow.

Most children today have access to a TV or video games, or own some expensive electronic equipment, a computer, or a CD ROM. In 1954 we had little, but we had much. In those days we didn't call it virtual reality. We called it imagination. We called it dreaming. We called it hope. All things were possible. The bad guys wore black hats and the good guys wore white (it was our own kind of virtual reality). Man had not yet walked on the moon, but the Dodgers were still at Ebbets field, Hitler had long been defeated by our fathers and all was well in the world. Even if things were not going well in Korea we knew that, the best team would win and that America had never lost a war. Every kid felt like and was a winner.

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Fireworks

Every Tuesday night throughout the summer, shortly after the sunset, Brooklyn was treated to an aerial display of explosions and fireworks. The boardwalk was filled with people and out in the distance a barge became the launching pad for a fantastic show. We all leaned on the rail at the boardwalk's edge; our necks craned back, our eyes wide. Green, yellow, white, blue, the burning phosphoresce painted the night's canvas with light, and each masterpiece was greeted with ohhs and ahaas. Booms and blasts startled us even though we expected them. After a grand finale that made your jaw drop open, there was a haunting silence until the lonely sound of the barge's whistle signaled the show's conclusion. We all vowed we would be back next week. It was addictive.

As June ended and the 4th of July approached more and more firecrackers could be heard throughout the neighborhood. Bang, bang, bang, little explosions echoed and reported everywhere. A pack of firecrackers could be exploded one by one stretching out the pleasure for as long as possible, or the whole pack could be set off at once in an act of financial extravagance. It was "against the law" to sell or purchase firecrackers. We were all criminals. It was almost considered "un-American" not to set off a few firecrackers on the 4th, and someone was always just getting back from Chinatown and happened to have several mats for sale.

There was one little kid who wanted to celebrate. He had fifty cents with which he purchased a pack of explosives. But for some reason he did not dare explode them himself. He handed the pack back to the older kid from whom he just made the purchase (I remember it as if it were yesterday) and asked him to "set them off." It was the easiest fifty cents the one made and the silliest fifty cents ever spent by the other.

Let's celebrate. Celebrate life. Every life needs a little 4th of July. Every life needs something to celebrate. Life is too short not to celebrate. While some are content to watch others enjoy life, to watch others shoot off their rockets, or blow up their firecrackers, others insist on having a hand in the festivities themselves. They are not content to give up what they see as their birthright. Some find something to celebrate every day. They see life as too precious to spend all their days watching someone else having all the fun. If you want to get the most out of your firecracker you must set it off yourself. There is no other way. Don't let someone else take away that pleasure.

Life is much like that. I think God gives everyone a bag of opportunities, that like seeds, must be planted. But he also gives us a pack or two of firecrackers. If you are not careful someone else, bigger than you will gladly blow them up for you. My life is my life, and I must live it. I once worked for a man that was so controlling, so demanding, so oppressive that I decided that loss of employment was not as bad a loss of opportunity. I resigned. Many thought my giving up a good paying job, with all its benefits and security was foolish. They thought turning my back on a posh office, company vehicle, insurance, and condo was foolhardy. But I couldn't help remember that kid in Brooklyn who was content to let someone else light the fuse, and was content to let someone else have all the fun. Life is not always a "blast," but everyone should make sure they get the most "bang" for their buck.

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City Lights

Every city is known for its lights. It is the lure of the lights that still attracts people to Las Vegas. Brooklyn may not have had as many lights as Manhattan, but ours were more exciting. Kids in the country went to the state fair once a year. I have been to many since I left Brooklyn. State fairs are an amalgam of 4H'ers and farmers, cows and canned goods, blue ribbons, big clouds of cotton candy. There is something else, the mid-way. This area of off limits to many of the religious folk because of the sideshows and the games of chance and the chance one might catch a glimpse of a dancing girl through a tent door. The mid-way was uncomfortably sinful to the minds of many, or at least that is what the "old timers" tell me when the talk of the "good old days." If it was so sinful, I have been tempted to ask, "why do you get that far away look in your eyes when you describe it, and what about that little hint of a smile that seems to hiding on the corners of you lips?" I think better of asking, because I know better.

A kid who grew up in Coney Island didn't have to leave the farm once a year to visit some fair ground. He lived on the Mid-Way. Everywhere someone was selling snow cones and custard. The air was rich with the aroma corn on the cob, hot dogs, and jelly apples.

There were the rides. The Cyclone, the Tornado, and the Thunderbolt where three roller coaster which lined Sea Breeze Avenue. They were guaranteed to rattle your bones if not your nerves and provide a thrill of a lifetime. I first rode the Cyclone when only five years old. Some girl named Bubbles, who was supposed to be "watching me" for a few minutes for my mother, took the liberty to break me in to the world of wooden coasters. I think my eyes were fixed in a wide-open stare for hours afterward. I think that is the first time I realized I was mortal and survival was not guaranteed. Then there was the Wonder Wheel, which was one of the world's largest Ferris wheels. There were bumper cars, and carousels, and loop the loops. I early learned that the world was an exciting place.

Millions of people poured out of the subway each day to come to where I lived. It was like living in Disney World (Disneyland would not be created for more than a decade). Every night we had our own electric parade as millions of lights would flash, spin and twirl. Carnival barkers would call out "hurry, hurry, hurry, step right up." Even a local kid couldn't help but stare and wonder while looking at the large canvas painted posters of "the world's smallest" or the "world's tallest" or the "monkey boy" straight from Barnio.

Most who came to Coney Island in the early fifties seemed to be having a good time. Most went home late, tired, broke, and perhaps a little nauseous from too many potato kinishes. The lights would eventually go out, the rides would come to a standstill, Carnies would throw out their trash and lock up their stalls around midnight.

What did I learn by growing up on the Mid-way (well actually one street away)? I learned to enjoy, but not be fooled by too many lights. I learned to not be taken in by every show. I learned the difference between fact and fantasy, illusion and delusion. I learned to laugh and enjoy the ride, but I also learned not to put too much money down at the wheel of fortune booth. I learned that not everything is what it seems to be. I learned not to let hope be led by hype.

But there was good also. I learned that the human spirit must have its Ferris wheels, and its roller coasters, and its occasional cotton candy. I learned that only those who reach, really reach, have any hope of grasping the brass ring. I learned that there must be a time for everything, even a time for mid-ways.

I learned to have fun. Every life must have a little. Everyone must find relief occasionally in the lighter side of life. But having said all that, we all must learn early about the false lights. Too many are mesmerized by man made glow and glitter. Every life needs a lighter side and every life needs its lights; but every soul needs to know the difference between the man-made incandescent and those which are eternal.

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Noel

Perhaps it's just me, but as I remember when Christmas used to have a magical quality about it. I have no idea what every happened to Christmas. Perhaps it was because we were more innocent in those days or more easily impressed. Perhaps there was a gentle but genuine conspiracy of kindness and good will we have now lost with all our sophistication. That Christmas is only for children, is merely a way for secretly disappointed adults to cope with their own feeling of loss. But I have a different theory. I suspect what really happened to Christmas is that it was killed with prosperity. I have a suspicion that Christmas was originally designed for poor people. Excess has somehow extinguished the little candles of simplicity and replaced it with brighter but artificial gas logs of commercialism. Those who think such an assessment is "nostalgic nonsense" do so only because they never owned a passbook for a "Christmas club." They never made a purchase on "lay-a-way." Those who think my memories are absurd, never knew what it was to have to wait and hold off shopping until after the Christmas bonus envelopes were distributed. Although they were out of ear shot, I remember the excited interchange between my parents as they examined and discussed its contents of such an envelope at the kitchen table long ago one Christmas eve. Master Card and American express have done more to kill the real spirit of Christmas than they will ever know.

City sanitation men were a breed of their own in those days. They worked hard on the hottest summer days and through the coldest winters. They worked in the pouring rain and in the biting wind. They would arrive on their appointed days in a kind of commotion. The crash of the cans was like a peculiar percussion section of their own symphony orchestra. Once a year, at Christmas time it was the custom for people (especially shop owners and apartment superintendents) to give a gift, a token of gratitude and appreciation in the form of money discreetly placed in an envelope. It not only showed appreciation, but it also assured that your garbage cans did not accidentally get run over by the garbage truck, or roll out into the middle of traffic- if you know what I mean?

After the war my Father went where the work was. And the way he told it, you took what you could find. My Parents moved to Brooklyn when I was one. In order to make ends meet we moved into an apartment building on what was then Henry Street near Fulton and Flatbush Avenues. Besides finding temporary work as a house painter, my father served as the building superintendent. Among his duties was setting the trashcans out on the curb for garbage pick up, as well as the heavy ash cans.

As I said, we did not have very much in those days. And it was Christmas time. On this one particular day before Christmas the doorbell rang, but my Father was not home yet. My mother answered the door. My mother was an immigrant had recently arrived from Iceland and was not acquainted with many customs of America, to say nothing of Flatbush, Brooklyn. She found a Lieutenant from the Sanitation department sheepishly standing at the door hat in hand. In her broken English she asked, "May I help you?" She was caught by surprised and did not understand

or appreciate the obvious Christmas ritual of the natives. The fellow said “ I am from the Sanitation department, do you have anything for us? “Oh, Yow, un minute,” said my Icelandic mother with a heavy Nordic accent, “let me look.” After a couple of minutes she returned to the polite young garbage man who was so kind to make a personal call- and (I swear to God), she handed him two brown paper bags full of garbage.

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Brooklyn Bridges
Ingimar DeRidder 5523 Newberry Drive Raleigh, NC 27609
(C)

Feathered Friends

They are in every large city, but when I see pigeons, I think of Brooklyn. Pigeons are funny looking birds. They bob their heads atop their plump bodies as they strut, apparently unaware of how silly they look. They hang around on sidewalks and like an ocean of feathers, they part for pedestrians like the Red Sea did for Israel, and then quickly reclaimed the concrete when they pass. They are often seen in local parks perched on the head of some heroic figure cast in bronze who must endure this indignity; and heaven knows they do make a mess. Yes, whenever I see them I think of Brooklyn.

I think of the old men, lonely old men sitting on park benches waiting for company. Perhaps it was because they remember what it is like to be hungry, perhaps just because they refuse to remain alone, whatever the reason, they come with a mission. I have witnessed the spectacle a thousand times. No sooner than they are seated, when out comes a crumpled brown paper bag. It is unrolled and opened and its contents are cast to the earth a handful at a time.

Then the birds come out of nowhere. The pigeons materialize out of nothing like a thunderhead on a hot summer day. They come washing up around his feet like waves of foaming surf. To the solitary figure it is a cloud of angel's wings. The noise, a cooing cacophony of feathered excitement is music to his ears, no it is more, it is a symphony that assures his senses that he is still alive. The old man reaches again and again into this paper storehouse of what must seem heaven to the birds. He seems to anoint them with a hand as graceful as that of the Pope conferring on his congregation the papal blessing. For a few moments an old man has forgotten all his troubles and sorrows. Life goes on and one solitary human being feels good because he is needed and has been able to give. When the crumbs are gone and the bag is empty, and mission accomplished, the lonely figure set off down the street to some place he must have called home. I wonder if anyone was there waiting for him? No one should be alone.

Everyone has heard of homing pigeons. There is within them some kind of homing device that helps them to find their way. For years they were used to carry messages on the battlefield. These little creatures know what we all have learned through the passage of time: There is no place like home.

But what I really remember about pigeons and Brooklyn was on Richie's roof. There was a pigeon coop and another world high above the noisy and crowded sidewalks below. Richie knew them all by name and type. They were friends. I was just an acquaintance to them. There were Tiplets, and Tumblers. There were Fantails, and Grays. He knew each one. I remember how he would enter the coop, grasp a bird, and spread its plumage with pride.

A long bamboo pole was his shepherd's rod. With it he would either send his flock out to play or signal it was time to come home. These birds which were so awkward on the earth were at ease in their element. Without a conductor they performed a symphony in the air. Each played their parts

with perfection. Richie and his birds had some unwritten agreement that allowed him to coop them up, but only for so long; then he must let them fly. They would return on faith to the promise of shelter, security and quality feed. It was a happy arrangement. No breadcrumbs for these birds, Richie bought them the best birdseed available.

On occasion, the sight of a single bird over his airspace would set Richie off like a hunter who spotted a ten point buck. He would quickly make it to the roof and arouse his flock from their lazy afternoon rest and send them out to work. Although many, they would move as one. To the right, to the left, wing tip to wingtip they would fly in close formation with all the skill of the Navy's Thunderbirds. They were a beautiful sight. Richie, however, was attempting to capture the stray.

No one likes to be all alone. Even the book of Genesis says, "it is not good." Richie would use this principle again and again to increase his numbers. The flock would sweep by making many passes at the solo pilot until it got the message. Soon the single stray in the sky had either fled or had joined the flock. With a combination of skill and luck it would become a valuable part of Richie's growing family of feathered friends. The key word here is friends, Richie was their friend. We all need friends. That stray had not intended to spend the night, but for now this would have to do. For now this would be home. Perhaps it would stay.

Every spirit like an angel has its wings. No spirit can be cooped up long and healthy. A happy soul must have the right balance of freedom and fellowship. A man must be careful not to give up his individuality or his identity, but at the same time no man or woman deserves to be lonely. The healthy human spirit must be free to fly, but it also must have a resting-place.

As we make our way through this world we each have an instinct that turns our heart to home. Along the way we often enjoy the company of others with whom we share common causes or commitments. When we are with those with whom we belong, even though one is a Gray Fantail, and another is a Tippet, one is white and one is brown, we are able to fly wingtip to wingtip without colliding in a kind of harmony that makes us feel at home.

Our spirit soars as it enjoys the liberty of being our selves while yet belonging to others. We need to be free, but no one should have to fly alone.

Each of us has some kind of "homing device" deep inside us. There have been times when it didn't seem to be working properly and I seemed to lose my way. I am grateful to the Richies, the mentors, the friends who temporarily "took me under their wing" until I was able to get my bearings once again. They let me fly with them while still allowing me to be myself. Although they took me in, they never locked the door. Their friendship nourished me and prepared me to take off once again to follow my dreams and to head for home.

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The Crossing

As bridges go, to me, none is more beautiful than the Brooklyn Bridge. Its two enormous granite towers with their cathedral-like arches stand 276 feet above the East River. In 1876 they dwarfed even the spire of Trinity Church, which was in its day the tallest building in Manhattan. And as was the intent of every church spire they also made men look up.

While it was their height (which was an engineering necessity demanded by land constraints) that gets our attention, it is in their depth that the secret lies. Huge wooden caissons were sunk off shore and the earth was dredged out at great peril, expense, and loss of life.

The foundations in place, the genius of the design began to unfold as a giant spider web of steel wires spun out from the anchorage. Roebling was originally in the wire business and his ingenious idea and process of braiding wire was “state of the art” science in his day. All the many miles of wire, all the tons of steel spanning the East river began with a single cable. One end, with the aid of a piece of hemp rope was hoisted to the top of the Brooklyn tower. Then a spool was placed in a bark which sailed over to the Manhattan side. When that end was hoisted to the top of the Western tower a celebration erupted on both shores. The headlines of the Brooklyn newspaper the *Eagle* said it all with one word: “WEDDED.” The work went on cable by cable until the modern wonder of the world was completed. It is amazing what man can do once he sets his mind to it.

The greatest bridges, however, are not made of steel and granite or finite things. They are made of better stuff. Some bridges are made of acts or words of kindness and they can bring two people close. Sometimes nothing less than courage will do for overcoming fear; and then there are occasions when compassion can connect the have with the have-nots. Sometimes knowledge is the frame and the truss that rises over ignorance and then there are times when we must get beyond hate and only love will do. span the gulf. The plan and design for this spiritual bridge called salvation is the epitomy of skill and wisdom, and the cost to God is nothing less than staggering. “For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” The greatest crossing is the cross, and with this greatest act of love, any man who puts his trust in Christ is linked to God forever.

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