
CHAPTER

1

Birth of a Salesman

Courage is going from failure to failure without losing enthusiasm.

—Winston Churchill (attributed)

I was born in East Harlem in 1953. Until about 1960, Italian East Harlem was one of the Naked City's worst ghettos and the Belli (pronounced "belly") family one of the poorest families in it. Following the race riots of 1964, the lawlessness, looting, and arson fires that decimated poor neighborhoods in cities all across the country came to East Harlem, too. Every other tenement house in our neighborhood was a burned-out ruin, and

4 THE STREET-SMART SALESMAN

if you were fortunate enough to live in a tenement that wasn't even smoke-damaged, you can bet the building was in some other advanced state of disrepair. We lived—my mother, father, older brother, sister, and I—in a rundown apartment on East 119th Street. The small, airless rooms strung along a narrow hall like boxcars in a rail yard, baking in summer, freezing in winter.

Generations of lead paint peeled from the cracked plaster. The kitchen/bathroom was at the front of the apartment. The so-called Venetian blinds were broken before I was born and hung at all angles. The frosted glass on the bathroom door had also fallen out before I was born; one panel was covered with scrap plywood, the other with a sheet of banged-up metal. There was no seat on the toilet, no working tub or shower. I took what we colorfully called a “whore’s bath” until I was 18 years old, using a sponge or washrag at the kitchen sink, head under the faucet.

Smokers stubbed out their cigarettes on our cracked linoleum floor. Bedsheets were never changed or even washed. Rats, mice, roaches came and went at will. Actually, mice were considered a blessing because if you had mice, the rats went on vacation. Arguably, the rats’ living standards exceeded our own.

I can hear you asking: Where were my parents in all this mess? Well, my father was a “molder” in a factory somewhere downtown, one of his two jobs. Even now, I’m not exactly sure what a molder does. We didn’t see Dad much, though he had a thousand eyes on Vinny and me,

courtesy of his friends and family in the neighborhood. Dad had a girlfriend around the corner; my parents' relationship was very complicated. In 1955, my mother, Emma Anita Lemorrocco, developed multiple sclerosis, just 12 years into their marriage and two years after I was born. Up until she got sick, she and my father had lived in the north Bronx for 10 years, and even had a convertible car. But after her disease set in, my parents fell into poverty and had to go back to East Harlem. Mom's disease was only going to get worse, and then she would die—as she did a full 18 years later. There were no medical treatments for multiple sclerosis and no such thing as full-time home care or Meals on Wheels. No costs were cushioned by the taxpayer; the family took the full hit. It was a hard way to learn the art of living with chaos and few resources, the value of sacrifice, but this knowledge has served me well in my profession.

For nearly two decades, the chaos in my family was complete: hour-to-hour, day-to-day, year in, year out. For the last five years of my mother's life, she was a helpless quadriplegic and received the Catholic Last Rites every few months. Every time I have the flu and find myself confined to bed for a few days, I can't help but imagine what it must have been like for her to be immobilized in pain for all those years in an infested tenement in the highest crime area in New York City with three kids to raise.

Because Mom was sick at a time when there weren't any social programs to help her, the awesome weight of her care fell directly on the family, mostly on my big sister, Camille, and the occasional generosity of others.

6 THE STREET-SMART SALESMAN

My father worked a second job, in the evening, delivering prescriptions for a local drugstore that's still in business. Dad didn't come home until after 11 P.M., but he slept in our apartment every night (he and I shared the "big bed") and he always paid the \$42 monthly rent on time. But mostly we didn't see him. My mother never seemed to be angry with him, maybe because she just didn't have the energy, or maybe because she had the three of us kids to worry about.

Mom was confined to the one tiny, dim bedroom at the front of the apartment and a metal hospital bed kindly left behind by the Dominican Sisters (the bed became the couch after Mom died). She had a spoon hanging on a string from the bed and she'd use all her strength to knock the spoon against the metal frame to scare away mice or call for Camille. She kept her purse under her pillow and never spoke above a whisper. I had to position my ear very close to her mouth to hear her speak, but I confess I generally failed to follow her instructions. I hardly ever went to school, for instance.

I preferred to hang around Jefferson Park with one eye out for the truant officer. Like other hardcore truants, I had a system for keeping my parents in the dark about my attendance record: I used a pair of tweezers to extract the school's "cut slips" through the daisy window on the locked mailbox door. I thought I was doing the right thing, taking the long view. By my logic, I was going to be a New York Yankee; what good was school going to do me? At-bats were what I needed.

Once in a while, some of us would carry Mom downstairs in her wheelchair on a weekend afternoon so she could sit on the sidewalk in the sunshine and watch the world go by. When I saw someone drop a dollar bill into her lap, I thought for a serious minute about putting a “Please Help” sign inside my cap by her chair on the sidewalk, but I knew it would make her cry. Maybe I did it once or twice; it pains me even to try to recall. The humiliations of those days were so many. I was so young and it takes time to learn about morality in even the coziest of childhoods.

On that afternoon, Mom’s disability offered an edge that, however distasteful, could allow me to feast on pizza and candy for a week. Edges, improved chances, are the stock in trade for a high-performance salesperson. I was, then as now, ever alert to moneymaking opportunities—though I do remember missing one big one. That was the time I got hold of, (1) a Bell & Howell movie projector my father had bought in better times, and (2) some porn films belonging a neighbor kid’s father or uncle. We got the idea to project the movies out the window onto the building across the street just as the old ladies left the Bingo parlor. Their shrieks were priceless, but in retrospect we realized that we could have made serious change showing the movies in my apartment. Sometimes fun is a better reward than money. Everybody knows that!

My beautiful dark-haired, dark-eyed sister Camille—who everybody agreed was a prettier version

8 THE STREET-SMART SALESMAN

of the heartthrob Italian-American singer, Connie Francis—cared for our mother and the rest of the family with almost no relief for 14 years, much of the time while also working the night shift as a telephone operator in midtown, near Grand Central Station. Camille had no childhood, none, and she nearly didn't survive it. But that's her story to tell.

Among a hundred other things, Camille was our main source of entertainment. We and all the neighbors called her Lucy, comparing her to crazy Lucille Ball, especially in that episode where Lucy has a job putting cherries into chocolates on an assembly line and everything gets out of control. Camille was always overwhelmed and having to improvise—using a bath towel for a tablecloth, that sort of thing—and always with a brave smile. We certainly had no money to go to the movies, and our cheap black and white television set was nicknamed Alaska because the screen was so snowy you could hardly make out the picture. A cockroach unlucky enough to squeeze into the back of the set only to be fried on one of the red-hot cathode ray tubes within was therefore called a Baked Alaska.

Camille was every bit as creative in her bid for all of us to survive as I was, particularly in her approach to discipline. Over and over I saw her choose to do the right thing even when that was the most difficult thing, to say no to her own needs and desires so that I could have or do something. She did everything she could, not only to keep me laughing, but also to keep me inside the apartment after dark, when she was working the midtown switchboard. In

those days, the big hotels in Manhattan still had to place calls through a central operator. Whenever Camille got a celebrity dialer, especially a ball player, she poured on the charm and asked politely if they wouldn't mind speaking with her little brother *before* she completed their call! The possibility that someone like Mickey Mantle might call (he hung up on me) was often enough to keep me indoors at night; I always knew which ballplayers were in town. The Mets' Donn Clendon also hung up on me, and so did Sal Mineo, but there were two players on Sparky Anderson's Big Red Machine from Cincinnati, the pitcher Clay Carroll and the outfielder Bernie Carbo, destined to be a superstar, who took a shine to me and my brother and had us out to Shea Stadium for every game the Reds played against the Mets that year. We sat with the players' families and I felt so self-conscious about my duct-taped clothes and shoes and glasses that I did my best to clean up. Ultimately, I stopped going. I just couldn't stand to sit there looking as I did.

Every bit as much as I adored my big sister, I idolized my big brother Vinny. I dogged him everywhere he went, and I fed on his passion for Yankee history and stats. Vinny was handsome, with an air of movie star danger—sculpted black hair, blue eyes, and perfect features—that stood in contrast to his mild manner. He was the local stickball champion, a thrilling “three-sewer man”—meaning he could whack a pink rubber high-bounce ball, the famous Spalding (properly pronounced Spall-DEEN) the length of a city block. Vinny was so incredibly shy that he would

10 THE STREET-SMART SALESMAN

routinely hide under the bed (or in the too-big-for-their-apartment cedar chest we got from the son-in-law of the Alibertis down the hall) to *avoid* the girls who followed him home, to my regular benefit (more on this later). In later years, I came to appreciate that Vinny spent far more energy developing my baseball skills than his own considerable talent, saving money he made working in the printing department at Lord & Taylor to buy me gloves and bats and such.

On my most self-pitying days, I actually used to think I had it rougher than my brother and sister because I had never even seen Mom walk and had known only poverty and chaos. I didn't have many good memories to draw upon. And I knew that Camille and Vinny were heartbreakingly obliged to place their time and most of their hope for the future in me. They were sufficiently older than me to serve as substitute parents and, like good parents, they were willing to sacrifice for my benefit. But really, they were just kids, overwhelmed, ill-attended kids who had so little to begin with that it was impossible for them, purely by virtue of self-sacrifice, to break the cycle of poverty and despair in which we lived. In truth, the only thing my brother and sister possessed to sacrifice for my benefit was their dreams. I'll always be grateful to them.

Vinny had dreamed of going to college. He even went so far as to enroll at Bronx Community, but he never attended a day of classes. I was in the room when Dad told Vinny he had to leave college to get a job and help pay for a home health aide to be there when the

Dominican Sisters were not, now that Camille had gotten married. Camille's good thing put additional pressure on Vinny, but he was so happy for her, he was never angry with her, just with the situation. I remember how crushed he was by Dad's words. His silent acquiescence was heart-rending and he never pursued that dream again, or any other. Instead, he became even more attached to the hope that my major league success would bail us out. Hope, however, pays no bills. I don't put much stock in hope.

Vinny was a great brother and he died too soon, just 60 years old, a doorman in a brass-buttoned suit in a nondescript building south of Gramercy Park in Manhattan. He was much beloved by the building residents and the circle of friends he maintained from the old neighborhood. We all miss him.

With little actual time to spend with us, my father, Carmine Belli, took a creative approach to our discipline. Because of his multiple jobs, he knew he had to tolerate a certain amount of craziness from us kids—boys—simply because he couldn't be there to do anything about it. In all honesty, he admired our spunk, our creativity. Dad was a nice-looking man, with a dark complexion and an early shock of gray hair. Never an athlete, he nevertheless encouraged both his sons in their pursuit of major league stardom in the can't-hurt way that people buy lottery tickets. Dad was not a churchgoing man, either, and didn't give us grief about all the girls visiting the apartment, so long as no one got pregnant, which, miraculously, no one did. Dad would begin whistling as

12 THE STREET-SMART SALESMAN

soon as he came into the tenement hallway and before he started to ascend the stairs, loud enough for us to hear him and giving us maybe 45 seconds to disengage before he came through the apartment door. His family was all up in the Bronx, in Morris Park, and of little help to us from day to day, though we did go up and visit them sometimes. We called it “going to the country.”

Although my mother came from a huge family of 16 children, only one of her siblings, Carmella, regularly helped us out. I don’t know why she was the only one. Probably the best answer is that the rest of the family was scattered around East Harlem and struggling too, to put it mildly. My mother’s mother had serious mental issues and a potty mouth that only became more and more embarrassing for everyone the older she got. I had cousins and in-laws on her side who were locked up, institutionalized, in gangs, on drugs, you name it. There were no drugs or crime in the Carmine Belli household, however, I assure you. There were plenty of teenaged girls and shadowy characters, but no drugs or crime. Remember the thousand eyes I said our father had on us? We never knew when we were being ratted out at a distance, and we knew where our father drew the line.

For instance, Mom had a sister who worked at John’s Bargain Store and was always offering to throw a few extra things in the bag for us without ringing them up. My parents never allowed it. That set an example for us kids. If my father didn’t give me a quarter or a dollar in the morning, I didn’t ask why, I just carried on the

best I could. We never stole. We asked, we cajoled, we pretended, we cried, we denied, we borrowed (we repaid), we went without. We made do. In truth, I'd say we welcomed the constraints demanded by morality—they placed some limit on the chaos and let us know that in some desperate way we were loved.

My Dad's mother would sometimes make the two-bus trip down from the Bronx on Sunday, bringing dinner, maybe even a homemade pizza. She spoke very little English but she was loaded with radar (thanks, Grandma!) and always found ways to make herself completely understood. For example, Grandma didn't like this one gal, a social worker who'd become infatuated with Vinny. So Grandma served her a plate of spaghetti topped with two meatballs and a sausage link arranged so as to leave no doubt she knew what was going on between them. She always made her point.

For years my Aunt Carmella appeared at our apartment door with a few groceries after working the night shift at the phone company (Carmella helped Camille get a job there, too). Our immediate next-door neighbor, Mary Aliberti, was also incredibly kind to my mother. She was a single mom and a super-old-school Italian. She and my mother were about the same age and Mary had plenty of her own hardships; she was living in East Harlem, too, after all. But Mary attended to my mother's every need when my sister was unavailable. I've never gotten over the sight of it: a stranger voluntarily cleaning my mother's urine bag and bedpan. After a sponge bath,

14 THE STREET-SMART SALESMAN

Mary would fix Mom's hair, help her put some lipstick on, encourage her to look at her pretty face in the mirror. Her compassion made a lasting impression on me. Her son, Sam, was also kind-hearted. For instance, he bought me a pair of gloves one day so I could get into a big snowball fight in progress, one of countless generosityes by the Aliberti family towards me, and a quality that left a lasting impression.

Any act of generosity makes both people feel good and that's reason enough to do it. That's not generosity's only reward, however, because generosity isn't limited to gifts of material things. When you share such things as time, attention, and wisdom, you assume the role of a teacher. In so doing, you gain clarity about your own work; you become better at what you do simply by taking the time to explain it. It's a form of practice not much different from fielding grounders. The best business people I've ever worked with were tremendously generous with their time, their experience, and their ideas. Generosity is a defining trait of the Street-Smart salesman.

Too few people appreciate the personal rewards of generosity, however. You'd think that maybe some neighbors would come by our place with the leftover ziti, but it isn't true. Everybody was poor. Most of our neighbors were doing better than we were only because they were healthy. Near the end, when Mom went into the chronic-care facility at St. Barnabas in the Bronx and Camille got married, our bad situation grew even worse. If things were a mess with two women in the house, you

can imagine what a mess it became with just my father, brother, and me.

As much as Camille and Vinny did for me and for Mom, I—the cute, talented, and ever-innovative baby of the family—could do no wrong. I was precocious and charming and wielded unexpected authority. As I got older, I pretty much ruled the family with my scheming and treasure hunting, always finding my own creative ways to get what I, or the family, needed.

Once when I was 10 years old, for instance, I was sitting on the stoop with Vinny when our landlord, Mr. Wilkes, came by, grumbling about needing a new super for the building. I volunteered my brother and me to be the supers for a fee of \$42 a month, the same amount as our rent, and maybe as much money as I could conceive of having. “You want to be the supers so you don’t have to pay rent?” he asked. Hmmm. I decided to go for the gold. “Charge Dad for the rent, same as always, and pay us our own \$42,” I said, never thinking he would actually agree. Cheap bastard that he was, he said okay. Who hires a 10-year-old, even one with a big brother, to be the superintendent of a six-story building?

“Martinez on the fifth floor has no water,” he said. So we went up there with some tools and not a single idea of what to do. We ripped the sink out of the wall. That was fun, but not educational. The problem became worse. So we went down to the basement, like superintendents do. We poked around in the moldy dark, wrenches and hammers in hand, and made more of a mess, something

16 THE STREET-SMART SALESMAN

along the lines of *The Three Stooges*. In a few hours, we were itching with flea bites and on our way to Harlem Hospital emergency room again. It wasn't unusual for the water to be off in our tenement for days or weeks at a time, so we waited a whole week before we called Wilkes from the pay phone on the corner to tell him that, after much investigation, we had determined that the Martinez problem required the services of a *real* plumber. The beauty of it all was that I convinced Wilkes to pay us for one week's services, a full 15 dollars.

Another time, a beauty from across the street, also in love with Vinny, remarked that her mother needed the apartment painted. Again, I suggested we were the boys for the job. This time I asked for a hundred dollars to do the job. I gave \$15 each to two Puerto Rican newcomers, Cheyo and his friend, to do the actual painting, and kept \$70 for myself in my capacity as painting inspector. That small business lasted through five apartments—until baseball season came again.

I was always doing my best to beat the deck stacked against us. I did the best I could to keep our apartment safe, too. An old, unrepentant alcoholic we took to calling Uncle Steve began coming by every afternoon to drink a quart of Rheingold beer and smoke Pall Malls in our kitchen. Steve must have been in his mid-forties at the time, harmless to others, his own worst enemy. I loved him because he was there every day and because he seemed to care about my brother and me. It didn't take much to earn my affection back then.

Uncle Steve may have been a drunk, but he had a big heart and his simple presence made me feel safe. In general, addicts, thieves, pushers, prostitutes, and wiseguys had the run of the hallways and the streets around my building: Just to have an adult male around the apartment, even a drunk like Uncle Steve, made it less likely that we'd be robbed of what little we had—or beaten up for having nothing to steal after they'd gone through all the trouble of breaking in.

We hardly ever ate a cooked meal: The stove was full of roaches that fled in droves when you turned on the heat. We owned no pots and pans, no dishes or glasses that weren't cracked and chipped. After the handle broke on the refrigerator, Uncle Steve put a padlock on it. He didn't actually lock it, but it wouldn't have mattered. There wasn't much inside anyway.

If there happened to be a supermarket special on olives, we'd get five cans and stab at the tops with a screwdriver when we were hungry (the can opener lost years before had never been replaced). Mostly, I ate Yankee Doodles or Devil Dogs (breakfast and anytime), washed down either with Pepsi or a Manhattan Special, a super-sweet black coffee soda I think was actually made in Brooklyn. I considered a slice of pizza a full meal, and tiny steamed White Castle hamburgers were a delicacy.

As a consequence of my nearly all-sugar diet and general lack of hygiene, I lost almost all my teeth while I was still a kid. I never saw a dentist until President Johnson

18 THE STREET-SMART SALESMAN

established the Medicaid program and I went to Golden's dental clinic on 125th and Lexington Avenue. On my first visit there I was found to have 32 cavities. Adult humans have 32 teeth, so you do the math. The dentist put me to sleep without telling me what was going to happen, then pulled four—count 'em, *four*—of my front teeth. I completely freaked out when I woke up from the anesthetic, and I made myself scarce for approximately six months, skulking, hiding my mouth behind a dirty handkerchief. My neighbors were pretty sure I'd become a junkie. My teachers thought I'd gone hysterically mute from all the craziness in our family. And all girls thought, correctly in my view, that I was a big-time loser.

Girls had more reason to regard me harshly than my toothlessness, I'll confess. Remember I mentioned that Vinny was so shy he'd hide under the bed to avoid his would-be girlfriends? Well, sometimes one or another bombshell would follow him home and, by prior agreement, I'd pretend that Vinny wasn't home. He'd hide and they'd almost always decide to wait for him. After a while, they'd get tired of waiting and turn their eye to me. I therefore had a lot of action, enough to be the envy of any teen, especially for a 12-year-old. It wasn't lost on me, then as now, that you don't have to have to be first pick to go home a winner. You don't even have to have all the goods; you just have to have a strategy! Sometimes just *being in the room* is a strategy. I had more girlfriends than anybody I knew, no matter what their age.

Actually, now that I think of it, even in my toothless stage, there was a girl uptown I had my eye on. I remember

sitting in a car with her, whimpering behind a handkerchief, letting her do the talking. I scored that day too, and it was one of many incidents in my childhood that led to another Street-Smart understanding—that it’s sometimes best to keep your mouth shut in order to achieve an end.

For example, take the afternoon of July 5 back in the early 1960s. My cousin had come down from the Bronx with some leftover fireworks—Roman candles, ash cans, punks, firecrackers—and a box of matches. I threw a lit firecracker out the back window into the yard and that was fun, so I threw another. This time a lit piece of firecracker paper drifted back in the window and settled onto the pile of fireworks on the floor. The whole pile exploded and the apartment caught fire. Vinny and Camille carried our mother out to the street. The Fire Department and NYPD arrived, but I was more concerned about what my father was going to do than about the firemen and cops. To the extent the cops cared, they interrogated me down at Harlem Hospital, where I was treated for burns. “You know anything about how this fire started?” they asked me. Not a word from my mouth. Somehow, I guess because the fire didn’t spread, the whole question of responsibility went away. What remained was water stains, smoke damage, and rocket burns in the ceiling—and the notion that it’s sometimes most productive just to keep your mouth shut.

I wore the same clothes every day. I had one jacket, one shirt, one pair of pants, one pair of underwear, one pair of socks, one pair of duct-taped sneakers and one pair of duct-taped eyeglasses with an outdated prescription.

20 THE STREET-SMART SALESMAN

We used a lot of duct tape. One of Dad's jobs made big use of the stuff, and we always had several big rolls around the apartment that we used to fix everything: We taped our baseball bats and balls with it; we *made* baseballs with it. I also used it for decoration, putting Mantle's number 7 not only on the front door but on the back of my mother's new wheelchair.

When I was eight years old, I suggested to Camille, who was slightly bow-legged, that we duct-tape her legs together to straighten them. It was a hot summer day, and as sure as we were that it would work, we didn't know how long it would take. After two hours in the sweltering heat, the glue on the tape melted onto her skin and wouldn't come off. Back to the emergency room we went.



Much as I'd like to, I'm unable to forget the day I got pulled from my homeroom class at Benjamin Franklin High School and sent to see the guidance counselor. There, in his office, I was informed that I had become "a distraction" to my teachers and other students. I remember thinking that that was odd because I slept through most of the school day. Then he lowered the boom, as quickly and directly as possible. "Mr. Belli, you smell," he announced. I could not respond! To think I'd been feeling so embarrassed about my missing teeth when all the time I was stinking up the room in addition to being perpetually sick and hungry and carrying a monumental chip on my shoulder. Okay, I knew it was time for a shower, but where? *I didn't own a toothbrush.* I don't remember that I got cleaned up that day, either. I don't think I did. I just lived with an enhanced sense of shame that can still sting.

I'd estimate I visited the emergency room at Harlem Hospital at least once a month. Colds, viruses, headaches, earaches, stitches, rashes, toothaches, dizziness—all were regular complaints. I spent countless hours in the ER waiting for my name to be called, feeling invisible. A desire to be looked upon with something other than pity or derision took me over pretty quickly. I needed to be admired, recognized, commended, for my ability to do something positive. It was as simple as that. I was always finding little ways to distinguish myself. Yankee star was everyone's prediction for me, and as sole possessor of a possible big future in my battered family, I was always the best ballplayer I could possibly be. Everyone around me seemed as sure (to a 10-year-old boy) as a person could be that I would one day wear the beloved uniform. So I put a lot of time into that.

I'm always aware of time, most specifically the time it takes to do something versus what you reap from the time spent. I'm no procrastinator, not even a little bit. I sometimes flash on the memory of a kid from my school, the teacher's pet, an altar boy type who was always being bullied, but always said hello to me. One afternoon, he said hello again as he passed by my stoop, and a minute later he was dead, murdered in a botched hold-up at the candy store on First Avenue. Despite the fact that I was seeing people get shot left and right all the time, I couldn't get over the shock of that boy's death when I heard. I might even say that the shock of it is one of the reasons why I bring a strong sense of urgency to everything that I do.



22 THE STREET-SMART SALESMAN



Today, though, I have a beautiful wife, Marian, whom I met when I was 14 years old on a trip to “the country,” the Bronx. Marian’s family lived across the street from Dad’s sister, Rose. I thought Marian McKenna’s big Irish family was loaded because they had food in the refrigerator *and* all wore nice, clean clothes. She wasn’t rich, just middle class, although rich in spirit. She had an affection for strays, including me, that she has to this day. She’d take the train down to Harlem a few times a week, with cake or clothes or just wearing a new dress, and stay for a few hours for some poor folks’ entertainment. We married when I was a junior in college and she was already working at the electric company, Consolidated Edison. We had two cats before Marian recently began studying to be a veterinary technologist after retiring from Con Ed (we now have four cats).

Marian has a great heart and soul and she has been my Number 1 cheerleader for more than 40 years—never underestimate the sustaining power of someone else’s belief in you. Very often, a friend, loved one, coach, teacher, or other elder, believes in you long before you do. That’s because their experience tells them something about you that you are too naive to understand. If you have someone who believes in you and you do your best to deliver a level of effort consistent with their expectations, you likely will find that their faith in you was not misguided. Conversely, if you get the chance to be a mentor, take it. You win either way. It’s another of the rewards of generosity.

