

LIE TO LIVE

By James Collins

In, 1952, my best friend Owen and I left our neighborhood to go to a high school dance at St. Catherine's on Pelham Bay Parkway in the Bronx. Any high school dance in the Bronx would typically draw 600 people or more, the number attending usually limited by the fire marshal's law as to the maximum number in a gymnasium. Tonight was a full house. This was an all-girls school and had 20 or 30 girls from the Highbridge neighborhood attending. As a result, about 60 or 80 guys would show up from our neighborhood and equal numbers from ten other districts in the Bronx.

Although the dance was fun, the music was great; there was tension in the air. Gangs from different districts attended and old hatreds were apparent. On the dance floor, there was some pushing shoving and hollering until security separated the opponents. A couple of brief fistfights broke out and hostile looking groups started to form. The dance started at 8 PM and ran until 11 PM. About half an hour before the dance ended, I observed a lot of motion in the crowd. I saw messengers from each of the various gangs or neighborhoods go to those they recognized. They asked for their assistance and told them they would meet in the park across the street when the dance ended. Owen and I were with two girls from Highbridge, and we had already told the girls we would take them home. I explained this to the messenger who came to demand our attendance. Since he came from the neighborhood, he understood and said, "Don't worry, we will handle it without you. We have quite a number of guys already."

The music stopped and someone announced the dance had ended. When the lights came on, groups of male teenagers gathered and went out the various exit doors all moving towards the park. The noise level rose, a few waved fists and others yelled threats back and forth across the gymnasium floor. We decided to take the girls, go out the back door, walk to the bus stop, take the bus to University Avenue and transfer to the Highbridge bus.

In the distance, on the side of a hill, we could see a mob of hundreds of teenagers in a big circle obviously watching a couple of gladiators in the center fight it out. In those days, the fights were mostly with fists but Garrison belts, knives, brass knuckles, blackjacks and zip guns often appeared. The district where the school is located was a rest area for police officers about to retire. As a result, the police did not want a lot of trouble or risk physical harm and they were all very experienced. Watching the event emphasized this. There were three police cars, each with two men, circling the mob. Like a pack of lions watching a herd of wildebeests, they waited to find a straggler, separate him out and pounce. The cop in the passenger side would hang out the window with an extra-long baton. If a teenager tried to leave the mob, the police car would circle around. The kid would run and the cop would stick the baton out the window between the teenager's legs and down he would go. Then

the cop would jump out, throw handcuffs on the kid and push him into the back of the squad car. It happened so fast it was obvious they practiced this routine many times.

After the fact, we learned that the two antagonists included one member from Highbridge and the other from Morris Park. It was a nasty fight with Garrison belts. These were 3-inch wide leather belts from military uniforms with a solid, 4-inch square, brass buckle weighing a half a pound on the end. With the buckle edges sharpened like razors, it acted like a small flexible hatchet. The loser from Morris Park ran off with a face gushing blood.

The two girls, Owen and I were alone at the bus stop. Suddenly four teenagers whom we did not know appeared out of the dark, grabbed Owen and myself and slammed us up against a telephone pole. I had a 12-inch butcher knife up against my throat held by a guy with wild eyes. He looked like something out of a horror movie. The 'V' shaped cut started just under the eye on the right side of his face, and the entire cheek hung down almost to his chest. Blood was everywhere. I could see both rows of his teeth all the way back to his molars. I later learned he took a hit in the face with a Garrison belt, which tore off his cheek. His face was six inches from my face and at this distance, the smell of blood was overpowering. My mind was racing. I knew the confrontation was a fight between a Highbridge gang and the gang from the Pelham Bay Park. We were unarmed. We were surrounded. We were vulnerable and we could die.

"You guys are from Highbridge aren't you?" Sneered the horrid apparition.

"No! You got us confused with somebody else we're from Kingsbridge. We're waiting for the bus. This bus goes to Kingsbridge. We are just taking these girls home. They are from our neighborhood. We're all from Kingsbridge"

With that, Owen joined in asserting that we are from Kingsbridge and the girls kept nodding their heads. Two of the members of the bloodthirsty crew pulled the hand with the butcher knife away from my throat.

"Nick, if these guys are not from Highbridge we should leave them alone. They weren't at the fight. The place is full of those creeps. Let's go find another one."

Without another word, the four turned around and vanished into the dark heading back into the park. I put my finger up to my mouth to indicate silence. Nobody said a word. We did not know who might be listening. We did not know who else might be around. As the four hoodlums left, the girls started to cry. Emotions were pulsing. We were all relieved. We were all alert. We were all on edge. Death had passed us by.

Once we got into the bus and got a couple of stops away the girls opened up. Now, as the shock wore off, they started to shout. Margie asked me, "How did you think so fast to come

up with that story. It probably saved your life and ours. They would never leave any witnesses behind."

"You have to think on your feet. You can't panic and sometimes you have to lie to live."

THE END