

COLLEGE BOYS

By James Collins.

Christmas vacation in 1956, three of us got a job at the Pabst brewery and Hoffman soda packing facility underneath the Queensboro Bridge on 159 Street in Queens. Three Bronx boys from working class families, on college break, were definitely out of their element in the Queens environment. Last summer Owen worked the beach lugging a 40-pound tank of soda while slogging through the sand. I held a union card with local 881 warehousemen's union and spent two weeks in a bonded warehouse in Hell's Kitchen loading, unloading trucks, and the remaining eight weeks in the Bronx train yards loading and unloading trucks and train boxcars. Felix was 6 foot 3 and 180 pounds. During the summer, he worked in a Rockaway bar as a bouncer and he looked the part. Management put him loading and unloading the trucks. Owen and I were two tall thin drinks of water each 6 foot 2 weighing about 145 pounds. I ended up manually loading bottles in a cleaning machine with three or four guys on either side while Owen ended up moving both empty and full cases on or off the assembly line. This job was a push over compared to our previous employments. However, the three of us were the only college students in the entire environment. At my workstation, the majority of the employees were high school dropouts, ex-cons, drug addicts and petty thieves. All this information came out during the conversations when the machine went down for repair. This happened frequently because of the innovative mobsters would insert the bottles in reverse so that the cleaning brushes would snap off. These unplanned breaks occurred any time one of the miscreants decided he wanted a rest.

As far as the locals were concerned, the three of us had two strikes against us. First we were college students and second, we were from the Bronx (to them a foreign country). Felix was intimidating by his very size but since he worked on a delivery truck and only interfaced with the driver, he had no problems. Owen and I, on the other hand, were standing side-by-side working with a group of thugs. Lunch at the brewery was a very different environment you could drink all the beer you wanted at no cost. After lunch, people changed; some became more pleasant; some became more dangerous. It is an art to be able to differentiate and find out which ones you have to worry about and which ones you can ignore.

This job ran about a week from right after Christmas, until New Year's Eve generating huge amounts of soda and beer in anticipation of New Year's Eve parties. The second day, Owen started to

encounter problems. The crew he was working with started calling him 'college boy' and it was supposed to be derogatory. Then he received elbow jabs, unfriendly pushes, snide remarks and had stuff thrown at him. We discussed this on the subway on the way home and Owen agreed that he would warn them the following day to back off. The third day started normally and we all met up again at lunchtime. I asked Owen, "how are things going?" He said, "Same as yesterday. They think because we're in college that we're easy marks."

"Do you want me to come down and give you a hand?"

"No, I can handle this myself."

An hour later, an alarm went off and the whole floor was muttering; everyone wondered what happened. When the ambulance showed up, we knew that something occurred. Eventually we learned that somebody had injured his leg and the ambulance took him to Queens County Hospital.

At quitting time, we met Owen in the parking lot. "Did you have something to do with the accident?" I asked.

"Well, I was very nice and soft-spoken and told them I didn't appreciate being hassled and told them to knock it off."

"What happened then?"

"One of the ringleaders thought it was cute and came over and slammed me in the side. At the time, I was holding a full case of bottles so I dropped it on his leg. He got the message and I think he has a couple of broken toes. Since they put him in the ambulance nobody has bothered me at all."

For the rest of the week, nobody bothered the college boys. On New Year's Eve, the job ended, and two days later, we went back to school. Management laid off the rest of the short-term help and they probably went back to jail. However, the thugs had a new appreciation of what college boys from the Bronx might do to you if pushed too hard. They also received an education of sorts.

THE END