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Back to Chicago

From the time my parents brought me home from Oak Park Hospital in the late summer of 1948, I was a wild child with a constant need for movement. I had a tendency to run toward the flame.

The sound of a fire engine siren was the first thing to catch my ear. Whenever one of the trucks came screaming through our neighborhood of New Little Italy, I waddled out the front door after it as fast as my short legs would take me. My mother was usually able to catch me before I made it to the street, but occasionally I slipped out without her noticing. One time I was found by a Chicago police officer almost a mile away from our house! Needless to say, my parents were horrified.

New Little Italy was an overflow of sorts for Chicago's Little Italy, a twelve-block stretch around Taylor Street. It was a typical Italian neighborhood: the houses were on the small side and packed close together. Families could smell what their neighbors were cooking in the kitchen and hear what they talked about at the dinner table.

My father, John Seraphine, met my mother, Mary, shortly after he returned home from a stint as an MP in the army during World War II. In the summers, my mom and dad took me and my older sister, Rosemary, on trips to beautiful Cedar Lake about an hour and a half outside of Chicago. We went on Wednesdays because it was my father's only day off from his job driving a bread delivery truck. Since it was the middle of the week, our family had the camp mostly to ourselves. We spent the scorching summer afternoons at the beach making sand castles and splashing around in the lake. It was our only escape from the sweltering summer heat. There was also a pavilion nearby with a dance floor where music boomed out of a jukebox throughout the day. I remember how the twelve-bar blues of Bill Haley and the Comets' "Rock Around the Clock" echoed up into the trees and carried out over the water. It was a nice family getaway from the bustling city streets.

My nervous energy drove my parents crazy. I was stubborn as hell. It got so bad they couldn't sit at the picnic table with their friends playing gin rummy for five minutes without me disappearing. They decided the only option left was to wrap a rope around my waist and tie me to a tree in the lakehouse yard. When I was in my playpen, they slid a section of chicken wire over it to make sure I didn't climb out. Their methods might have been a little over the top, but it was the only way they could be sure I wouldn't make a run for it.

Fortunately, there were more than enough family members to help keep an eye on me around our neighborhood. My mother grew up one of twelve kids, and my father had six brothers and sisters. Most of them lived close by, and we all got together regularly at my grandma Filomena's house on the corner of Grand and Narragansett to celebrate every holiday and birthday. With the size of my family, there was no shortage of occasions. The women brought over their best dishes for our huge Italian meals—homemade ravioli, spaghetti and meatballs with marinara, and chicken Vesuvio, which was served right on the bone with potatoes, a Chicago specialty. My mother always cooked up a batch of her famous lasagna, which I could never get enough of. There was a running competition to see who was the best cook, but nobody

could beat my grandmother's homemade deep-dish pizza topped with her delicious sausage and peppers. As long as she was around, the title was hers.

My grandmother didn't speak much English, but she did the best she could. She was a strong lady who had single-handedly raised twelve children after her husband, my grandfather Michael, died. When I was young, her boisterous personality and heavyset frame sometimes scared me a little. But whenever I'd start crying, she was the first to calm me down. She'd call me by her nickname for me, Danootz. "What's the matter, Danootz?" she would ask, picking me up into her arms.

By the time I was eight, I had found the perfect outlet for my never-ending energy: my mom's cookware. While she fixed dinner, I sat on the faded linoleum in our kitchen banging away on overturned pans, colanders, and saucepots with a set of her wooden mixing spoons. I loved the sound each one made—the high-pitched ting of the frying pan and the low bass thump of the mixing bowl.

My mother's pots and pans were the closest thing to having my own drum kit. I came up with the idea from watching my uncle Dominic play drums with his band at family parties. During the set breaks, he sat me on his drum stool to get a better look. My feet didn't come close to touching the floor, but I still wanted to be exactly like Uncle Dominic one day. I remember my family saying he was only a part-time drummer because making a living playing music back then was simply unheard of. It was considered "pie in the sky," as they used to say.

My whole family had a deep love for music, especially my mom. Whenever my father didn't have a Chicago Cubs game on the radio, she tuned the dial to Lawrence Welk. The songs were truly an escape. They allowed my mother's mind to wander to a place far from her routine existence as a housewife. Together, we spent the long afternoons listening to her old forty-five records of classic crooners like Vic Damone, Frank Sinatra, and Dean Martin. Early on, my mother saw the passion I had for music.

After her father died, she had led a hard life. She was left to help my grandmother take care of her younger brothers and sisters. I can't imagine what kind of a struggle it was for my mother.

I loved to see her face light up as I drummed on her pans while she fixed dinner. She got such a kick out of it.

"You sound so good, Danny," my mother told me as I pounded away. "I just know that one day you're going to be a famous drummer." My playing had become her soundtrack as she cooked dinner.

My father wasn't as thrilled with the new activity. After returning home one night from a long day of work, he remained in the doorway staring at me. The expression on his face couldn't have been a clearer cue to stop with my banging. I looked up at him from my setup on the floor.

"This is what you have Danny doing while I'm out driving the truck all day?" he asked my mother, sliding into a chair at the kitchen table. He pulled off his baseball cap and scratched the back of his head. I was already having trouble in school. The nuns were telling my parents I could hardly read. The last thing he wanted to come home to was the sight of me sitting on the floor banging on pots.

"Have you seen how well he does it?" my mother asked. "At least I can keep an eye on Danny in here, and he's not out wandering the streets."

My father got quiet and ran a finger over his mustache. He didn't want to admit it, but he knew she had a point.

"I want to enroll Danny in lessons and buy him a real drum set," she continued. "I saw one down at the music shop."

"What? Do you know how much those things cost? Where would we get the money?" my father snapped.

"I'll take care of it. I've been setting a little something extra aside for the past few months and it might be enough," she explained.

"Well, what are you asking me for if you've already made up your mind? You always do what you want no matter what I say," he told her, getting up out of his chair. He grabbed a slice of bread from the counter and made his way into the living room. As soon as he was gone, my mother looked down and gave me a knowing wink. I smiled back up at her and returned to pounding on the pans.

My mother was a real handful. She was headstrong and opinionated, two traits I inherited from her. She didn't hold her

tongue for anyone and regularly nagged my father. Being the gentleman that he was, my father stayed calm and cool. It was his nature. He had come from a poor immigrant family and also led a hard life. His father, who I was named after, died when he was young and my dad was forced to drop out of school at sixteen to help support the family. Despite the hardships of his childhood, I never once heard my father say a bad thing about anyone. Ever.

My mother made good on her promise to start me playing drums. I graduated from my set of pans to a rubber practice pad she bought down at the music shop. The mixing spoons were traded out for my first set of oak drumsticks and I sat in my bedroom for hours practicing until my forearms were sore and my hands ached. I drummed along to my mother's classics as well as to my sister Rosemary's hip new forty-fives by Elvis Presley. I couldn't get enough of songs like "Heartbreak Hotel" and "Hound Dog."

Once I got bored with the practice pad, my mother helped me put together an actual set. I started with a Slingerland snare and then added a bass drum and cymbal. She enrolled me in private drum lessons after school with a teacher named Mr. Spranzo, who walked me through all of the basics, including seating and positioning and hand technique. I rode my Schwinn bicycle down to the local music store where he had a practice room in the back and went through the routines on a practice pad. My left hand was weaker than my right, but he told me that was typical of most beginning drummers. Not long after my lessons began, Mr. Spranzo moved, and I didn't like the guy who took his place. It was fine with me because I had grown tired of the lessons anyway.

I set up a space for my drums in our basement and practiced along with Gene Krupa, Sandy Nelson, and Cozy Cole records for hours. Those musicians became my heroes. The albums sounded amazing, especially Cole's *Topsy Part II* and the soundtrack for *The Gene Krupa Story*. There were kids whose parents had to force them to practice their piano or accordion, but I couldn't wait to get down to the basement after school and get behind my kit. It was the only thing I thought about all day.

My banging didn't sit well with my older sister, Rosemary. She hated me drumming in the house. Whenever she reached her boiling point, she would whip open the basement door and shout at me to keep it down. Being the snotty-nosed little brother that I was, her outbursts only made me play harder. Rosemary was a straight-A student and the perfect daughter. I got a real kick out of messing with her.

My sister wasn't the only one who was annoyed with my playing. The neighbors weren't thrilled with the racket either. The houses on our street were practically on top of one another, so the sound of my drums didn't have far to travel. My banging shook the foundations of a couple houses in each direction.

One afternoon, a guy named Stanley showed up at the basement window above where I was sitting behind my kit. He was an old, crotchety neighbor who always had a sour look on his face, probably because he worked nights and found it impossible to get a wink of sleep during the day. As he stood there shaking a clenched fist at me, I glared through the window and chucked the middle finger back at him. Old Stanley almost blew a gasket.

Within seconds, there was a pounding at our front door. I tiptoed up the basement steps to hear what was going on.

"Do you know what your son just did to me?" I heard Stanley ask my mother. "He flipped me off!"

"Well, Stanley," my mother answered, "Danny has a right to play, so stop picking on him!"

There was no response from Stanley. How was he going to argue with her? That was my mother for you. She had my back no matter what the circumstances. Even though Stanley's visits became a routine occurrence, I could never do any wrong in my mother's eyes. My father, on the other hand, was a different story. He thought I was wasting my time. What future was there in playing the drums? In his mind, I should have been upstairs studying.

By the time I was eleven, I had mastered a mean version of the Surfaris' hit song "Wipe Out" in my basement. While attending St. Priscilla's Middle School, I tore through the tune onstage at the talent show. I practiced for weeks and even added my own twist, coming up with a cool drum solo to throw on toward the

end. My inspired performance attracted plenty of attention from the girls in the front row.

"Go, Danny, go!" the girls shouted from their seats.

This drumming thing just keeps getting better, I thought to myself.

Soon afterward, I connected with a couple of other kids at school, an accordion player named Rosario Duca and a guitarist named Ken Gorski. Rosario was an Italian immigrant from the old country who looked like a European movie star with his slicked-back hair and navy blue blazer. Ken had his blond locks whipped up into a pompadour and could play all of the Ventures' songs on his new Fender Stratocaster guitar. The three of us spent afternoons practicing at Rosario's house down the block or in my parents' basement. If my playing alone annoyed Rosemary, having the band over sent her into the red.

What we came up with was some type of hybrid of pop and accordion music. We gave the Top 40 hits of the time a whole new style. Although it may have sounded interesting, I'm not sure we did songs by popular performers like Chubby Checker much justice.

"Come on-a baby-a, and do-a the twist-a," Rosario would sing with his thick Italian accent.

Our jamming was short-lived, though. I then began hooking up with other kids in the neighborhood to play with once in a while, but nothing constant came together. We made it as far as learning a few songs and performing at a middle school dance, but that was about it. Our families supported us by going to the few shows we played, but they were usually the only people there. To make up for the lack of an audience, they applauded as loud as they could at the end of each song.

Between practicing in my basement and playing the occasional school dance, I started hanging out in Shabbona Park off West Addison Street. It was only a short walk from my house. There I met a couple of boys named Rick Bracamontes and Mike Sells, who I thought were the coolest kids around. From the start, Rick and Mike were impressed with how well I could curse. It was a talent I had picked up over the years of eavesdropping

on my uncle Pete and uncle George while they were talking with my father.

After I finished one of my obscene rants, Mike clapped me on the shoulder. "Wow, you really know how to *swear*, man!" he gushed.

Our lives revolved around the park. During the summer break from school, the three of us spent our days strutting around trying to look as cool as possible. I also began sneaking into my mother's purse and stealing her Viceroy cigarettes to smoke. Everyone knows you can't look cool without a cigarette dangling from your lips, right? When we weren't chasing down girls and copping a feel of them in the bushes, we were vandalizing the park restrooms and blowing up toilets with cherry bombs. It was easy. Light the wick, flush the thing down the toilet, and *boom!* One night, we blasted three toilets clear off of their pedestals. Within seconds, the park attendant rushed toward us with his arms flailing. The other guys took off running, but I didn't make a move. I was too cocky and arrogant to run. As far as I was concerned, we were just blowing off a little steam. What was the big deal?

"I'm calling the cops!" the attendant yelled.

"Go right ahead," I told him, lighting up a cigarette.

The guy took my advice, because the next thing I knew, two Chicago policemen came out of nowhere and hauled me down to the station. My mother and father couldn't understand what was getting into me. My mom had my uncle Pete, who was also a World War II veteran, come down to pick me up from the police station later that night.

"What's the matter with you?" he growled, stuffing me into his car. "You better not pull any shit like this again or the last thing you'll have to worry about are cops coming for you. You'll have me to deal with!"

My father didn't have the personality for discipline, so my mom brought in Uncle Pete anytime she thought I needed straightening out. Not that it did any good. I continued getting into trouble, especially with the nuns at St. Priscilla's. They were a bunch of mean old grumpy hags who didn't hesitate to slap you around to keep you in line. Corporal punishment may have been looked

down on in the public schools, but Catholic schools were another story. It was open season.

One day, a lady named Sister Moore dragged me out of the classroom by the neck for goofing off in the back with a few of the other boys. Once we got out into the hall, she grabbed me by the shoulders and slammed me up against the wall. I exploded in a fit of rage and pushed her back as hard as I could.

"Get off me, you old bag!" I shouted.

Sister Moore lost her balance and fell down a short flight of stairs a few feet away. Most of the kids lived in complete fear of the nuns, especially Sister Moore, who was about six feet tall. The look of shock on her face when she got up from the foot of the staircase was priceless. I have a feeling no student had ever stood up to her like that before.

When my parents were called in for an emergency meeting at the school, my mother was beside herself. She was realizing I wasn't her sweet little boy any longer. Luckily, I was a talented athlete on the boys' basketball team at the school and my coach put in a good word with the nuns. Because of my mother's emotional pleading and the urging of my coach, I was allowed to stay at St. Priscilla's. They probably let me graduate just to get me the hell out of there.

When I moved on to St. Patrick's High School out on Belmont Avenue, the fierce side of my personality continued to rear its ugly head. Being on the short side for my age, I got picked on by the older kids from the moment I stepped into the schoolyard. I surprised a lot of them because I never backed down. The more I fought, the tougher I got, and I quickly developed into a wiry street fighter. I became the poster boy for a defiant teenager.

At the same time, I also started getting interested in cars, especially my dad's '58 Chevy. My father got up at the crack of dawn every day, so by the time he got home from work he was exhausted. After he lumbered back to the bedroom to take his nap, I'd grab his keys from the kitchen counter and take off in the car. I'd pick up Rick and Mike and we would buzz the neighborhood a few times.

But my fun didn't last long. As I crept up the street one night, I caught sight of my father standing out at the corner of our driveway with his arms crossed tightly in front of him. There was going to be no talking my way out of this one. I was screwed. My dad rarely lost his temper, but when he did it wasn't pretty.

"Okay, okay," I said stepping out of the car. "I deserve it. You can just—"

Whack!

He slugged me a good one to the side of my head. I couldn't run in the house fast enough. My parents grounded me and warned me never to even think of trying a stunt like that again. I was one of those kids who never got away with *anything* and had to become a fast talker out of necessity. I was always scrambling to try to get myself out of a jam.

It wasn't long before I got into another fight at school, this time with one of the brothers at St. Patrick's. It was almost a carbon copy of my run-in with Sister Moore back at St. Priscilla's. Unfortunately, St. Patrick's wasn't as forgiving and decided to kick me out altogether. They didn't want to listen to anything my parents or I had to say.

Despite getting kicked out, my marks were so awful at St. Patrick's that I needed to go to summer classes at the Steinmetz School before I could transfer. Of course, I paid no attention to the teachers there either. My focus was on a pretty little thing named Elsie, a cute brown-haired girl who sat in the row next to me. From the moment we met, we started spending most of our time together. I had messed around with girls before, but I finally lost my virginity to Elsie. We couldn't get enough of each other.

Shortly after I turned fifteen, Elsie told me she was pregnant. I had no idea how to react. I was a carefree corner kid. How could I possibly support a child? I wasn't in any position to get married and become a father. Elsie didn't want to hear anything I had to say and decided to have the child on her own. In the end, I had to come to terms with the fact that I just didn't love her enough to stay with her. From that point on, the only contact I had with Elsie and the baby, a girl she named Maria,

was through her family attorney. I was allowed to see Maria once and that was it. When I asked Elsie's lawyer when I could speak to her again, the guy told me, "She said she hates you, Danny. It wouldn't be a good idea." In the end, my only option was to stay out of the picture to avoid ugly confrontations.

All the kids had something to prove hanging out in Shabbona Park. Everyone wanted to be known for being a tough badass. In our neighborhood, if you didn't have respect, you didn't have anything. Somebody would mouth off, and before you knew it, two guys were tumbling around in the grass beating the hell out of each other. Overall, you could say I took as much as I gave. One day, I got caught by a sucker punch and was in the middle of having my ass handed to me by a much bigger kid when a guy named Tom Padula came to my rescue. He landed a left hook that nearly took the other kid's head off. I had known Tom since grammar school and I couldn't have been happier to see him that day in the park. It made me understand the importance of running in packs of friends. You never knew when you were going to need backup.

My rebellious behavior at Steinmetz School continued and my grades kept getting worse. One morning, I was sent down to the administrative offices to meet with Mrs. Peterson, the school's guidance counselor. She sat behind her desk with a puzzled expression as she paged through my student transcripts. The lady didn't have a clue what to do with me.

"What do you want to be, Danny?" she asked, peering over her giant glasses.

"I want to be a drummer," I told her. To me, the answer was obvious. It was the only thing I ever aspired to. I may have been playing in lame bands at the time, but I figured something better would come along at some point.

The forced smile on Mrs. Peterson's face disappeared. "I'm not sure that is the best idea, Danny," she said. "You should consider enrolling in beauty school to learn how to be a barber. There may be a real future in that for you."

I couldn't believe she was being serious. As far as Mrs. Peterson was concerned, I had no skills or talent for anything other than being a menace. In her mind, suggesting a trade was a sensible option. But as my parents already were well aware, telling me not to do something is like pouring gasoline on a fire. *A barber?* That lady was out of her mind.

One afternoon after school, I was walking home past a local hangout called Lindy's Coffee Shop when I noticed a brawl on the lawn of a house next door. Five guys had someone down and were putting the boot to him. When I got closer, I saw it was Tom Padula, my friend from the neighborhood. Tom had saved me from getting my ass kicked in the park, so it was only right to return the favor. Without giving it a second thought, I ran into the mix of bodies swinging my fists.

I connected with a couple of good ones, but wasn't on my feet for long. A kick to my ribs and a fist to my head sent me reeling. The next thing I knew, I was down on the ground next to Tom. I rolled and held my arms up in defense, but it was no use. The blows came from every direction and I soon had the bitter taste of blood in my mouth. A couple of the kids picked me up and threw me headfirst against a parked car. I collapsed to the sidewalk and used my last bit of energy to curl up into a ball. I braced for another round of kicks, but they never came. There was a lot of yelling and I looked up to discover an even bigger fight. Some neighborhood guys had come in and saved our asses. One of them jogged over and helped me to my feet.

"You've got some serious balls, kid," he told me.

I was a total mess. The arm on my jacket was torn and my Italian loafers were all scraped up. I was bleeding and my eye started to swell.

I may have looked like hell, but I gained everyone's respect that day. Little did I know that the guys who came to my rescue were part of the notorious gang called the JPs. They had been sitting in Lindy's watching the whole scene go down. When they saw that Tom and I were in trouble, they ran out to get in on the action. The other hoods who jumped us were members of the Bell Park gang, their rivals.

My ballsy performance in the scrap gave me an instant reputation. The notoriety allowed me to start hanging with the JPs. The name didn't do them any justice; they were just as nasty and dangerous as any of the big gangs in the city. The JPs were under the Pizza Palace gang, who were below the Outfit—the full-blown Mafia of Chicago.

I may have started walking the streets with an exaggerated swagger, but behind the front I put up my life was a mess. My father and I were barely speaking to each other. My mother was scrambling to find some way to get me back on course. But it was no use. My only concern was with my new reputation as a member of the JPs. No matter what anyone said, I was a part of something and was going to do whatever I wanted.