

Ralph Uttaro

## Down The Park

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We were kept inside during morning recess<sup>1</sup>, allowed only to walk down the hall to the supply room<sup>2</sup> to buy milk and cookies, five boys at a time to limit any roughhousing<sup>3</sup>. I had just returned to my seat, neatly stacked my ten vanilla wafers on top of my desk, and pried open the spout on my container of chocolate milk when Poochie strode through the door. He stopped in the aisle and looked down at me, cocked his head to one side, then hocked<sup>4</sup>. A thick bubbling gob of phlegm<sup>5</sup> shot out of his mouth and landed on my desk.

It wasn't like Poochie had any particular beef with<sup>6</sup> me, he did this kind of stuff to everybody. I don't know, maybe it was his idea of fun. Anyway, I lunged at him, knocking the container of milk he was holding to the floor. It was pure reflex. The room fell silent.

"Down The Park," he hissed.

That was code, a challenge to meet after school for a fight. Poochie loomed over me, hands on his hips, breathing heavily, his eyes narrowed to dark slits, his nostrils flaring. I looked toward the door but our teacher, Sister Mary Clair, was standing just outside monitoring the activity in the hallway. [...]

The Park was a long narrow stretch of asphalt under the elevated train. You could see the tracks from our seventh grade classroom. It was spring, the air warm and sweet. [...]

The Park was enclosed by a sagging cyclone fence<sup>7</sup>; scraps of faded newspaper would collect along its rusty bottom like seaweed in a fisherman's net. We would gather there before school and during lunch break, playing fistball<sup>8</sup> or shooting baskets in our white shirts and blue ties, tiny shards of broken beer bottles crunching under our feet. [...] The Park, half a block away, was the domain of the seventh and eighth grade boys.

Poochie was big and dark-skinned with bristly<sup>9</sup>, curly hair. When we saw him in our neighborhood, he was usually by himself. He lived in the projects<sup>10</sup> on the other side of the Gowanus Expressway<sup>11</sup> with his mother. There were rumors that his father was dead or in prison. Most of our class had been together since first grade, but Poochie had just enrolled at St. Mary's<sup>12</sup> the previous fall. [...]

We all lived within a few blocks of the school and, since there was no cafeteria, we all walked home for lunch. When Sister marched us up to the corner to dismiss us, I looked back to make sure that Poochie was well behind me, then peeled off quickly down Court Street toward my house. Carmine caught up and loped<sup>13</sup> along beside me in his awkward way.

"So you're not gonna to fight him, are you?"

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<sup>1</sup> frikvarter

<sup>2</sup> *supply room*: skolebod

<sup>3</sup> ballade

<sup>4</sup> (her) harkede snot op

<sup>5</sup> *gob of phlegm*: spytklat

<sup>6</sup> *beef*: problem

<sup>7</sup> *cyclone fence*: trådhegn

<sup>8</sup> en slags volleyball

<sup>9</sup> strittende

<sup>10</sup> socialt boligbyggeri

<sup>11</sup> *Gowanus Expressway*: motorvej i det sydlige Brooklyn, New York

<sup>12</sup> *St. Mary's*: katolsk skole, hvor lærerne er nonner og munke

<sup>13</sup> løb med lange fjedrende skridt

“What else am I supposed to do?” I replied. Only a coward would fail to show if challenged to meet down The Park.

“If you were smart, you’d just lay low and stay out of his way.” [...]

It wouldn’t be a surprise to anyone if I didn’t show up. I had always been shy and a little  
35 scrawny<sup>14</sup>. I was smart too. Everybody assumed, at least in this neighborhood, that if you were a  
brain you couldn’t play ball and you certainly couldn’t hold your own in a fight. Carmine was a brain  
and seemed proud of the fact, but I had begun to think of myself differently. I had grown five inches<sup>15</sup>  
over the winter, had abandoned my crew cut and let my hair grow out long. I had begun to notice  
girls, but they only seemed interested in the louder, cooler, tougher guys. Maybe taking on Poochie  
40 would help change my image.

“Well? Are you gonna fight him or not?” Carmine persisted.

“I don’t know.” [...]

“Mary, Mother of God! You’re actually thinking of going through with this? I’m not gonna let you  
do it, Tony.”

45 “And what are you gonna do about it?”

He stopped in front of my gate. “I’m going to ring your bell and tell your mother.”

“Don’t. Just... don’t.”

“Okay, suit yourself.” He walked away, waving his arms and talking to himself.

I could barely choke down half of the sandwich my mother put in front of me. [...]

50 “Something the matter?” my mother asked.

“No.” [...]

“You hardly ate.”

“I guess my belly hurts a little.”

55 She touched her palm to my forehead. “You feel cool.” Then she looked at the clock. “Isn’t it  
time?” I had been planning to wait until the last possible minute to leave, so that I would arrive back  
at The Park just as the whistle blew. [...]

It was even harder to concentrate after lunch as Sister Mary Clair droned on about the Middle  
Ages. Finally, my curiosity overtook my fear and better judgment and I glanced over my shoulder.  
Poochie was staring at me. “Down. The. Park.” He mouthed the words slowly, silently. It was clear to  
60 me now that I had no choice.

Frankie and Carmine walked me down to The Park after school, one on either side of me like  
handlers escorting a boxer into the ring at Madison Square Garden<sup>16</sup>.

“He’s gonna get his ass kicked,” Carmine said to Frankie as if I wasn’t there. “It won’t be on my  
conscience though. I told him he should go home and lay low.”

65 “What good would that do? Poochie’ll just kick his ass next time he sees him anyway. In the  
meantime, everybody’ll just think he’s a pussy.”

“I don’t like this. I don’t like it one bit,” Carmine said. “I got a bad feeling.” [...]

Poochie had just taken off his white shirt and tie and was handing them to Philly Pearson. [...]

“Look, he showed up,” Philly said.

70 “Yeah, too bad for him,” Poochie responded. About a dozen kids were standing behind him in an  
arc, smiling hawkishly<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> splejset

<sup>15</sup> *five inches*: 12,7 centimeter

<sup>16</sup> *Madison Square Garden*: berømt sportsarena i New York

<sup>17</sup> krigerisk

I stopped about ten feet away from him, Carmine and Frankie lingering a few steps behind. Poochie flexed his biceps, rubbed his right fist with his left hand, then began moving slowly toward me, still rubbing his fist, his tongue poking out of the corner of his mouth. I raised my hands in front of me and began moving to my left. Poochie matched me step for step, the two of us rotating almost a full circle. He fainted<sup>18</sup> suddenly, stepping forward into a boxer's stance then back again. I flinched<sup>19</sup> and jumped back a step.

"Whatsa matter? You ascares<sup>20</sup>?" Then he dropped his hands and stuck out his chin. "C'mon, I'll give you the first shot."

"Don't do it," Carmine shouted. "You'll get yourself killed."

Everyone laughed. Frankie pushed me from behind, nudging me forward. Beads of sweat boiled on Poochie's upper lip, a ring of black crust was caked in the folds of skin on his neck. He snarled and fainted again but this time, instead of jumping back, I jabbed my right fist out and struck a glancing blow<sup>21</sup> on his left cheek just above the jaw.

"Attaboy<sup>22</sup>, Tony," Frankie yelled.

"So you wanna fight, huh?" Poochie spit on the ground and started to circle again. He tried another stutter-step, but this time, to my amazement, I lunged forward and caught him with a clean shot square<sup>23</sup> on his mouth.

"Oh, mah-dohn<sup>24</sup>!" someone whispered.

"You like to hit in the mouth, huh? I'm gonna kick your fuckin' ass."

Poochie's voice didn't sound so sure anymore. He rubbed his forearm across his face. I thought I saw a trickle of blood on his lower lip. A delicious pulse of electricity rippled through me. It was like nothing I had ever felt before and it was intoxicating<sup>25</sup>. He swung wildly with his left fist, a haymaker with such a long windup<sup>26</sup> that I easily stepped to the side to avoid it. I tried another right, but he saw it coming this time and jumped back in the direction of the crowd.

"C'mon, you gonna take that?" Philly barked, pushing him back in my direction.

Three short bursts from a whistle pierced the air. Poochie dropped his hands and instinctively started moving toward the other end of the park. He glared at me over his shoulder. The other kids scattered too. Me and Carmine and Frankie weren't as quick. Brother Dominic rushed toward us, the white rope on his long brown Franciscan habit<sup>27</sup> swinging from his side. His small round face and bald head were flushed; a pipe was clenched tightly between his teeth. He barely stopped before slapping each of us hard on the side of the face. My ear started ringing and the whole side of my face went numb. I didn't dare look at Carmine or Frankie, but I could hear Carmine suck in huge gulps of air and whimper.

"Now. Who wants to tell me what was going on down here?"

Frankie jumped in. "Poochie spit on his desk, Brother. When Tony got pissed off ..." He caught himself in mid-sentence, a beat too late. [...]

"Sorry, Brother," Frankie mumbled.

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<sup>18</sup> lavede et skinangreb

<sup>19</sup> for sammen

<sup>20</sup> *Whatsa matter? You ascares?*: What's the matter? Are you scared?

<sup>21</sup> *glancing blow*: slag, der kun strejfede

<sup>22</sup> That's a boy

<sup>23</sup> (her) lige

<sup>24</sup> (her) udråb: Madonna

<sup>25</sup> berusende

<sup>26</sup> *haymaker with such a long windup*: et knockout slag hentet så langt nedefra

<sup>27</sup> Franciscan habit: franciskaner munkedragt

110 “Go on, Francis. But this time dispense with the profanity<sup>28</sup>.”  
 Well, Poochie got mad naturally.”  
 “Naturally.”  
 “And he told Tony to meet him down The Park.”  
 “For a fistfight?”  
 “Yeah.”

115 “And Anthony, of course, had to accept?”  
 “Well, yeah,” Frankie answered, not picking up<sup>29</sup> on the rhetorical nature of the question.  
 “Mm-hmm. I see. Anthony, do you have anything to say for yourself?”  
 “No, Brother,” I responded.  
 “You realize, of course, that a fistfight on school grounds is a serious matter?”

120 “Yes, sir, I do.”  
 “You will report to my office for detention after school tomorrow and for the next week. Francis, you will be joining him. The use of foul language will not be tolerated. And I will be talking to both your parents tonight. [...]

The phone rang shortly after dinner. I turned down my radio and listened from my bedroom. My  
 125 mother’s voice stiffened, her words coming haltingly, artificially formal and polite.  
 “Yes, Brother. Good evening.”  
 ...  
 “No, no. Anthony didn’t tell me anything.”  
 ...  
 130 “Oh, my. Who with?”  
 ...  
 “Was the boy hurt?”  
 ...  
 “I’m so sorry. His father will have a good talking to him. Tonight, for sure. This won’t happen  
 135 again, I can tell you that.”  
 ...  
 “Likewise, I’m sure.”

A few minutes later, my parents appeared side by side at the doorway to my room, their arms folded across their chests.

140 “What’s this I hear about you fighting with another boy?” my mother asked. Her voice was brittle<sup>30</sup>, shrill. She moved toward me with wide, wild eyes. “You embarrass me and your father like that? Acting like a little ruffian<sup>31</sup> so Brother Dominic has to call us at home? And you don’t tell us nothing about it?” I cringed<sup>32</sup> as she slapped me on the top of my head. “Don’t you ever do this to me again.”

145 My father stood silently in the doorway as she walked past him. “Don’t disappoint your mother like that,” he said at last, but I thought I saw a trace of a smile on his lips.

I flopped back on my bed, staring at the patterns in the tin ceiling, replaying the fight in my mind. It unspooled in slow motion: my fist connecting with Poochie’s mouth, the look of surprise as he

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<sup>28</sup> *dispense with the profanity*: undlad bandeordene

<sup>29</sup> *not picking up*: (her) uden at opfatte

<sup>30</sup> skælvende

<sup>31</sup> voldsmand

<sup>32</sup> krympede mig

150 stumbled backward, the gasps from the crowd, Frankie's raspy voice afterward: "Did you see Poochie's face?"

I really did have him back on his heels, surely everybody could see that. I was the first guy in the neighborhood who ever stood up to Poochie. I was proud of myself, surprised too. I found myself wondering if maybe I could have taken him if Brother Dominic hadn't shown up.

155 Those thoughts had all faded by midnight. [...] A breeze kicked up, a rush of cool air rolling in through the open window. I shivered on my sweat-soaked sheets, wondering what would happen when I walked into the schoolyard in the morning. Everything went quiet all of a sudden and all I could hear was Carmine's voice ringing in my ears: "You think he's going to forget this? I don't think so."

(2021)