

## “A PARADOX FROM THE PAST”

It was the famous Father Flanagan who once said, “There is no such thing as a bad boy.” This statement made at a time when girls rarely if ever got into trouble, was inspired by a misguided man who had only wished that in his troubled youth someone had been there to set him straight. When we were young and living in the old neighborhood we had more than “someone” to look after us we had practically everyone keeping an eye on us. How lucky we are that we had so many people concerned so that we would not turn out to be “juvenile delinquents.” In comparison to some of the kids today we were practically saints. However, if you repeatedly got into some minor trouble and only after a good beating and punishment failed, you were often subjected to two radical remedies. These two remedies were a definite “contradiction of beliefs!”

**Summer, Saturday Night circa 1960;** It is one of those very hot humid summer nights on the corner of J&I. Petchy whispers, “Aron you lift the lid off the fire plug while I turn the valve with the wrench.” Horn is looking out for a signal from Livin who is standing at the corner of 24<sup>th</sup> & Indiana looking out for the cops. Within seconds the plug is spurting a heavy stream of water up and over the curb across Judson Street onto the pavement near Lena Tacony’s candy store. Within a few minutes most of the people on the 2900 block of Judson Street are in the street with their bare feet in the cool water flowing swiftly along the curbside. Balloons is spraying the water flow from the plug as Barbells, Rodger, Squid and Trains enjoy the cool water splashing over them. Livin and Vinny Chang are about to enter the stream and out of nowhere a meat wagon pulls up and two cops jump out of the wagon and turn the plug off. We all start to boo, but the cops pay no mind to us and take off in their wagon. It didn’t take long for most of the people to return to their

homes. Tony Perna pulls out a deck of Pinochle cards and begins to deal them to Donald Bove, Pat Nicastro and Dooner Ricchutti. The rest of us kind of sit there and can’t believe that the fun only lasted for a few minutes. From where I am standing I can see some stacks of lettuce crates with garbage in them up against the telephone poll in the alley way behind Capriotti’s Grocery Store. I quickly make a dash for the garbage and extract a rotten head of lettuce and a mushy tomato and throw them into the crowd of guys on the corner. I didn’t hit anyone, but the guys charged after me, so I grabbed a few tomatoes and ran down the alley way. To my surprise no one followed after me instead they began having a free for all garbage fight. Tomatoes, lettuce, onions, string beans and all kinds of fruit are being thrown all over Indiana Avenue. I quickly return up the alley way, but by the time I get to the end, every one is scattering quickly. Emerging from the alley I run smack into Jules Capriotti. Jules pauses then calmly says with a very angry look on his face, “You better get this mess cleaned up fast.” He walks away without uttering another word. The remainder of the night is spent by all of us cleaning up the mess of squashed garbage. The next morning, I am told by Aunt Martha that I better go to Church and pray for forgiveness, because this is the third time this week I have gotten into trouble. The other incidences of accidentally hitting Roseanne Simpson with a water balloon and coming in after curfew Friday night have me facing possible solitary confinement for the entire summer. After Mass I start walking home and I see my sister Mary Juliani walking down Fox Street with her sons Angelo and Larry. I wait for them and as she approaches me she lectures me and tells me I better straighten myself out and stop getting into trouble. You better see Aunt Helen and get her to remove

the “maloik” from you. She then proceeds off to Mass. I figure why not, so I turn around and make my way to my Aunt Helen Marcino’s house on Lambert Street. While I am walking I begin to think about how the evil eye could have been cast on me, then I remembered that old women on the corner of Broad & Allegheny on the last day of school. She was very upset at me, because I inadvertently ran into her trying to catch the 60 trolley that was pulling away. I didn’t make the trolley and the lady was standing next to me and cursing me in Italian. I didn’t understand what she was saying, but the manner in which she said it now makes me wonder if she cast an evil spell on me. I explain all of this to Aunt Helen who is like the rest of my family, a devout Catholic. She begins to tell me that she truly believes that the women put the malocchio on me. “This is a superstition that if you are a believer it can be responsible for many bad things that happen to you. I remember when I was a child my mother Niccolina Panico, telling us about a pregnant friend of hers who was cursed by her mother-in-law. The lady was never able to nurse her baby because of the malocchio.” She then proceeded to get a dish full of water and began dropping olive oil in the water and reciting prayers in Italian. The drops of oil run together and take the shape of an eye. She speaks to me, “See the eye? This means that your troubles are being caused by the curse.” She tells me, “That in the future, if you think that anyone is giving you the malocchio make your fingers in the shape of horns and point them at that person.” Until this day I can honestly say that I don’t know whether it was the daily Mass that I attended or the removal of the maloik, but I was a different person by the end of the summer. If you ask my wife, she will tell you I changed because I met her a few weeks after the curse was removed!