

The New Sidewalk

By

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“No. I want it smooth.” Louie Rocca thrust his belly forward and shook his head.
“Smooth, like glass.”

“Yeah, but you know, it gets a little wet from the rain, somebody’s going to slip and break their neck.”

“What’s the matter? You can’t do it smooth? You don’t know how?”

The workman flushed. “Don’t worry, mister. I’ll make it like frosting on a cake.” He inched his knee boards further forward on the wet concrete. As he bent and reached for his trowel, I heard him mumble, “And I hope you fall on your fat ass some foggy morning.”

I stood leaning on the wooden barricade with the other children and watched him work. His right arm smoothed the metal trowel back and forth over the thick gray ooze in a long sideways figure eight. Bubbles and swirls erased as he ironed them out in steady, rhythmic movements.

“And you kids, you keep off it, see?” I jumped at the sound of Louie Rocca’s voice behind me, and, as I turned, my nose almost hit his belly. I looked up at his face, trying to match his hard look with a defiant look of my own. I knew the other kids were watching, and Louie Rocca was our enemy. We never played ball in front of his house; if the ball went up over his roof to his back yard, he would keep it and say that would teach us to keep away from his property. There were so many children on the block that someone’s father was always replacing a broken window. Louie Rocca’s window had been broken only once, and that time it had been his own son Dominic who was at bat.

Dominic, to our disgust, had been terrified and had sworn on the Blessed Virgin that he hadn't done it; his father believed him and called us criminals, destroyers of property who would all end up in prison some day.

He pointed his finger at me. "First kid who touches it before it's dry, I'll use a two-by-four on him."

I took a step back, but Roy stood still and stared back at him through his thick glasses. "Who's going to touch your lousy old sidewalk? Besides, my father says you touch me and he'll get the police on you."

"Hah. Sure, the police. They know you, huh, Roy? The young Mafia, that's what we got on this block."

He was right about the police knowing Roy. Roy's parents had never gotten over the surprise of becoming parents when they were nearly fifty years old. They shrugged in confusion as he ruled them and terrorized the neighborhood. Once he had thrown a lighted firecracker into our mailbox, starting an interesting, if small and quickly quenched, fire. The BB gun he received one Christmas equipped him as the neighborhood sniper. The police had taken the gun from him, and he turned to knife throwing. An accident ended this phase before he managed to hurt anyone but himself. He had been practicing throwing his knife against a fence. The handle of the knife hit the fence, and the knife bounced back, hitting Roy in the left eye. Three operations had saved his sight, but he now wore thick glasses. The experience had not changed him, and the glasses, instead of making him look studious or vulnerable, only made his fierce eyes look bigger. No one ever called him four-eyes.

Louie Rocca turned away and began to walk around the wooden barricades as he had been doing since the concrete had been dumped. For another hour he harassed the finisher, talking about pitch and drainage and joints while the man silently did his work. Louie smiled only when adults stopped to look. Then he would point to the square in front of his house. No halfway patch jobs for him, he would say. Rip the whole thing out and do it right, he repeated over and over. His words implied an affluence rare in 1938, when the other fathers on the block were patching and painting only when necessary, counting themselves lucky to have met last month's payment on the mortgage.

The adults would nod and walk on. We children were the only constant audience, and we gave all our attention to the workman, asking him questions and envying his being paid for enjoying such an orgy of mud molding. Finally he finished, cleaned his tools, and loaded them onto his truck, saying, "Just keep off of it till tomorrow."

Louie Rocca nodded impatiently and looked relieved as the man drove away. Then he turned and looked at the slick surface, delicately jointed in neat squares. Now it was all his. He owned the best sidewalk on the block.

The other children had been called in to dinner, but Roy and I still leaned on the wooden barricade.

"What you waiting for? Go home. You kids go home."

I moved one foot, but Roy stood still, as if he had heard nothing. Louie Rocca moved closer. "You think I don't know why you hanging around? Soon as my back is turned you figure to write your name or some dirty thing in my sidewalk." He walked carefully across a plank to his front steps and sat down. "You might as well forget it; I'm going to sit right here and keep an eye on you."

Roy nudged me, and we turned and started walking slowly up the block.

"How long do you think he'll stay there?" I asked.

Roy smiled. "He can't sit there all night. See you later." He ran up the stairs and into his house.

I could hear my father washing in the bathroom as I walked into the kitchen. My mother turned from the stove. "You're late. Wash your hands. Dinner's ready."

I washed my hands at the kitchen sink and dried them on a dishtowel. My father came into the kitchen and we sat down. My mother ladled pale yellow broth into our soup plates.

"I was watching the man put in the concrete," I explained.

"Is it finished?" asked my mother.

"Yes," said my father. "A nice job too. I saw it on my way home. Slick as glass." He laughed. "That guy doesn't know what he's letting himself in for. The way he hates the kids playing around his place. Why, when those kids see how smooth it is for roller skating, they're going to play all their hockey games right smack I front of his house."

I hadn't thought of that. Where had I left my skates? I began to eat faster. I wanted to suggest a hockey game to Roy before someone else got the idea—and the credit.

My mother sighed. “I don't know what that man has against the kids. It's a disgrace, a grown man yelling at them the way he does.”

“He's a big bully, that's what.”

“Eat your soup.”

“He likes to be the boss, all right,” said my father. “He runs that house of his like he was Mussolini himself.”

“And he gets to look more like him every day,” said my mother. “His wife and the kids too. They're all round as barrels. Why, his wife told me he has a fit if they don't have pasta every day.”

“He told me if you would fatten me up I wouldn't catch so many colds,” I said.

“I guess I know how to feed my family without that big mouth telling me.” The bowl of stew clattered as she set it down hard on the table.

“Take it easy,” said my father.

“All I ever hear from him or his wife is how they bought this and they bought that, and how they got such a good price because they know somebody who knows somebody.”

“And how much land he had in grapes near Lucca, and how many people worked for him,” added my father, then laughed. “The guy next door asked him, ‘Then why didn't you stay there?’ They don't talk anymore.”

“I heard a woman at Saint Anthony's say she had known him in the old country—no family, lived on the streets, half-starved. She didn't even know his name. Everyone called him ‘ghitarra’ because he played and sang for pennies.”

“Pathetic. You gotta feel sorry for him.”

“That's no excuse for the way he acts. If everybody who had a hard time back there acted the way he does—“

“Can I go out now, Mom? I'm finished.”

“What about your homework?”

“No homework tonight.”

“After the dishes. And just until it gets dark. Don’t forget your sweater. It’s not summer anymore.”

I hurried through the dishes while my mother put the leftover stew in the ice box and swept the kitchen floor. Louie Rocca probably was inside, still eating. I didn’t want Roy to get to the concrete before I did. I hung the dishtowel on the rack, grabbed my sweater, and ran.

A dozen or so kids were already playing one-foot-off-the-gutter, but I shook my head when they called me. I ran to the wooden barricade where Roy was already leaning.

Louie Rocca was still sitting on the steps. Next to him was a plate with a fork and one or two strands of pasta on it and a half-empty glass of red wine. He had eaten his dinner on the steps. As I reached the wooden barricade, I saw something resting across his knees.

“That’s right, kid. See? I got my shotgun here. I’m gonna shoot the first *bastardo* touches my sidewalk.”

Roy’s eyes met his defiantly. “You don’t dare or my father will—“

“No?” He picked up the gun.

I pulled at Roy’s arm. “Come on. Let’s get in the game. I have to go in when the street lights go on.” Roy let me pull him away, but he wouldn’t play. He just sat on the curb until his mother called. As he waved good night, the street lights went on. Louie Rocca was still sitting on the steps holding the gun when I went into the house.

“He’s got a shotgun,” I told my mother as I undressed. “And he’s going to sit there and watch. And anybody touches his sidewalk, he’s going to shoot them dead.”

“Did you hear that? My mother said. “That crazy man. He’s going to hurt someone.”

My father didn’t answer her, but I heard him open and close the front door. I got into bed, and my mother turned off the light. In a little while I heard the front door open and close again.

“It’s all right. It isn’t loaded. He showed me. But he says he’s going to sit out there all night until the concrete is hard. He’s afraid one of the kids will mess it up or a cat might walk across it or something. It’s his business. Let’s go to bed.”

That night I dreamed of Louie Rocca. He was standing on his steps holding his shotgun. On each step behind him was a row of balls. One of the balls I recognized. It was the one I had lost over his roof a few weeks before. I was standing with twenty or thirty children, a single row surrounding the fresh concrete. The wooden barricade was gone, and each of us had a toe touching the edge of the wet sidewalk. Roy was standing next to me. I looked down and saw that he was wearing roller skates. We all began to chant, “give us the ball, Louie, give us the ball.”

He raised the gun with his right hand, and with the other hand pointed to the balls. “I grow the best grapes in Lucca. Anybody tries to take just one, I’ll shoot him.”

Roy crouched, then pushed himself forward. He spread his arms and glided in a wide arc on one skate, across the soft gray surface, cutting a deep track and stopping in front of Louie Rocca. Louie raised the gun, pointed it at Roy, and pulled the trigger. From the gun oozed one string of spaghetti. Then the balls began to roll down the steps. I looked at the sidewalk; it had turned into a sheet of glass. As the balls bounced down the steps, each one cracked the glass with a sharp clink, clink, clink.

Clink, clink. The sound came from the kitchen. The edges of the window shades were light. I dressed as fast as I could, not stopping to tie my shoes.

“Where are you going?” asked my mother as I ran through the kitchen. “Breakfast isn’t ready yet. Take off that dirty shirt. I ironed you a clean one for school.”

“I’ll be right back.” I ran out the front door. I was still half in my dream and almost believed I would find glass in front of Louie Rocca’s house. I nearly fell running down the front steps. As I reached the sidewalk I looked down the block and saw that there were, as in my dream, a row of children surrounding the square in front of the Rocca house, leaning on the wooden barricades. I looked for Roy, but he was not with them.

Louie Rocca was still sitting on his front steps with the shotgun across his knees. His head was resting against the banister. He was asleep. With his eyes closed his face looked softer, worn. His thick cheeks sagged, and his mouth turned down, as if he was having an unhappy dream. No one spoke. No one moved. All the children were watching Louie Rocca and almost holding their breath.

When I reached the wooden barricades and looked down at the concrete, I saw why. Almost every inch of the new sidewalk was etched and lined. There were footprints in circles. There were pictures outlined, cartoon-style: a horse, a gun, a sailing ship, a house with a curl of smoke coming out of the chimney, a knife, a fire cracker exploding, a tree. Across the middle of the sidewalk, gouged in letters nearly a foot high were the words, LOUIE ROCCA IS A BIG FAT WOP.

As I turned to look at the frozen faces of the other children, I saw Roy across the street, standing in front of his house. I waved at him to come and look, but he only smiled and went into his house.

I heard a clattering noise and looked back at Louie Rocca. The gun had fallen off his knees. As he opened his eyes, the children ran. I ran too.

Years later, Louie Rocca's sons replaced the concrete, but for as long as we lived there the sidewalk remained as it was. Neighbors averted their eyes at first, but soon stopped noticing it. We children never mentioned it, even among ourselves, but, for a while we all avoided Roy. Such a lasting symbol of public defeat was more than any of us had wanted. Perhaps we had some vague concept of fair play, even extended to our enemy.

Roy and I drifted apart. He had taken to using his knife on whatever small animals he could capture. That and his studies in the private school his parents put him in began to absorb him and, I guess, led to his later success. He's a prominent surgeon now, the only kid on the block, we often say, who ever amounted to anything.