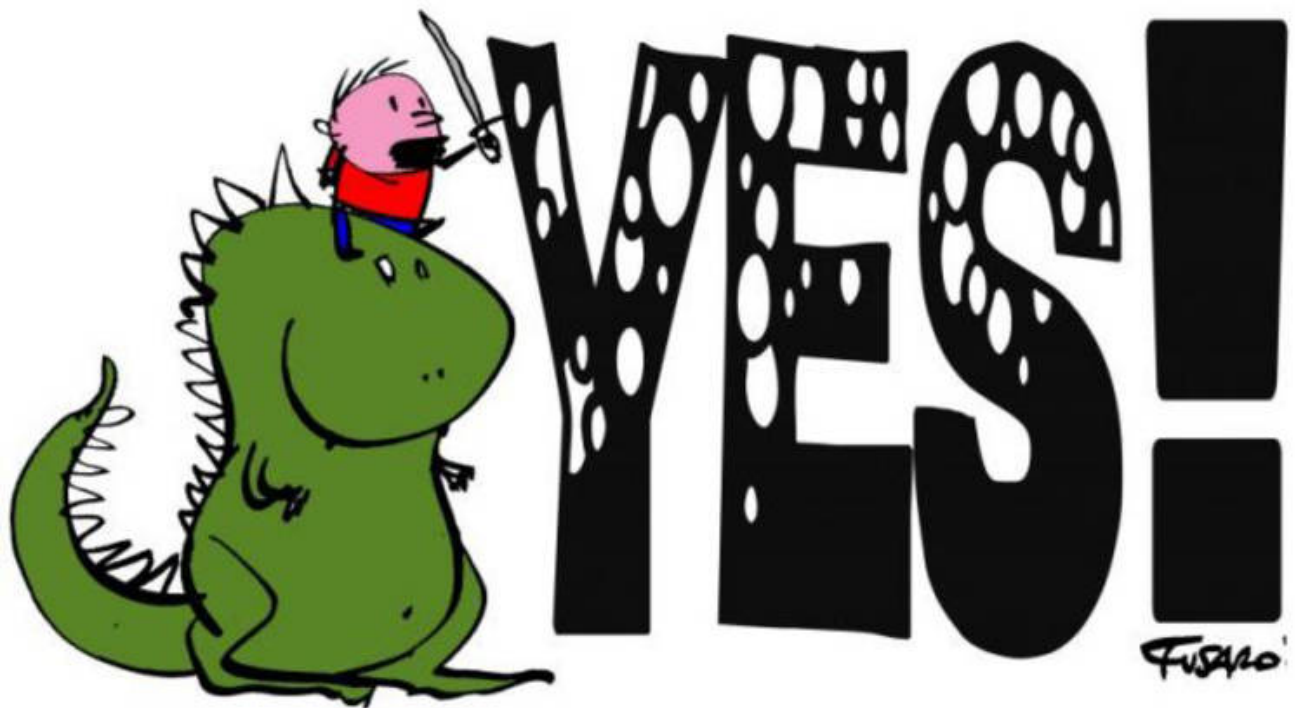




A Tough Guy's Actions Expose a Soft Spot

Darrell Fusaro (June 20, 2012)



At age fourteen I defended us against the black mafia and experienced my dad's love.

From the time I was nine and my brother five, my father raised us as a single parent. He did get by with some help from his buddies. For example, since my father worked days selling business machines for Burroughs he had his friend, a nightclub bouncer named Paulie who worked nights. Paulie would arrive at dawn, which was the end of his shift. That way there would be an adult in the house during the first half of the day, while my brother was home. Around noon, I'd walk home from school for lunch, wake up Paulie, make Dinty Moore beef stew from a can for the three of us. Then I'd walk Eric back to school with me for the afternoon session.



Our father parented us by busting our balls continuously with insults. I have to assume this was what he believed would mold us into well-adjusted men.

When we were upset he would cheer us up, "Jesus Christ, think positive, you miserable fuck."

And when we were struggling with a problem he would encourage us, "For Christ's sake. You're smarter than that, you fuckin' idiot."

He was like a "New Jersey" New-Ager.

All this did was make me feel that no matter what I did, I would always disappoint him. So in an effort to become more of what seemed to be a man I started lifting weights. My plan was rolling along nicely, then one night the three of us, my brother Eric, our Dad and myself were eating dinner at the kitchen table, when our Dad stopped eating and stared at me.

"What?" I said with my mouth still full of food.

"Ever since you started lifting those weights you look more and more like a fucking monkey. Straighten your arms out when they are at your sides, at least make an attempt to appear human." Disgusted, he went back to eating. Honestly, I thought I was supposed to hold my arms out from my body a little bent so that it was obvious to everyone else that I worked out. I thought the girls liked that.

Ironically, my working out was also the reason my dad wanted me to go to work with him one Saturday afternoon.



"Hey let's go, you're coming to work with me." My dad said, dressed in his suit, tie, overcoat, hat, and carrying his briefcase.

Then he went to the front closet, took out our softball bat and I followed him out to the car. He opened up the trunk, placed his briefcase in it, and tossed in the softball bat. With his hand on the trunk about to close it he stopped.

He was looking at me straight in the eyes. "What the fuck is that?" He was serious. "Does that fucking thing make you smarter?" He paused for a moment then, "Take that fucking thing off before I knock it off!"

So I took off my "Loverboy" headband, got in the car and we drove onto Route Three eastbound to New York City and into Harlem. It was a weekend in the fall. Traffic was light as we cruised up Third Avenue. It was one of those wonderful days at summer's end when the weather is how I wished it could be forever. The sky was clear blue with puffy white clouds and the air without humidity was crisp and cool. The warmth of the sun dialed in so perfectly you could enjoy it all day without breaking a sweat.

"New York is beautiful on the weekends isn't it?" He commented before taking a puff from his cigar as he drove with the windows down.

He turned left down a one-way street going west. The street was lined with brownstones and we parked on the south side of the street in front of the only brownstone that had been painted. It was obvious that it was a church because it was painted white and it had the plexi-glass encased church sign in front. The familiar church sign; with the black felt backing and the crooked white plastic letters, announcing the upcoming sermon. When my Dad got out so did I. I followed him to the back of the car. He unlocked the trunk, opened it up, took out the briefcase, handed me the bat and closed the trunk.

"Keep an eye on the car while I'm inside all right?" That was the last thing he said to me before turning around and walking up the stairs that lead into the church.



There I was, all alone, fourteen-years-old, and standing on the sidewalk next to my dad's brand new Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme Brougham. I was wearing a sleeveless teal blue muscle beach T-shirt, a pair of white corduroy Sassoon jeans I had to lie down to squeeze into, and holding a bat in the middle of Harlem. Even I was smart enough to know that this wasn't a good idea. That's when I noticed a huge black guy standing on the corner. He also had a bat.

What now? I don't know how to sword fight with a softball bat. I'm going to die! Then the black guy waived at me. He held up his bat with a smile, like we were comrades. My sense of relief was so incredible I waved back held up my bat in unison with a smile. Then I realized what he was doing there. His job was to make sure that the kid running groceries into the corner store from a truck wasn't to be screwed with. OK, I get it, that's how they do things around here... with bats.

Before I got too relaxed I noticed three more black guys walking along the other side of the street towards me, and they were dressed just like my dad, in suits and overcoats, wearing hats. But since they were black they looked like those Malcolm X types to me. Just as I felt my panic rise the three of them nodded and tipped their hats to me. Confused but relieved I nodded back.

After what felt like an hour I got bored, so I opened the trunk threw in the bat and left the car to go to the corner store. I walked in the store bought myself some candy and a copy of the Daily News. Walking out I thought to myself, "How do you like that? Even the black guy in the candy store was nice to me."

When I got back to the car, I sat in the passenger seat and read the paper while I waited for my dad.

Finally, my father returned and plopped down behind the wheel. "So, any problems?"

Now that I was clear as to why everyone was so nice, I confidently answered, "No, dad. We are parked in front of a church."



"Church? What church?" Indicating with his thumb pointing over his shoulder at the church, "That's the Black Mafia."

I knew it was one of those times when you don't ask stupid questions so...

"Dad, what are you doing with the Black Mafia?"

"What do I do for a living?" He answered with a question.

And so did I, "Sell computers?"

True that's what he did; he was a representative for Burroughs business machines, aka computers. Keep in mind in 1976 the smallest computer was the size of our refrigerator.

My mind began to race, attempting to make sense of it all. First you have the Mafia: OK, let's see, lopped off horses heads in the bed and short Italian guys in suits with machine guns in violin cases. Then you add Black. I'm thinking about those tall skinny black dudes with huge Afros in lime green leisure suits and bellbottoms, wearing big fancy hats with the ostrich plume, adept at using kick ass Kung Fu. Refrigerator-sized computers didn't seem to fit in with any of it.

After a long silence I had to ask, "Dad what's the Black Mafia going to do with computers?"

"Do you realize if you had just half a brain you'd be dangerous? How do you expect them to run their numbers... on their fucking fingers?" That was his answer. He had me light him another cigar for the ride home and it was never brought up again.



A few weeks later, my father wanted me to go out with him again. It was a Saturday evening when he called out to me. "Darrell, come on, we're going out tonight."

I hurried to his bedroom where he was getting dressed up. Once I got there and stood in the doorway he stopped what he was doing and looked at me. "Jesus Christ Darrell, do you own anything with a sleeve on it?"

After putting on a decent dress shirt I got in the car and once again we headed east on Route Three through the Lincoln Tunnel and into New York City. This time we drove down Broadway. New York City in the evening resembles nothing like itself during the day. At night, the lights in Times Square ignited the indigo blue atmosphere with bright neon pulsating colors. Well-dressed people flowed like a river along the wide sidewalks.

We turned west on one of the side streets and pulled up to a theater. People dressed up like the pictures of famous actors I'd seen were gathered on the well-lit sidewalk chatting and smoking cigarettes. They looked happy underneath the illuminated marquee. The marquee lit up big red letters spelling out, "GiGi, The Musical!" My father gave the keys of his car to a man dressed in a white shirt, black slacks, and vest. The valet gave my dad a ticket stub and drove off with the car. My dad handed me a ticket to the performance and together we joined the crowd of beautiful people. I had never been to a Broadway show. Up until this moment, I had no idea that my dad had any interest at all in this sort of thing. As he enthusiastically began to share with me everything he felt I needed to know about the theater that night, it was obvious that this was something he really enjoyed.

I followed him all the way down to the edge of the stage and he pointed out the live musicians underneath the stage. Then I followed him back several rows to our seats. As we took our seats he said, "This is the orchestra section. It costs a little more, but it's worth it. You'll see."

I got my first playbill. "It's just like the program at a ball game." He ran his finger down the page listing the cast and explained, "This is the starting line up, and these are the positions they play." Then he noticed a sliver of white paper tucked in his playbill with something typed on it.



"Agnes Morehead's part is being played by an understudy." He said with disbelief and disappointment.

"Who's Agnes Morehead, dad?"

"You know, she's the broad who plays the mother on that show, you know, 'Bewitched.'"

"Oh." Then I asked, "What's an understudy?"

He stared long enough for me to know that my question was irrelevant before answering, "Somebody else."

The lights dimmed and the show began. At half time, I followed my dad outside. He was just a few steps ahead of me when he stopped. He stood right on the edge of the sidewalk at the curb along side a lamppost and lit a cigar. I just watched him. Everyone was moving around me and chatting enthusiastically about the performance so far and I just stood there, with my father near the curb. I can honestly say that I don't remember a damn thing about "GiGi," but that was the best Broadway show I've ever been to. For that one night, it felt like my dad and me were friends.

At the end of the evening as we stood on the sidewalk waiting for the car my dad asked, "So Darrell, what'd ya think? Did you have a good time?"

"Yeah dad I loved it. It was great."

"Yeah well it really wasn't the best show for your first show." He went on, "You know what? I'll tell you what. Why don't we start a new tradition? Every year you, me, and that silly little son-of-a-bitch you call your brother will go to a play. Would you like that?"



"Yeah dad. That'd be great."

It was a promise he kept until he died five years later. The last year of his life he was too sick to attend but had tickets for Eric, who was now fourteen, and me. That year I was eighteen so I drove us into New York City for a performance of "The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas." It was my turn to share with Eric everything daddy was once so excited to share with me.

When we got home we both went straight to our bed-ridden father who enthusiastically asked us, "So what'd ya think? Was it good? Did you have a good time?"

Eric and I both went on to tell him how great the seats were, how I gave the car to the valet just like he had, and that the Sheriff fired his gun on stage.

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