**A Nickel’s Worth**

**A nickel could buy a nice piece of candy in the 50s. I had narrowed the choice down between a pack of bubble gum cigarettes or Turkish taffy . It was a real honey of a choice, spending the nickel I got for saving Freddy Yakowski’s life.**

**Longfellow Avenue was a stretch of road built across a lower level of a hill that started up at Hunts Point and sloped downward towards the Bronx River. There we lived in the middle one of three two-story brick homes each with long descending driveways. The two end houses were adjacent to weedy rock-strewn vacant lots. Across the street was a row of five floor brick and stone apartment buildings separated from each other by narrow alleyways that held trash cans and led into paved back courtyards. Ours was the only house with a screened front porch and swing couch. I lived upstairs with mom and dad and two sisters. Pop and Nana occupied the lower floor. All together there were two kitchens and three bedrooms, an upstairs one for us three kids. Next door lived Grandpa and Grandma in a two bedroom house that held seven children, five boys sharing one small bedroom. Each house had a large side yard with vegetable gardens, cold frames, and fig trees which had been brought from Italy. While Pop actually owned his property, Grandpa’s yard was actually a part of the adjacent lot which he had impounded by gradually expanding the perimeter of a six foot chain link fence.**

**The kids who lived in the apartments across the street were mostly Jewish and Italian. I must have been viewed as somewhat “privileged,” living as I did in a nice house, but what we all had in common were “free-range” parents. Coming home from P.S. 48, I did my homework quickly and then ran out to play until mom would stick her head out the upstairs bedroom window and give the supper call. The street and sidewalks were alive with kids playing wallball, scully and flipping baseball cards. We’d ride up and down the block on scooters made of skate parts, wooden soda boxes, and two-by-fours. We played stickball with a rubber Spaulding, a broomstick, and two chalk bases drawn in the middle of the street. When someone yelled out “car coming” we’d all shift to the side to allow it to pass. Some Saturdays were special days when a half-moon ride truck would roll down the street blasting music. We’d line up with our nickels for a ride and the toy give-away at the end. Other Saturdays there would be pony rides, ice cream trucks and the occasional organ grinder.**

**One vacant lot was our playground. It was a large weedy expanse that backed into a shallow rocky ravine across which one viewed the back and roof of the factory on the next street below us. Overlooking the depression was a tall tree to which someone had managed to tie a rope swing on which we took turns looping around and over the crevice. The tall weeds often held tossed “treasures” both hidden and in plain view. When word got around the street one day that someone had tossed out an old sofa on the lot, kids poured from the apartments and swarmed the sofa like bees on a honeycomb, tearing away at the pillows and upholstery and actually pulling out coins that had slipped out of pants’ pockets.**

**Freddy Yakowski in those days was a steady friend. He was bigger than me, had somewhat bucked teeth, large ears, and blonde crew-cut hair. Occasionally we tussled and he usually he got the better of me, leaving me bruised and scratched a bit. He would always excuse himself to my parents, saying “it wa’ a accident.” But we still stuck it out together, playing cowboys and Indians among the alleyways of the apartments, sprawling on the marble floors of the apartment foyers comparing and trading comic books, flipping baseball cards.**

**One day he pulled from his pocket a pack of matches that he had found in a kitchen drawer. That was enough motivation for the two of us to think up a little bit of mischief. We made our way to the vacant lot, climbed half-way down the narrow ravine to an outcropping of rocks that offered both seats and concealment. Grabbing twigs and tossed newspaper sheets we got a fire going in no time. Holding two sticks into the flame we imagined ourselves out in the prairie, under the moon, like some of the cowboy heroes we watched on Saturday morning TV. Before long I noticed smoke coming from Freddie’s right knee. His overalls had caught fire. Without hesitation I started slapping at his knee, him jumping up and down, whether from the flames or my frantic slapping I don’t know. In short order the fire was extinguished, leaving behind a large hole in Freddie’s pants for him to somehow explain to his parents. That was it. Freddie claimed that I had saved his life, for which act he reached deep into his pocket and pulled out a nickel, along with a half-filled book of matches. The nickel was my payback. As we made our way home, we found the street as we had left it – scruffy little boys, some arguing over balls or strikes, some flipping cards along the apartment wall, a line of kids alongside the Good Humor truck.**

**The only house still standing now is Grandpa’s, tightly encircled by a six foot chain link fence. The yard that held gardens and fig trees had been reclaimed and is now part of a red-brick blocky building that covers the once vacant lot. My home is a fenced-in repository of junked cars. The apartment houses are still there, as well as the candy store on the corner of Seneca and Bryant, although now it is a grocery. Like me, Freddie must be in his 70s now, if he is still alive. Had he become a lawyer, an engineer, an accountant? Does he too remember that summer day, and does it trigger memories of childhood as it does for me? That memory has been with me my entire life. Why? Is it because I really thought at the time I had saved a life? Or is it the preposterous idea that Freddie felt his life to be worth a half-pack of matches and a nickel? More likely it is because that nickel each time buys me a curbside seat before a set staged with scores of kids doing what kids did on weekday afternoons on every city street in the Bronx of the 50s: playing games, squabbling, choosing sides, reaffirming friendships, until windows open and mothers summon with supper calls, and like a cloud of smoke above a smoldering fire, the children we were evanesce through doors and into hallways of places we once called home.**