

The Passing Parade

Although I lived on the ground floor facing the street, I rarely observed the parade from my apartment. Most of my free time was devoted to playing ball in the street, in the “eye” of the spectacle.

In the mid-1930s, the population density of our neighborhood was the magnet that brought itinerant entrepreneurs on their daily odyssey through our streets. The simple skills developed in the villages of Eastern Europe they honed and refined on the teeming streets of the East Bronx. Their given names were unknown to us. We identified them by their occupations.

The I Cash Clothes Man had a cart drawn by a plodding, stooped horse with an arched neck that brought its head so close to the asphalt that it appeared to be searching for a line to guide him from Anatevka (the tiny shtetl in *Fiddler on the Roof*) to Seabury Place. The ragman’s scraggly beard matched the threads escaping from his worn collar. The bench upon which he sat was covered with an oily flannel blanket that had long ago surrendered its nap to the seat of his pants. He was the centerpiece of a rusty metal arch from which copper bells dangled. With reins in hand, he pleaded with a horse whose legs seemed to have forgotten the coordinated sequence to move him forward. His blasts of, “I Cash Clothes,” accompanied by the clanging of his copper bells, let everyone in the neighborhood know he was there. The entire scene might have been featured in a film from the archives of the YIVO Institute, an organization that documents Jewish history.

“Ma, it’s the I Cash Clothes Man.”

“We send our old clothes to our relatives in Lithuania. They need them more than he does.”

“Why don’t they buy their own clothes?”

“They have no money for clothes.”

“Why don’t they work? Pa does.”

“There is no work.”

“Why don’t they leave?”

“They’re not allowed to leave.”

“You left.”

“Oy! You ask too many questions.”

It puzzled me why the I Cash Clothes Man bothered to visit our neighborhood. Most of the residents wore what he collected as rags.

Without rising from his perch on the wagon, he belted out his familiar refrain as the windows on the street reverberated to his solo. If a housewife had accumulated enough *shmatehs* (rags), she would raise her window and call out her apartment number. The cart came to a halt. He strapped a feedbag to his horse’s mouth and climbed the steps, hauling a large, empty, canvas bag.

The haggling began with the turn of the doorknob. The price for the pile of garments ranged between 25 and 50 cents. If a serviceable man’s suit was included, the price could rocket to 75 cents or a dollar. With the booty in his sack, he returned to his wagon, removed the feedbag, and continued his pursuit of rejected rags.

Where did the I Cash Clothes Man come from? Where did he go?

Just as mysterious as the I Cash Clothes Man, who appeared to have driven off the stage of *Fiddler on the Roof*, was the Lineman, who seemed to have stepped out of the cornfields of *Oklahoma!* He made his way through the backyard tenements with yards of clothesline spiraled around his shoulder. He was a tall, lean, blond, middle-aged, handsome man, apparently of Anglo or Nordic stock. A light blue denim work shirt, freshly washed dungarees, and a navy blue knit hat complemented his rugged persona. The I Cash Clothes Man's territory was the street. The Lineman's domain was the backyard, where clotheslines spun on pulley wheels.

His signature call was, "Line! Line!" A tenant's frazzled clothesline and her shout of the apartment number brought him up the steps. He connected his new rope to the old one, then guided it through the far pulley attached to a tall wooden pole and the near pulley at the tenant's window jamb. After discarding the frayed line, he knotted the new one together using a series of concentric circles like a hangman's noose, all for \$2, no haggling.

At the end of World War II, the launderette burst upon the scene. The Lineman couldn't compete with the dryer. Another voice from the East Bronx Chorus was eliminated. Where did he go? Maybe he returned to the cornfields of Oklahoma. The spiderweb of clotheslines in our backyards almost disappeared. One of the few remaining filaments was suspended from our apartment. Ma refused to surrender to technology. On her hands and knees, she fetched her rocking, corrugated metal washboard from under the bathtub, where it awaited its call to duty. She kneaded and rubbed our dirty clothes against its metal folds and then rinsed them. The launderette's dryer was no competitor to our line's production of fresh, air-dried clothes.

Quietly, another chorus member trudged along the streets, clutching the smoothly chiseled, projecting handles of his handmade, unpainted, gray, seven-foot wooden cart. What looked like a millstone was suspended on an axle spinning lazily at the center of the front. A few repaired but unclaimed umbrellas were tucked behind a strip of wood on each side of the cart. The housewives in the neighborhood knew that the sound of the gong from his pushcart meant it was time to gather their dull knives and damaged umbrellas. The Knife Sharpener had arrived. I ran to our apartment to announce his visit. If only Ma had a knife that needed sharpening. I knew she always sharpened her knives on the rough windowsill outside our kitchen window, but maybe this time she would give me one to carry to the sharpener.

"Ma, the Knife Sharpener is in the street. "

"No, there are no knives to sharpen."

"But last night you said the knife was so dull you could ride a horse on the blade."

"Maybe next time."

The sharpener began his rhythmic pedaling, sitting on a bicycle seat at the end of his cart. The assembled knives waited their turn to meet the spinning wheel. We gathered in awe, ducking and dodging, as his wheel spun and sparks flew. Occasionally he repaired an umbrella, but that wasn't nearly as exciting as

the darting sparks. Unfortunately, this poor man, too, couldn't compete with progress. Motorized sharpening wheels in a large green van drove him off the street. It was an example of a pro totally outclassing an amateur. The Knife Sharpener, his cart, and the sparks shambled into obscurity.

In the autumn, a simple black sheet metal wagon riding on small metal wheels creaked over the asphalt. It could easily have been constructed in Mr. Haller's sheet metal shop at Hermann Ridder Junior High School. Behind this wagon, straining and pushing, was an elderly gentleman wearing a black derby, a black jacket, and black pants, covered by a sparkling white bibbed apron. No matter that the street was level, his body leaned at a 45-degree angle, leaving the impression that he was guiding the cart uphill. A tubular three-foot metal chimney projected upward from the end of his cart, sending a gentle flow of black smoke into the air. He was the Sweet Potato Man. The scent of his baking potatoes crept through every unplugged nostril in the neighborhood. He kept opening and closing the three wide metal drawers in his cart to rearrange the potatoes. The bottom drawer held glowing charcoal. In the drawer above, were potatoes being baked, and in the top drawer were totally baked sweet potatoes kept warm while waiting to be sold. For 3 cents he would wrap a white paper napkin around the hottest and sweetest potato ever to excite a taste bud. A gentle pat on the rear sent you on your way. He eventually found the same lonely path as the Knife Sharpener, the path of no return.

Tony, the Jelly Apple Man, also made his debut in late spring. Tony had two polished copper vats set in the center of his cart, each holding heated red jelly. A crowded mound of small Macintosh apples in a wire basket separated the two vats.

If you didn't care for an apple, you could pick from a selection of other items filling glass partitions running along the sides of the cart: prunes, marshmallows, apricots, or "shoe leather" (pressed sheets of mashed and dried apricot). We pointed to our selection; then Tony impaled it on a round lollipop stick. With an arching loop, he removed the copper lid and ceremoniously twisted the fruit into the warm, red jelly. For 3 cents he placed your choice into your hand with a paper napkin wrapped around the stick. Then we gathered at his side to take inventory of our friends' selections. The item least requested was at the front left corner of Tony's cart—coconut slices floating in a translucent liquid against the walls of a square jar. I never saw Tony unscrew its lid. Did we know then that coconut contained saturated fat?

"So, what are you getting, Mutt?"

"I think I'll get the prunes."

"Ugh. The last time I had them, I couldn't get off the toilet seat."

"That's you. I'm me. I'm getting the prunes."

"I don't care what you get. But don't ask me for a bite of my apple."

"I don't like the apples".

"I didn't get it yet, did I?"

The bickering was aimed at getting in the last word.

As warm weather approached, Tony and the Sweet Potato Man deferred to an enameled white wooden cart with a red border and a green-striped canvas

canopy. Inside this open cart rested a rectangular block of ice. To prevent its premature melting, the Ices Man placed a grungy sheet of water-saturated brown burlap over the block. The Board of Health was never consulted on the acceptability of his product.

It took 2 cents to have him create his masterpiece. With a cast-iron plane the size of a blackboard eraser he shaved and collected the ice. The shavings were slipped into a paper cone cup and then doused with your choice from a colored spectrum of flavors in containers resembling hair tonic bottles. With that soggy burlap cover indelibly imprinted on our minds, my friends and I were observers, never customers.

“Do you believe that kid is getting ices?”

“Look at that green flavor he picked.”

“It looks like the chlorine water in Crotona Park Pool.”

“He’ll be at Dr. Kulock’s office tomorrow.”

“I hope he will be. I hate that kid.”

When the street resounded with tympanic blasts, we knew that the One-Man Band had arrived. With an accordion in his hands, a harmonica braced at his mouth, and a parade drum strapped to his back, he tuned, harmonized, and energized the neighborhood. Each step activated drumsticks that pounded the skins of his drum while cymbals above it crashed together, accompanied by the harmonica and accordion. We slowly followed the booms and clangs enlivening the residents in their apartments. An aluminum cup, connected to the side of his drum collected coins from the music lovers. Out of step with the changing times, he, too, passed from this dwindling caravan of characters as the parade slowed to a crawl.

Another contributor to the sound of music was the Yardnik. In their old shtetls, the immigrants gave aliases to citizens, usually based on their occupations. The Yardnik got his moniker because he performed in the yards. Singing in Yiddish, Polish, or Russian, or playing his instrument, he worked the maze of backyards behind the tenements. My mother, in the midst of preparing dinner, would tear off a piece of newspaper and wrap 2 cents in it. When the song was over, I threw the package to the grateful singer awaiting a wave or a smile. Although the neighborhood ached from the sting of the Great Depression, and unemployment was the norm, the concept of charity was passed on from parents to children.

Our favorite Yardnik carried an old black case worn gray around the edges. Inside, in contrast to its shabby exterior, were his glossy, honey-colored violin and stringy bow. Sometimes he was a Yardnik, sometimes he played on a street corner. When he was a child, I’m sure, these were not the venues his parents envisioned as they saved their coins for his music lessons.

He wore an ironed white dress shirt whose frayed cuffs bounced off his wrists in tempo to the melodies escaping from the strings of his violin. Many of the tragic Yiddish songs he played lent themselves to the melancholy tone of the violin and of his appearance. The backyard airshaft provided an ideal conduit for the flow of these nostalgic tunes up to and through the open windows. Sometimes, I would hear my mother sadly humming, occasionally muttering along with the

notes. On the other hand, he could energize his violin, himself, and the tenants with a lively *Fraylach*, a tune usually played at weddings and bar mitzvahs. Newspaper-wrapped coins of appreciation fell at his feet at the end of the recital. With a “thank you,” he gathered the packets and left to continue his gig on the tenement circuit. Whatever became of him and his violin?

Another neighborhood sight was a truck thundering music from a speaker at each side of the cab. On the rear platform of the truck sat a circular mesh fence about fifteen feet in diameter. It was covered by a multicolored dome like an umbrella. When the truck came to a halt, the proprietor opened a gate in the enclosure and flipped down three wooden steps that we could mount to arrive at five brightly colored miniature cars, each accommodating one driver. The cars were connected to a geared wheel at the center of the platform.

The volume of the music increased as mothers in housedresses brought their excited children to “drive” a car. Once the children were securely inside, the trucker shut the gate, stepped out, and manually turned the handle of a geared wheel at the side of the gate. The motorists were on a voyage to Oz. They pulled on ropes attached to bells. They squeezed black rubber honking balls at the sides of their cars. They spun the steering wheels to avoid road hazards. At the end of the journey, each motorist was given a lollipop. With the advent of World War II and gas rationing, this truck followed its little cars on a journey to Oz.

The Fruit Man’s wagon was approximately twenty by twelve feet. Four large metal-surfaced wheels with wooden spokes slowly spun as a heavy-necked, wide-hipped draft horse pulled the produce-laden cart. Why was he the Fruit Man, not the Vegetable Man? Who knows? Frequently, his horse left a trail of compact brown spheres in the middle of the street, temporarily impeding, but not stopping, a stickball or punchball game. That was a given we lived with.

The fruits and vegetables, exploding with color, contrasted sharply with the gray- or brown-faced tenements peering down on the wagon. The Fruit Man’s bounty was arrayed on angled boards so that it could be seen from a distance. Thin one-by-four wooden boards were nailed to a post behind each variety of produce. Brown paper bags displaying the name and price of the product were slipped over the boards. The prices could easily be changed as the merchandise aged or lost quality. To measure the weight of a purchase, a round-faced scale hung with three chains connected to a dangling steel pan. The customer placed her selection in a brown paper bag. The Fruit Man placed it in the pan. Both watched as the dial trembled and then came to a halt. He would invariably say, “I should charge you X, but for you, it’s Y.”

Of course, when supermarkets appeared in the area, the Fruit Man and his horse trudged off to oblivion.

It was early in the morning. I was preparing to go to school when there was a knock on the door.

“Ma, it’s the Egg Man!”

With a dragging foot and a face misshapen from a stroke, he went door-to-door selling eggs.

“Order mir a dozen krex.”

I turned to the Egg Man and ordered a dozen krex.

For years I had no idea what krex were. I thought they were a category like small, medium, or large eggs. In my teens, I finally asked, “Ma, do you remember the Egg Man? What were the krex you ordered from him?”

She told me that, in contrast to regular eggs, the krex had hairline cracks in them. Eggs sold for 25 cents a dozen at the grocery. Ma paid only 15 cents a dozen for krex. She bought them partly for economy, partly out of pity for the Egg Man. When she did go to the grocery to buy eggs, she bought the cheaper brown eggs because, as Dr. Carlton Fredericks had counseled, they were just as nutritious as white eggs. The Egg Man hobbled off to where?

Underneath pink, dirty, dank quilted blankets, in front of Adoff’s drugstore rested three five-foot blocks of ice. Sal, the Iceman, was canvassing his customers. Seeing him at her door, the housewife lifted an oak lid at the top of her icebox to see what remained of her ice. After completing his calls to take orders, Sal returned to his horrible blankets, removed them, took his pick from its leather holster, and began to peck away at the block. A hunk of ice was separated. He fastened his tongs around the piece, placed it in a miniature wooden wine bucket, lifted it to his shoulder, and then carried it off to his first customer.

Every apartment had an oak icebox. A block of ice in the upper chamber chilled the contents in the chambers below. As the ice melted, the water was directed toward a small pipe leading to a drip pan below the icebox. If we forgot to empty the drip pan, it overflowed, sending a puddle creeping toward the curvy legs of our Quality gas stove.

In late fall, when there was a consistent chill in the air, my father placed a rusty sheet metal box with two sliding doors on our kitchen windowsill. He connected it with braided wire to two eye screws in the wooden jambs on either side of the window. Everything we had in the icebox was transferred to this window box. The chill of fall and winter refrigerated and sometimes froze our perishables. Our encounter with the Iceman came to a temporary halt until the following spring.

Milk, available only in glass bottles, was yet to be homogenized. Through the glass, you could easily see the separation between the cream and the rest of the milk. On very cold days, as the freezing water in the milk expanded, it would push up the cream, popping it up and out of the cardboard lid.

In the spring of 1939, a new blue-and-white enameled sign replaced the old, rusty one dangling from a twelve-inch metal pipe projecting from the facade of our building. It announced the availability of apartments including a perk—a Kelvinator gas refrigerator. Our oak was felled by technology. The Iceman slid into retirement. Iceboxes became storage containers in our small apartments. How were we to know that fifty years later these oak iceboxes would be expensive collectibles housing stereo sets or wine and liquor?

Who else marched in this passing parade? An occasional visitor was the Organ Grinder. At the end of his performance, his monkey darted from one person to another collecting coins in a small metal cup. In the summer, Simonize Joe, a smiling, jovial black man, would appear in khaki jodhpurs and a wrinkled white shirt, clutching a bottle of whiskey while singing a song familiar only to him. His voice sounded like Louis Armstrong’s marinated in alcohol. As coins

were thrown into a rumpled hat at his feet, he would declare, “Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!”

In chorus, we would ask, “Who is the Lord?”

“Calvert is the Lord!” he replied, as he held up his inexpensive bottle of Lord Calvert rye whiskey.

The last time I saw Joe was in 1939 when the Detroit Tigers were at Yankee Stadium. He was a rabid Tiger fan. Walking along the aisles, he gesticulated at the ineptness of each Yankee batter who stepped up to the plate. Whenever Hank Greenberg came to bat, he would run toward the field boxes. With one hand he clutched tightly to the paper bag holding his pint of Lord Calvert, with the other he pointed to the bleachers. Joe tumbled out of the Bronx never to be seen again.

The Great Depression brought the parade to an abrupt halt for some families in the neighborhood. In the 1930s, a common sight was a family dispossessed—removed from their apartment for nonpayment of rent. Their furniture, dumped on the sidewalk in front of the house, resembled Salvation Army rejects waiting for disposal. One day, my mother, holding my nine-year-old hand tightly, saw her friend Tillie, her two daughters, and her husband standing on the stoop of their apartment house. The family was dispossessed. Before moving to a shelter for defaulting on her rent, Tillie addressed a small crowd gathered between her and her possessions.

“How do we pay rent? How do we pay rent when there are no jobs?”

Turning to her husband, she went on, “Is this why he was gassed in France? Look at my husband. He hasn’t worked in four months!”

My mother joined the sobbers around us. I looked at Tillie’s husband’s crumpled blue shirt with a worn, wilted collar, oversized pants, threadbare at the knees, supported by stretched, rippled suspenders. His dirt-impregnated calloused hands hadn’t held a pickaxe, pushed a wheelbarrow, or loaded a truck in months. He was a poster child for the Great Depression. The sobbing was contagious, but I held back my tears. Big guys didn’t cry.

Another day, the empty lot adjacent to my apartment house vibrated in tempo to the explosives used to excavate a foundation for a group of stores. We watched through holes in a wooden fence as heavy metal mats, covering the detonating area, heaved with each blast. Steam shovels loaded waiting trucks with the debris from the blasts. Finally, when the blasting was completed and the base of the excavation was flat, construction began on an A&P supermarket, the magnet of this small shopping complex. The mom-and-pop stores of the neighborhood were shoved aside by this giant. They joined the I Cash Clothes Man, the Lineman, the Sweet Potato Man, the Jelly Apple Man, the Knife Sharpener, the Fruit Man, the Iceman, and the Yardnik who once marched in the rich spectrum of the Passing Parade.

The parade’s colorful cast of characters vanished, leaving only their memory, which will pass into oblivion when the surviving residents who “cheered” from the sidelines follow the same inevitable path.