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# half- breed



1

To understand who I am,  
you have to understand  
where I'm from.

I doubt you've ever heard of me, which is OK because this book is not really about me anyway. It's about God—how He found me when I wanted nothing to do with Him. It's also about the incredible things I've seen God do since then.

But before I get to all of the “good stuff,” I need to tell you some things about me and where I came from.

I was born in 1960, a decade perfect for me because I had a taste for rebellion. My family lived in a neighborhood called Second Little Italy in East Harlem, better known as Spanish Harlem, New York City. Second Little Italy was a five-block area, filled with decaying brownstones, where the most dominant employer was a family business called the Mafia. Many of the neighborhood's restaurants, candy stores, and joints were fronts for illegal activities—running of numbers, prostitution, drugs. The FBI was always filming secret videos in the hood, trying to trap the organized crime guys. As a kid I'm sure I appeared many times on-screen—unknowingly—in those fed flicks.

Second Little Italy did not have the notoriety of Little Italy in Manhattan, except for a few landmarks like Rao's Restaurant, which was four doors down from our brownstone walk-up. Rao's was a famous Mob restaurant in New York City, a tiny place seating about forty, very similar to the eating place portrayed in the movie *Goodfellas*. The current co-owner, Frank Pelligrino, had a part in the TV series *The Sopranos*—as well as *Goodfellas*. In December of 2003 there was a Mob-related shooting at Rao's, so the joke around the city was, "Let's go to Rao's for a couple of shots!" New York humor for you.

Harlem was populated predominantly by blacks and Puerto Ricans, with the streets ruled by gangs and thugs. Every day was combat—you didn't know when you would need to run, hide, or fight, but you'd better be ready for one of them. You could get killed in a place like this, and I almost did, more than once.

In Second Little Italy an Italian flag flew from more windows than the Stars and Stripes. My mom, Rosalie, was full-blooded Italian, but my dad, William, wasn't, which meant that William Rieser Jr.—me—was considered a "half-breed." Mom's Italian family had warned her not to marry a man whose "crime" was his German (and other) blood. But she loved him and followed her heart.

When I showed up, my parents and older sister, Ann Marie, lived in a fourth-floor apartment in a brownstone on 114th Street. Our place had five small rooms—two bedrooms, bath, living room, and kitchen.

## Roaming the Hood

My dad left when I was a year old. My mom, who was one tough lady, used to tell the smileless joke that my father "went out to buy a pack of cigarettes and never came back." When he disappeared Mom had just given birth to my younger sister, Thea, so now Rosalie had three kids under age three to raise on her own. She did a great job of keeping us fed and under a roof, but the battle to survive consumed her.

Mom's parenting style, especially during the hot summer months, was summed up by "you better be home by 11 p.m. or else!" But when Mom was working late on some job, I'd take off. So as a little boy of

twelve, I took to the streets. That's what I remember most from my childhood—roaming the hood and trying to avoid the human scum slumped on street corners and sprawled on the stoops.

Some relief came from my extended Italian family, like my uncle Dominick, who had a heart of gold but was one of many “characters” I knew back then. Some were funny or dangerous or both. Their names were clues to their uniqueness—“Johnny Babaloo” and “Vinny the Bird.” Vinny had received his nickname because it was said his nose walked into the room two minutes before he did! Too funny. Another guy named Johnny was a character too, as in “bad character.” More on him later.

### *A Trip with Uncle Dominick*

I was four years old when Uncle Dominick called my mom and asked, “Could I take little Billy to a hockey game tonight?” My mother, welcoming some father-type influence for me and a little space for herself, said, “Sure, Billy would love to go to a hockey game.” What Uncle didn't tell her was that this was an away game.

Dominick came by and we drove off in his car, stopping first for sandwiches at Katz's Deli on Houston Street. We then drove and drove on a highway. Dominick finally told me that the game was in Philadelphia! No problem for me—at that age I didn't know Philadelphia from the zoo!

Our New York Rangers defeated the Philadelphia Flyers 2 to 1, and I had a blast. But the drive back to New York took many hours, and with cell phones not yet available, Dominick couldn't call to tell Mom why we were late. She was going crazy when we came to our apartment at 3 a.m. Mom had the cops waiting down on the street and the whole neighborhood on alert. And she was so angry that she almost put Uncle Dominick's head in a bucket.

That fiery spirit typified my mom. She was a warrior, so if anybody messed with my sisters or me and my mother found out, she would beat the living daylight out of them. Mom worked when she could find a job and took welfare when she couldn't. Her family helped us out sometimes with food and clothing, but the Riesers were always scrounging to get by. Even as a little kid I was on the streets hustling, running football

gambling slips or errands for the local mobsters, looking to make—or steal—a buck so Mom could get a few groceries.

## Rage in My Fists

Roaming the streets, playing ball in the park, going to school, and watching sports on TV—that was my life. For other kids you might have added going to Mass because almost everybody was Roman Catholic. Some Italians were devout, but my family wasn't. We seldom went to church, except for midnight Mass at Christmas and Easter. For a while I was an altar boy, which I liked because I could steal sodas from the church basement where they held the bingo nights. Religion didn't matter to me and I didn't think about God much.

Because I was scrawny and not a "real Italian," I got picked on by the bullies who often lounged on our stoop. More for our safety and education than for religious reasons, Mom wanted to send us kids to the local Catholic elementary school, where most of the Italian kids learned; but without money for tuition, we went to public school instead. There most of my schoolmates were black or Puerto Rican, so I stood out.

First grade went OK but in second grade I hit trouble. Although I was thin as a pipe, I was the tallest kid in the class. The second largest kid was an African American boy named Obey (Yes, that's his actual name!) who thought I was a threat. Several times he tried to provoke a fight, but I wasn't interested until the day he called me one too many names and I knocked him flat. The school yard got quiet as Obey lay motionless on the concrete. This was the first time I felt rage in my fists.

A week later, as I was leaving school, a pack of older boys from outside our neighborhood were waiting for me beyond the school door. Two of them grabbed me and threw me to the sidewalk.

"We're Obey's friends and we're going to take care of you," one said. I wanted to run but I was cornered prey. After punching and kicking me, the leader grabbed my shirt, twisted the collar, and pushed a blade against my throat. *Was it a knife?* My mouth turned to dust, and I shook with fear. I expected to die.

"You touch Obey again and you're dead, white boy." My attacker

pushed the knife tip into my neck. I felt my heart beating in my throat, the artery thumping like a bass drum.

“Cut his tongue out,” a voice whispered.

The kid sticking my neck laughed. Others grabbed my arms and held me on the ground. Then someone broke a soda bottle. My mouth was pried open and my tormentor grabbed my tongue. I tried to scream but could only gurgle. I saw his eyes—slits of icy hate. When his lips stretched to smile, I noticed his thin moustache moistened by sweat.

“Owww,” I moaned as glass sank into my tongue. I tasted my blood.

“See white boy bleed!” he snarled.

I wasn’t so much worried now about losing my tongue as I was about dying.

“Cut him again!”

The boy did, three, maybe four times, the slices making red foam. I swallowed and choked.

## Hate in My Heart

They left. I slumped against the building and cried. And inside I felt something hard swelling in my chest. I wiped my face and spit blood on the sidewalk. I could wiggle my tongue, so they’d not cut it off, but I was a bloody mess. I stopped at a water fountain and rinsed my mouth and cleaned my face, wiping away, I hoped, any evidence of blood and tears.

On the way home I still felt that tight knot in my chest. Later I would understand the word for this bitter ache: *hate*.

I couldn’t hide my wound from my mom, who concluded I could not stay in that school. She worked extra jobs and the church helped with tuition so I could go to the parochial school on 116th Street, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, which was next to the Catholic church and just two blocks from our apartment.

## Innocence Lost

The summer of 1972, when I was twelve, any ray of innocence still in me was extinguished by the dark side of East Harlem. The place was

infested with bad characters, like the Mob guys and the Mob wannabes. Then there were the general misfits—angry teenagers already dead on the inside who found pleasure in bullying and hurting people, especially the young and weak. They carried knives and guns and were always on a short fuse. I'd seen what they could do; you didn't mess with them. If you saw these angry punks on your side of the street, you crossed over. But you couldn't avoid them if they were blocking your doorway or the gate to the park. Then you caught their attitude and lip and a few punches. This was the life I knew, so I didn't think much about it. Later I realized how fear released a constant rush of adrenaline in me.

That July afternoon was like most summer days in East Harlem. The sun scorched the concrete and asphalt until the heat burned your feet through your sneakers. My friends and I would walk to Ronnie's candy shop on 1st Avenue between 114th and 115th, pull a cold soda from the cooler, pay our 25 cents, then move along the street sipping the bottle, because if you drank too fast, the chilled liquid made your head hurt.

That afternoon I'd ended up with a friend in his apartment on 115th Street, and as I ran down the last flight of stairs and opened the door to the brownstone's entrance area, a young man stepped from the shadows and pressed a blade into my neck. My heart raced. I knew this guy—like many others in the hood who by their late teens had surrendered to the demons of the street.

"You gonna do what I want you to, Billy," he whispered, jabbing me. The steel glistened in the half dark. I was at his mercy, for at this time of day, it might be an hour or more before anyone came or left the building. In the distance I heard car horns honking and children splashing at an open fire hydrant. Here it was quiet, except for the rasp of his breath.

"Get down on your knees." I saw contempt in his eyes. *Why did he hate me so much? I hardly knew him.* Digging the knife into my neck, he unzipped and pulled down his pants.

I hated it but I did what he asked me to do, scarcely connecting what was happening with sex. No one came into the entryway to rescue me and the ordeal ended. He pushed me to the floor, dressed, and left without a word. I trembled, tears staining my cheeks. Would he return? Scrambling to my feet, I cracked the apartment door. He was gone. Shak-

ing with shame, fear, and rage, I walked warily home along the hot streets.

I told no one what had happened. What good would it do? He might come back to cut me or maybe even hurt my mother. I fantasized for years what it would be like to catch him and slit his throat. Good thing that in the meantime I met God and surrendered my lust for revenge. But I'm getting ahead of the story. . . .