

# Lessons Learned

*by vic fortezza*

Vito shuffled happily down Benson Avenue, buoyed by the thought of the double-feature matinee he was to see. He still could not believe his mother allowed him, a child of ten, to go to the movies by himself. In fact, he wasn't even sure he was responsible enough to take care of himself as yet. He wasn't about to talk his mother out of the privilege, however, which he'd been enjoying since the onset of winter. He loved movies, especially scary ones. He could not understand his friends' indifference to them. He'd ceased asking them to accompany him. He did not mind going alone.

He turned right at Bay Parkway, averting his gaze from the huge temple at the opposite corner. It was there, however, in the corner of his eye, beckoning, drawing his gaze like a magnet. He shivered, fearful his soul would be doomed to the eternal fires of hell if he stared at it willfully. Why, if it held such peril, did he find it so difficult to look away? It was so big, so awe-inspiring. Two of his own parish's church might fit into it with room to spare. He was puzzled: How could Jews be so bad if they'd built such a magnificent place of worship?

What was so bad about other religions that their followers were automatically condemned to eternal damnation? The priests were so convincing when they claimed Christ was the only true way. And his mother was always warning him of the danger of straying. If Catholicism were the only true faith, Vito was sure his mother would go to heaven. She never failed to attend mass on Sunday or the first Friday of the month and often attended weekday mornings before going to the sewing factory. This amazed Vito, as Sunday worship was more than enough for him. His mother observed mass with the same zeal he had for movies and baseball. She had many sets of rosary beads and countless icons, and kept candles burning constantly. She scotch-taped religious photographs to the walls of their three-room apartment. There were several pictures of St. George, slaying the serpent, throughout the flat. She was especially

proud of this brave warrior, for whom her hometown in Sicily had been named. A photograph of the pope greeted visitors at the door.

Many of the neighbors were Jewish. Ricky Gilman's father had taken Vito to his first major league game. He'd sat in a box seat behind home plate, no more than 100 feet from where his hero, Mickey Mantle, kneeled in the on-deck circle. The sight of little Albie Pearson of the Washington Senators fading back and snaring Mantle's majestic drive against the black wall near the 407 ft. marker in right-centerfield was still crystal clear to him. He'd never seen anything more beautiful than the flight of that object gleaming in the bright sunshine. How disappointed he was that the ball, hit by the man with the magical name, had not found the bleachers, which were packed.

Clifford Brown, who'd lived in the four-family building next door, an exact duplicate of the one Vito's parents owned, had always been game for a friendly wrestle wherein neither was ever hurt. Cliffie had been the only child to have admitted being a party to the breaking of the ledge of the front porch. He came to the apartment with tears in his eyes and was consoled and praised for his honesty, Vito rendering the translation into English. Cliff and Ricky had moved away. He missed them. There were no more Jewish boys his age on the block.

Mrs. Waxman, who lived a few doors down, frequently hired Vito's father to do cement work on weekends, which brought in money vital to the support of the family. She lauded his industry and craftsmanship.

Vito wondered what was so bad about these people, Jews, that such harsh words were said about them, words he occasionally found himself spouting to secure the approval of friends. They did not believe in Jesus, he knew, and he'd learned that was bad. Yet hadn't Jesus been a Jew himself? It was so confusing.

He came upon a patch of dirty snow at the edge of the sidewalk and scraped up an icy snowball. Spring was still three weeks away. The school year had more than three months to go. He dreaded the thought. Time moved so slowly for him. He longed for the day he

would be done with school forever. He'd graduate high school in 1968, that is, if he were never left back. He prayed that by then his mother would have forgotten her desire to have him attend college. He hoped she wouldn't be too hurt if he weren't bright enough to make the grade. He'd been certain he was going to be left back last June. He suspected his mother had sent his sister and brother in law to plead for his promotion.

At 86th Street he climbed the stairs leading to the elevated train station, snowball in hand. He lacked the confidence to cross the busy intersection below, despite the traffic light. He turned right at the landing, passed through the area of the token booth and turnstiles, and made his way to the opposite landing. He paused at an open window that overlooked Bay Parkway, snowball poised and ready to strike. Traffic was moving so fast he dared not throw for feared of missing the mark. Finally a taxi slowed as it neared the intersection and Vito let fly, striking the windshield. The snowball burst into innumerable tiny crystals, as if it'd been a delicate piece of glasswork. He was shocked at the force of impact, amazed the windshield hadn't shattered. Had he known the force would have been so great he would not have thrown. He'd intended a prank, not vandalism. He flushed hotly, tears welling in his eyes. The driver exited the car and gazed about perplexedly. Vito remained frozen in place, the words: "I didn't mean it, Mister" at his lips. He was amazed the man hadn't realized what seemed obvious and spotted him. He shuddered at the thought that he might have caused an accident, that the police would have come for him. What would he have said to his parents, who were busy trying to make ends meet in a land that was foreign to them? He was not a bad boy, not like those who threw candy at others, at the matrons, in the movie theater; not like his friends, who delighted in tormenting each other.

He walked past the token booth as nonchalantly as possible, then hurried down the stairs at the opposite side of the street, glad he was at least across Bay Parkway, amazed no one was after him. He would cross 86th Street at the 20th Avenue station, part of which rose above the Benson's marquee. His fears were subsiding at the

next block. Luck had been with him. He prayed he would never do anything so foolish again. He felt a pang as he realized, in terms of honesty, he was no Clifford Brown.

There was a short line at the ticket booth. Admission was fifty cents for children. He was elated, as he would have a half-dollar left with which to buy candy. He did not understand why adults had to pay twice as much as children to see the same films. He wondered if admission would ever again be as low as twenty-six cents, which it'd been the first time his father had taken him to a matinee. The only thing he didn't like about having the privilege of going to the movies himself was that his father was no longer interested in accompanying him.

To his relief, the show hadn't begun. He ran to the bathroom, which reeked, and hurried out when he was done, as his mother had taught him to do when using a public facility. He purchased a large package of Juju Fruits at the refreshment counter and was digging into it as he made his way down the aisle along the children's section, which was to the right of the screen. The theater was nearly empty, which pleased him, as there weren't enough children present to make a commotion that would drown out the actors' words.

As he was about to take his accustomed seat halfway to the screen, he came upon a boy he'd met the past two weeks.

"Jeffrey!" he said excitedly.

"Hi, Vito," the boy returned, smiling warmly.

Vito was thrilled that Jeffrey, 13, seemed genuinely happy to see him. Most of the older boys of his neighborhood tormented the younger verbally and physically. He respected and admired Jeffrey and could tell by the way he expressed himself that he was a good student. Jeffrey was able to read the screen credits with ease. He was well-behaved and had a wonderful laugh, not a sniggling one like most boys his age. And he would not, as some boys did, cover his face at the appearance of a monster. Vito did not understand why anyone would do such a thing. It seemed silly, depriving oneself.

As the first feature began they turned their attention to the screen,

disappointed the film was in black and white. "Low budget," Jeffrey called it. Vito agreed, although he wasn't sure what it meant. They conversed as the film ran, comparing it to others, pausing only when the monster appeared. Vito wondered why his friends weren't as pleasant as Jeffrey, why they insisted on being cruel. Sometimes he thought life strange.

The coming attractions promised more thrills. Vito despaired at the thought that an entire week of school stood before his next trip to the movies. To his disappointment, Jeffrey wasn't sure he would be able to attend. He didn't live in the neighborhood. He'd come today only because his mother was visiting his ailing grandmother, who lived around the corner.

The second feature was dull. Vito decided a joke would enliven the situation. He was proud of his ability to tell one, a gift which amazed his parochial school classmates, who all received higher grades than he yet lacked the energy and imagination to tell a joke effectively.

"Did you hear the one about the rabbi who went to Texas?" he said, eager to employ a Hebraic accent.

"No," said Jeffrey indifferently.

Vito began and paused as the smile left his friend's face. "Are you Jewish?"

"Yes," said Jeffrey, arms folded tightly to his chest.

"That kills that one," said Vito, trying to make light of the situation, masking his shame.

"Yeah," said Jeffrey abruptly, nodding, forcing a chuckle from himself.

Vito sensed Jeffrey's pain, despite the latter's effort to disguise it. He admonished himself for not having realized Jeffrey's heritage. None of his friends or classmates had that first name. And none, not even the brightest, behaved like him. Jeffrey was a lot like Clifford Brown, only smarter. Vito wished he could go back in time and redo the past few minutes. He wondered how he might make it up to Jeffrey. He didn't dare apologize. That would be tantamount to admitting he'd meant harm when all he'd hoped was to be funny, to win his friend's respect. Besides, he feared he would not be believed

if he said he hadn't meant to be mean.

When time failed to alleviate the tension, Vito tried to salvage the situation by telling the joke with a raceless man as its subject, although his zest for humor had left him.

"This guy goes to Texas and goes into a bar and says: 'Please, can I have a short beer.' And the bartender puts out a pitcher for him, and the guy says: 'This is a short beer?' And the bartender says: 'In Texas everything's big.' Later, the guys says: 'Please, can I have a short pretzel,' and the bartender brings out one that's three feet long. 'So big?' the guy says. 'In Texas everything's big,' says the bartender. Later, the guy has to go to the bathroom and the bartender tell him to go down the hall and into the first room on his right. The guy goes down scratchin' his head, thinkin' about how everything's so big in Texas, and instead of goin' right he goes left and falls into a giant swimmin' pool and yells out: 'Please don't flush!'"

Although Jeffrey laughed politely, Vito sensed that he wasn't really amused. He suspected Jeffrey realized it'd been the original joke with only the subject's origin changed. He was angry with himself, realizing the joke would be funny no matter the subject's race. Any goofy man in that situation might have reacted similarly.

Conversation ceased between them. The film had not become any more exciting. They sat silently staring at the screen.

"I gotta go," said Vito finally, rising, unable to look at Jeffrey directly. "See ya."

"Yeah," said Jeffrey, deflated.

Vito was unable to dismiss the incident as easily as he had the one with the snowball, as an injury had occurred, despite the fact that he'd intended none. He felt even more distressed than whenever Mrs. Sarno berated him before his classmates. He felt unworthy of Jeffrey's friendship and believed nothing would ever atone for what he'd done. All he could hope was not to make the same mistake again. He despaired as he recalled having made it recently during a rank-out session with classmates when Peter Cavallaro had belittled his mother. "Pick up your father, Petey," Vito shot back, tossing his

head in the direction of a mass of dog refuse, proud of his wit. In the ensuing, profound silence he recalled that Petey had never known his father, a pilot shot down in Korea. He'd been unable to apologize for that indiscretion as well. Fortunately Petey, a big boy, had not pounded him into the ground, although he felt he deserved it. In fact, Petey hadn't said a word, for which Vito was grateful and amazed. His respect for Petey grew by bounds.

He sensed he'd never forget these incidents. He was awed by how much there was to learn in life and did not understand why God created slow learners such as himself. He feared he would never acquire the intelligence to deal with the complexities of life, which were growing rapidly.

Although he never saw Jeffrey again, he thought about him often and prayed the pain the joke had caused him had been forgotten. He wished he could forget it himself.

