

DAVID KOULACK

## The Clock

*Better three hours too soon than a minute too late.*  
—Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

THE CLOCK IN THE KITCHEN of our ground-floor apartment on Charlotte Street—that's in the Bronx, New York City—hung on the wall above the cabinet where the dishes were kept. My mother set it exactly five minutes ahead of real time, that is, five minutes ahead of radio time, WQXR time to be more precise.

The small radio, which sat on the cabinet just below the clock, was permanently tuned to WQXR as was the huge console, complete with record player, that resided in the living room between the two windows that overlooked the street.

On the nights when the air raid sirens sounded, we'd gather around the console, ears cocked in the direction of the filigreed brocade that covered its one large speaker, listening intently to the news. The street lamps throughout the city would go dark then and our windows, as was true of all the windows in New York City, would be covered by two sets of pull-down shades, one of them black.

On one of those nights we were startled by a knock on our door. It was a uniformed air raid warden, a tall man with greying tufts of hair sticking out from under his metal helmet. He was carrying a flashlight and he looked tired.

"I can see light coming from one of the windows in your front room," he said.

"I'm sorry," my father told him in a timorous voice. "I'll fix it right away."

My father was always nervous in the face of authority. My mother made him nervous too, frightened maybe. She had a look, the "dirty look" my brother and I called it, that she gave him if he were late for 5:30 supper. "Look at the time, Izzy," she'd say with venom, pointing to the clock on

the kitchen wall. No use arguing that it was running fast, that we were in a time zone of our own.

Once, when my brother was late for supper my mother hit him with his snow shovel. She grabbed the shovel out of his hands and hit him over the head with it, because he was late—late by our time, Kraemer time.

So it's no wonder that I raced home after school everyday. To not be home on time meant to my mother that something bad had happened, something that was necessarily worthy of a lengthy and detailed inquisition. Not that there wasn't always some sort of interrogation although that particular afternoon it started innocently enough.

"Can I have some cookies, Ma?" I asked.

"Of course, don't I always give you cookies after school? But go wash your hands first."

"I already washed them."

"When did you wash them? Not since you came in the house, certainly."

"No, I washed them at school."

"There's no telling what you've touched since then. There are germs all over the place." (My father was a doctor so my mother knew all about germs.) "You can't be too careful. Go on now. Wash your hands."

When I got back to the kitchen there was a glass of milk, a plate with two Oreo cookies, and a folded paper napkin waiting for me on the red and white chequered, oilcloth table cover. My mother sat down opposite me as she always did. A slight wisp of steam rose from her cup of tea.

Her procedure was always the same. With a lump of sugar in her cheek, she would pour some tea into her saucer to cool it off and then carefully bring it to her lips and take a sip.

I glanced up at the clock on the wall and waited.

"How was school today?" she asked.

"Okay," I said.

"You didn't get into any trouble, did you?"

"No, no trouble."

I leaned forward and carefully twisted an Oreo to liberate its white creamy center.

"Look at me. Was there trouble again?"

"I told you, Ma. No trouble."

(Well what was I gonna tell her? I got into another fight? "It was different this time, Ma, honest. I had to hit him. Herbie made fun of me because we don't go to *schul* on *Yom Kippur*. He called me a *goy*, Ma.")

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. But, Ma ...."

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“What do you mean, never mind? I hate it when you don’t finish a sentence.”

I looked at the clock again—already nearly four o’clock. At this rate I’d never get out in time to play stickball, not that they’d necessarily pick me. Maybe they were choosing up sides already.

“I’m waiting.” Her eyes were suspicious, narrow slits by now.

“Well, I was just wondering why we don’t go to *shul*.”

“Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know, just wondered. You keep me home from school”—not that I minded, far from it. Once I even tried to pretend that I was sick to get out of going to school, held the thermometer near a light bulb, almost broke the thermometer but didn’t fool my mother—“and Daddy closes his office but we don’t go *shul*.”

“It’s out of respect, that you stay home from school and your father closes his office.”

“Out of respect?”

“It’s out of respect for our neighbours. It would be hurtful to them to see other Jews, on this holiest of days, going about business as usual. But since we don’t believe in God, we don’t go to *shul* to pray. It’s sort of a compromise between our beliefs and our neighbours’ feelings.”

That’s when it came up. My mother put another lump of sugar in her cheek and took another sip of tea. She pursed her lips and sighed. “Sometimes I think it would have been better if we were religious.”

“Why, Ma?”

“Maybe it was an omen when your brother was born early,” she said, talking into space, almost as if I wasn’t there. “Maybe there is a God and he was trying to tell us something but we were too foolish to listen and then it was too late.”

“Why was Doron born early?”

“That’s just it. It’s not clear. The doctor figures out when the baby is due but often the first child is late.

“In your brother’s case, there was nothing unusual. He wasn’t expected for two more weeks and then suddenly I went into labour. Your father rushed me to the nearest hospital, the Jewish hospital on Pelham Parkway.”

“How does the doctor know when the baby is due?”

“Never mind that, you’re too young to understand. The important thing is that the labour started early and it went very quickly. We were lucky to get to the hospital just before your brother was born.”

“He was perfect. Such a *schienner*. I adored him so. I can’t tell you how wonderful it was to hold him, my firstborn son—my Doron, my gift.

“Because it was a Jewish hospital, I stayed there the full eight days so that your brother could have a *bris*. They had a special room for the ceremony and the *moyl* presided. He knew exactly what he was doing. It really was as if there was a covenant with God, the *moyl* did such a perfect job on your brother.

“But there was no *moyl* where you were born. You were not an early baby. There was no rush and we were able to drive to Manhattan, to Montefiore Hospital, as we originally had planned. You were a beautiful baby too until the doctor got hold of you.

There was no eight-day wait, no *moyl*, no *bris*—the doctor did the circumcision himself—just two days after you were born and he really messed you up.”

“What do you mean, Ma?”

“He just messed you up. Let’s leave it at that.”

I hate it when they do that—grown-ups, I mean, and my mother in particular—not telling you things because they think that you’re too young to understand. But this time it was worse, it was about me.

“Now go out and play and make sure you’re back by 5:30.”

By the time I got outside, most of the other kids were there. Some of the girls were playing jacks and others skipping rope. The boys were roughhousing—I wondered what they looked like there, how I was messed up, different from them—and tossing a spalDEEN around, waiting for Phlug to appear with the stickball bat.

The spalDEEN was a multi-purpose ball. The girls used it to play jacks or A-my-name-is, or to flip a penny placed on a sidewalk crack. The boys used it to play slug or handball against the brown bricks of the apartment building, or monkey-in-the-middle or stickball.

The spalDEEN got its name from the black “Spalding” printed on the light pink sphere that smelt faintly of glue when Stan-the-Man took it fresh out of the box in the glass case in his candy store on the corner of Boston Road and Charlotte Street. He’d sell it to you for ten cents or five, if that was all you had.

It would take less than fifteen minute’s worth of slug to change the fresh pink of the SpalDEEN to a scarred brownish hue and to eradicate both the smell and the black letters. And after a while the surface would wear thin and become hard, ideal for stickball because a well-hit ball would travel faster and farther than when the SpalDEEN was new.

The dimensions of the stickball field varied from day to day—boundaries depended in part on where the cars were parked on our one-way street

and today was no exception. “The front fender of the Oldsmobile is first base,” Ernie Phlug said, all business when he finally arrived. “Got that? And the taillight of the Buick’s third. Anything hits the Buick is a foul ball. Okay?”

The sewers were the constants. Home plate was the sewer cover nearest Boston Road. Second base was the sewer just before where Charlotte Street dipped and sloped precipitously toward the Jennings Street market.

Ground rules clear, we made a circle with Ernie and Freddy Freiberg in the middle. Ernie tossed the stickball bat, the sawed-off handle of Mrs. Phlug’s old broom, and Freddy caught it. Ernie grabbed the bat just above Freddy’s hand and Freddy placed his hand above Ernie’s and so on.

If Freddy caught the bat just right—which he’d managed to do this particular day—by the time they were done Ernie would be left holding the bat between the tips of two fingers and Freddy would have no trouble kicking it from his grasp. That way, Freddy would have the first pick.

“Arthur,” he said. Arthur Waxman was always picked first. He was a big fat kid who could really hit. Arthur once broke a third-floor window in fair territory. It was a home run that ended the game because an irate Mrs. Einspruch screamed at us through the broken pane.

“I see you. You wait there all of you. I’m coming down and you’re all going to pay.”

We ran off scared but laughing. We rounded the corner, separating as soon as we hit Boston Road and meeting up again in Crotona Park.

“Do you think she saw us?” Robert Berger asked.

“No, she’s blind as a bat and she didn’t have her glasses on,” Ernie said. “We’ll just wait a while and then go back one at a time. It’ll be alright.”

“What if she did see us? What if she tells our parents,” I asked.

“Don’t be so pathetic. Nothing’s gonna happen.”

The other picks were more or less predictable—the better players being picked early except for special friends of Phlug or Freiberg, like Shrimp—he wasn’t that much better than me but he was always sucking up to Freddy, “Pick me, pick me, Freddy,” he’d squeal. “I wanna be on your team.” And Freddy, flattered, would pick him early.

It didn’t matter on this day that I was chosen last. And it didn’t bother me when Phlug had me batting at the bottom of the lineup and stuck me out in right field behind the Olds where no one was likely to hit the ball. I had other things on my mind.

We were winning by a run when my mother threw open the window and yelled that it was 5:30 and I better get home and wash my hands before supper if I knew what was good for me. But the rules on the block

for leaving a game early were clear and unyielding.

“Sixty shots, a punch in the jaw, a kick in the ass and forty more,” they chanted as they surrounded me and meted out my punishment. It was a ritual more than anything. It didn’t really hurt but I lost it when Shrimp punched me in the jaw a little too hard.

I grabbed at his pants, tried to pull them down, see what made him better than me. That’s when Freddy came to his rescue, wrestled me to the ground and socked me hard in the eye. When I got up my clothes were torn and I could feel the shiner beginning to form. I knew I was going to be late for dinner but there was nothing more that my mother could do to me than she had already done