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In a Neighborhood, A Boy's World

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In the early 1940s, when I was a boy in Hartford, one of my favorite summer-morning hangouts was Abie's Barber Shop on Garden Street. It stood next to Ray's Drug Store, which was on the corner of Mather and Garden streets. On the corner across the street was a tavern. Angelico's Market occupied the corner east of the tavern, and the Peskin and Perler Bakery stood on the last corner.

Most of the six-tenement apartment houses like mine that lined nearby Bedford Street had wooden ash-sheds, underneath which rats lived in colonies. These brown, fat, furry rats were as huge as cats and had large alligator teeth. They also lived under first-floor porches, multiplied in the walls, dominated our cellars, and scurried about the yards with impunity. Some mornings, I would be seized by nervous anticipation as to whether or not there was a rat caught in a trap my father had set the night before. I'd dress quickly and creep stealthily out the back door.



I'd then visit my old friends Pappy Goldberg and Joe Benheimer at the gas station for breakfast. The Bergen Bros. gas station was at the corner of Bedford and Mather streets, diagonally across the street from our apartment building and opposite the vacant lot and synagogue. Three brothers owned the station. Pappy was my favorite because he didn't mind kids hanging around. He was a thin, wiry, gray man who dressed like a chauffeur. He wore knicker pants and was never without his leather pettees, which engulfed his chubby shanks. His face was a sandy red, and there were heavy lines about his eyes that were accentuated on hot days whenever he looked up into the sky while wiping the inside rim of his cap with a brown handkerchief.

Pappy usually sat in a swivel chair with his feet, outstretched and crossed, placed on an oak desk that was dark and oily. Joe sat near him in a barrel chair with his ever-present pipe planted in his mouth. No one knew how old Joe was or where he came from. He arrived in the neighborhood one day and began to help pump gas and load the oil trucks at the station. He received no pay, but proved so helpful that the Bergen brothers befriended him, and he made the gas

station his home. At night he slept inside the station on the desk, and on warm summer days during slow periods he usually fell asleep outside the station in a captain's chair. He sensed intuitively the arrival of a customer and sprang to the pumps from his chair as though he had been ever vigilant.

The screen door slammed behind me as I entered and sat on the desk and dangled my feet.

"Vhat are you doink up so early?" Pappy asked, yawning and stretching his arms.

"I was checking the rat trap, and we caught another one."

"Vas it a big vone?" Pappy queried, as he turned to look out the window at the pumps.

"No, about average size. Probably like the one Sonny caught last week." A slight pause ensued.

"Did you half breakfast?" I shook my head.

"Joe, do you vant somesthink to eat?" Pappy rinsed out a dirty saucepan, filled it with water, and placed it on a portable heating unit. He then pushed the no-sale key on the cash register, extracted a nickel and a penny from it, and told me to race to the bakery and buy three rolls.

Peskin and Perler Bakery always smelled delicious in the morning. Mr. Peskin frequently stood to the side of the main counter and nodded his head, sympathizing with a customer about some personal matter, while bakers flew through the swinging doors at the back of the shop carrying out steaming trays of jelly doughnuts, crullers, and Danish pastry. The counter cases were loaded with tempting pastries that made it nearly impossible for any boy to decide exactly what to buy. When my turn came, I plunked the nickel and penny onto the glass counter and asked for three rolls with seeds. The girl handed me a small brown bag, and I pushed my way through a sea of stomachs to the door.

By the time I got back to the station, the coffee grounds were rolling about in the dark, boiling water. Pappy had set out three white mugs on the desk alongside a pale silver tablespoon with a bent stem. Pappy took a strainer from a drawer and poured the coffee through it into our cups.

Abie's Barber Shop did not open until 9:00, so I generally played in the streets, hung around Pappy's station, or performed some tasks for my mother until then. I liked going to the barbershop because I could read the Hartford Courant and digest all the daily baseball information. Also because Abie and Charlie sometimes asked me to perform odd jobs for them, which earned me slugs to put into the baseball machine. As I approached the shop I would always stop skipping and restrain my natural exuberance, for it was essential not to disrupt business with childish antics. After opening the screen door, I'd close it slowly and head for an empty chair. I'd greet the brothers cheerfully, and they in turn would welcome me genially if they were not occupied, with a nod if they were busy, or with a scowl if the shop was crowded.

Inside the shop three barber chairs, complete with long leather strops at their sides, faced three large mirrors on the west wall. Twisted wire-backed chairs lined the opposite wall along with two tables, which held torn magazines and the morning paper. An electric baseball machine and a pinball machine stood against the wall after the row of chairs. If I reached a chair and began to read the paper without any scowls or negative comments, I was safe.

It was never difficult to spot the write-up on the Red Sox, and if they won I was ecstatic; if they lost I usually swore and was morose for hours. Most of the boys in the neighborhood liked the Yankees, but Abie, Charlie, and I loved the Red Sox. On some afternoons the voice of Jim Britt, the Red Sox announcer, would echo throughout the shop as he described the game through a brown Philco radio. All customers were compelled to listen to the game whether or not they wanted to. If one of the Red Sox players got a hit and a run scored, I'd jump up and down, and Charlie would smile smugly; but Abie would dance a small jig and shout "see, see, see!" waving his hands frantically about in the air while holding a pair of scissors or a razor, much to the consternation of the customer in his chair. Such exhibitions surprised one or two of the stoic rabbis in the shop and caused them to stare at the radio and contemplate how such a modern mechanism could elicit that sort of response from a middle-aged man.

Whenever the shop was empty Charlie assigned a task or two to me, for which I was rewarded with one or more slugs to play the machines. Polishing the mirrors with Bon Ami was the hardest task, but worth five slugs. The most undesirable job was washing out the four spittoons, whose brown, murky waters were cluttered with cigarette and cigar butts and exuded an insufferable stench. The pay was one slug per spittoon. The easiest task was sweeping up hair, a task that could be initiated without a formal job request. Occasionally both Charlie and Abie were so beset with customers, or so enchanted with the ball game, or so engrossed in a debate that reverberated about the shop that they walked about their chairs on clumps of twisted hair. By alertly grabbing the broom and dustpan, I could quickly earn a slug.

I always played the baseball machine. When I inserted a slug, a buzzer sounded, and a shiny ball was propelled from a metal tab in the center of the machine. The bat was operated by a small button on the front. The object of the game was to score as many runs as possible by driving the ball into the various "hit" holes and not the "out" ones. Sometimes, when the shop was empty, Abie and Charlie played the machine for money, and then there was a lot of swearing on the part of the loser.

Charlie, Abie, and the boy that I was are all gone now. But the few small blocks that constituted my world as a boy, the apartment houses, the stores, the empty lots, and the people who spent their lives on those streets still move in my heart.

Walter E. Smith is a poet and retired executive from the aerospace and national defense industry. This is a second installment adapted from his unpublished "Bedford Street Sketches." The first installment appeared in the Fall 2005 issue.