

Boys of Summer in Yonkers (Memoir Excerpt # 2)

by Gary Percesepe

Living in the heart of the heart of the country I miss the beach.

When I was a boy my father would sometimes pile us into the family station wagon on summery Saturday mornings and drive us from our apartment in the Italian-American Park Hill neighborhood of southwestern Yonkers to the IBM Country Club on Sands Point, Long Island. For a kid who grew up playing on hot city streets, where the only relief from the heat came from an illegally opened fire hydrant or a visit from the Mister Softee ice cream truck, the prospect of a day at the beach was indescribably delicious. How we looked forward to these drives! How long it took to get there!

It was a short trip through the Bronx--over Mr. Moses' Whitestone Bridge to the Northern Parkway (25A), then Searington Road to the country club-- but weekend daytripper beach traffic could be fierce; the trip could take well over an hour. (Robert Moses--whose name can still set off brawls in New York and is the subject of a remarkable biography by Robert Caro--was the irascible public works administrator who built much of modern New York, including the Whitestone, Throgs Neck, and Triborough bridges, and established public parks and beaches all over Long Island. He resisted alternatives to the automobile, such as ferries, which might have relieved traffic congestion from the city to Long Island. To this day traffic on his Long Island Expressway comes to a complete standstill twice a day in his honor, during rush hour. The L.I.E., which has its own channel on New York television, can become a twelve lane parking lot.) My sister and I, riding across the

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Whitestone, would stop fussing with each other and count the lampposts on the bridge, singing out the numbers with glee. When we got to the other side, out of the Bronx at last, we knew we were close.

I am coming to understand how many memories of my father involve him, driving. My father had done a lot of driving during the war in Europe, as part of an advance team that sniffed out enemy land mines. It was a harrowing life. Driving at night to his next assignment, away from help and always in harm's way, he had navigated by light of moon and stars; on moonless nights he watched the tops of trees to feel his way on the narrow roads. When I turned sixteen he taught me how to drive. We drove together all over Westchester County, mostly at night. It was strange to see him seated on the passenger side. In fact, it is the only memory I have of my father seated on the right side of a car. We rarely talked; driving was a serious business. We drove in the rain to the steady drone of the wiper blades, we drove in winter with studded snow tires that whirred on dry pavement, we drove and watched the changing of the seasons, but we always drove in silence. I don't ever recall my father giving me much in the way of advice, except once. After a long stretch of night driving on the Taconic Parkway using my low beams, perhaps remembering his wartime driving, but more likely thinking of the deer that were thick in the woods along the Taconic, he said simply, "Don't be afraid to use your brights."

My father's education had been interrupted by the Great Depression, and after that the great war. An excellent student in high school, he nevertheless missed the chance to go to college; though he was offered a generous scholarship, he was unable to use it. In the early years of my parents' marriage, we lived with my grandfather on the second floor of a large house at 32 Prospect Drive. The beautiful stone house with its wraparound front porch, built in 1898, had a commanding view of the Hudson River. On clear winter days, looking south, the Empire State Building and the Statue of Liberty were visible, twenty-five miles away.

At the time of my birth my father had a small business as a moving man, hauling appliances in a cab-over-engine truck. He caddied at the local golf course to make extra money for his young family. Later, he was happy to get the job at IBM, which carried with it country club privileges. The country club at Sands Point—there was another one upstate in Poughkeepsie, not far from Vassar College—was one of several perks that helped keep the burgeoning IBM work force from unionizing.

Once a year IBM hosted a company picnic at the Sands Point club, which was formerly an estate of the Guggenheim family. Workers were invited to tour the Guggenheim mansion and the graceful gardens, complete with statuary and flowing fountains. The house was light and airy, with exquisite views of Long Island Sound and a constant ocean breeze. Each year we would walk the shaded grounds on the hill near the beach in search of the perfect picnic table. While my mother laid the table, my father would start the fire for the grill, then hit the links with his buddies. (There was a nine hole golf course at the club.) My sister and I would be entered in organized games—relay races, sack races, softball, swimming. There were prizes for everyone.

The beach was narrow and pebbly, and the water calm and warm. We were made to wait one hour after dinner before being allowed to swim again. No matter. There was always something new to do. There were day friends to be made, kids I would never see again, Italian-American kids like me, whose fathers drank beer, unlike mine, and spoke in booming voices. Day passed into night. The table would be emptied, and leftovers placed into the wicker picnic basket. Slowly we would make our way in the dark to the car, looking back on the lights of the yachts and fishing boats on the Sound. As we drove out past the lighted mansion I would take a long look back at the world I was leaving, a magical kingdom filled with everything I wanted, but given only once a year. My cup was small in those days, it was not so difficult to fill. There was much to miss.

Missing, I came to understand, was what I did best.

We rolled off the grounds back onto Searington Road, where my father would stop for one last treat, a custard at the Carvel stand. Then it was back over the Whitestone, the water dark as midnight and menacing beneath our gaze, up the Major Deegan, through the Bronx, and back home to our apartment building, where we would wait until next year.

