

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

milt montague
Sutter Theater

THE CAUSE OF THE FIRE WAS A MYSTERY but never the less it had destroyed their business on Blake Avenue. With the money they received from the insurance company they would be able to finance a new store. There were no empty stores on the block of their former shop, or anywhere else in the immediate area. Since they had to move to another area, they consulted with their merchandise suppliers and several family members, who were also in retailing. The consensus was that this was a great opportunity for them to find a more upscale neighborhood. One that lacked a store carrying their type of merchandise. They chose to open their new bedding and dry goods store in an area called East Flatbush because it was contiguous to the affluent Flatbush community of Brooklyn.

There was a four room apartment that came with the store. The entrance to the living quarters was at the rear of the shop. There was also a separate street entrance that led to their apartment and to another, apartment, above the store that was rented to another family. The private entrance was important since their girls were dating and were embarrassed to take their dates through the store. The living quarters were small for the family which consisted of the two parents, three grown daughters and one son, Milt. It was 1936 and the economy was slowly moving out of the Great Depression, but its horrific memory lingered on, tempering all financial considerations. They all hoped that the very tight living quarters would be a temporary inconvenience.

Ruth, the eldest daughter had graduated Thomas Jefferson High School and was working in an office in mid-Manhattan. The two other girls, Gertrude and Anita, had to finish one more term in order to graduate. They elected to travel to their old school, Thomas Jefferson High School, by subway every day in order to be with their friends and graduate with their classmates. Milt was the youngest child, and attended public school. Fortunately, there was a school for him, Public School 186, just one block away from their new home.

In back of their apartment, there was a fenced in patch of unpaved ground. Helen, Milt's mother, was eager to try her hand at gardening. Milt helped his father turn over the ground to prepare it for planting. Helen, it turned out had a green thumb, and intuitively knew what vegetables to plant and how to do it. After the planting, Milt helped his mother tend their new garden. His main job was to water it every day after school and later to do the weeding. His mother showed him how to distinguish between the weeds and the young vegetables they had planted. By early summer they had a steady daily supply of vegetables, fresh from their own garden. Tomatoes and radishes thrived lustily and by late summer corn and cucumbers joined the comestibles. Beets, carrots, and lima beans were discontented with the soil conditions and not replanted the following year.

Next door to their store was a greengrocer owned by Mr. Ganz. Mr. Ganz admired the vegetable garden, especially the plump tomatoes ripening on the vine. Helen, Milt's mother, in the spirit of good neighborliness

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offered him some. He raved so much about how delicious they tasted, that she repeated the gift on a weekly basis.

They soon discovered the Sutter Theatre, a movie house that was only two blocks from the store. The Sutter did not show first run films. They would feature them a year or two later, therefore the admission price was more modest than the first run theaters. In the evening, admission was 15 cents for an adult and 10 cents for a child. Friday nights were Dish Nights. Every adult ticket received one dish from a complete set of dinnerware. Every Friday a different piece of the set was offered so that if you attended regularly on Friday nights, eventually you could amass a complete set of dinnerware for eight people.

Milt's parents decided, as did many others, that every Friday night would be movie night for the entire family. The decision was then made that even though Milt was only nine years old and entitled to enter with a child's ticket at 10 cents, they would invest in the extra nickel so that he would also receive a dinner plate. [Remember this was 1936 and the subway and bus fare was just five cents each.]

The nightly performance always featured two full length films plus a newsreel and sometimes a "short" film and of course the coming attractions for next week, plus the free dinnerware. The show lasted from two and one half to three hours. Milt's mother always brought along a bag of food for the family to share. [This was before the advent

of popcorn, sodas, and candy in theater lobbies.] There were apples, precut into sections, peeled oranges, bananas, grapes, and slices of her delicious homemade cake which she apportioned, just before the feature film began, or whenever someone felt "hungry". For "Dessert", there were Hopjes, small individually wrapped coffee flavored hard sucking candies from Holland.

It never failed that during the course of the evening, there was at least one loud crash as someone accidentally dropped their "free plate". [The aisles were carpeted but the seating area was painted concrete.] Everyone giggled and then applauded the embarrassed customer.**

**This story has been checked for accuracy with Milt's older sister, Anita, who corroborated the facts.