

My Best Friend

It was a sunny, warm morning, or so it will be told in this story, that found me at the age of four, ambling down the block on 60th Street in Woodside, Queens, New York. I lived on 60th Street and so did a lot of other notable characters. But all in all it was a typical block in an average neighborhood surrounded by the most mundane Burrough in all of New York City, except that this block was also home to Kevin McShea. At the start of my walk I did not know that Kevin McShea existed and at the end of it, twelve minutes later, he was my best friend in the whole world, anywhere.

Our block was one of ten thousand like it in our mundane Burrough of Queens. It was an unzoned jumble of single family homes, two flats, three flats, apartment buildings, empty lots and a couple of factories to boot. We lived on the west side of the street, the side with even numbered addresses, at 37-44 60th Street. In the days before zip codes our postal zone was 77. I still think it's cool that our zone was 77. Double lucky.

As I walked along on the even numbered side of the street (crossing the street was still a bit dicey) I spied a handsome fellow, somewhat taller than myself coming up the even numbered side of the street in my direction. He had a crew cut, we all did, and coolest of all he was wearing combat boots. Brown combat boots with laces and buckles. He was obviously a fellow to be reckoned with. As we closed on each other it became apparent that we were of a similar age which, for children, is a big deal because the age range for fast friends, the guys you hang with, encompassed two years at the most.

As it so happens I was in the market for a new friend and, the fates were smiling down, so was Kevin. I remember wondering which house we would meet in front of. Not that it mattered in particular because meet we would. It's just that it's always been a habit of mine to estimate distances. How far is it to the RR tracks? How long will it take to walk to Yonkers? How many steps wide is a sidewalk square? How long is a thumb? Where will that kid and me meet up? Turns out that it was in front of old Sadie's house. Old Sadie was not old at all, probably forty or so but she was mean enough to be really, really old, witch old. Ergo, old Sadie. Don't throw your ball into Sadie's yard because you won't be getting it back. Don't try a short cut through Sadie's yard because she'd be waiting for you. Rumor had it that old Sadie cooked and ate children like me. I think I saw a bone once, really.

Anyway meet we did in front of the evenly numbered 37-22 60th Street. The meeting went exactly like this. 1: fifteen seconds of silent evaluation. 2: "My name is Kevin" followed by "My name is Eddie". 3: he punched me in the belly but not too hard. 4: I punched him in the belly but not too hard. 5: "Let's be best friends". 6: a firm handshake to seal the deal. It took about a minute all tolled. We walked away arms on each others shoulders, comrades in whatever would befall us and played with each other non stop for the next five years.

A note to anyone under thirty: That's how little boys used to make friends. There was no date arranged. We were on our own, outside all day. Parents were not in the loop. We were in charge of our own happiness. Really.

I think it would be an absolute hoot to meet someone at a social gathering today, size him up in terms of a compatible comrade and then punch him in the belly. There's something about the direct approach that is so refreshing. No muss, no fuss, no small talk, no tip toeing around the central issue, no agonizing reappraisals just a firm punch in the belly. You pretty much know after you have punched someone in the belly (and been punched in return) what the future holds for the both of you.

Be that as it may, I was talking about Kevin McShea and me. For the next few years until school wrecked everything my best friend Kevin and me played and played and played as if we were the patron saints of playing. We played tag, we played skully, we played ring-o-leaveo, we played running bases (Kevin always in his combat boots), we played home run derby, we played on rope swings and at construction sites. We went through the garbage behind the factories and collected treasures. We buried those treasures, created treasure maps to find the treasure and then dug it up again about two days later thrilled to death that the treasure was still there. We also played 'Shot the Best'. Yup, shot the best.

You and your pals choose someone to be it, the 'Shooter'. He goes to a secure defensive position and creates a machine gun nest. We watched a lot of war movies in those days so machine gun nest creating was a no brainer. The rest of the gang would take a position about thirty yards from the Shooter and on the count of three-two-one, go! They would heroically charge the nest.

The Shooter would open fire (Kevin was really great at making both machine gun and hand grenade noises) against the charging troops and one by one each of the ill-fated assault team would die. The idea was to meet your maker in the most dramatic, extended, pathos laden fashion imaginable. In short, it was a game of who got 'shot the best'. The Shooter picked one admirable death above the others and that deceased comrade would be the next Shooter repeating the same bloodbath over and over and over. Never got tired of that game, saw some pretty amazing expirations.

It is more than a little ironic that Kevin has a son who is just days away from graduating the Military Academy at West Point, his second to do so, and I have been a lifelong anti-war protester. You never know where a good game of 'Shot the Best' is going to lead. What you do know is that best friends forever are still best friends forever.