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In Queens: Becoming a Sweeney (1974-76)

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Chapter **II**

Call Northside 777

ONE EVENING IN LATE JUNE 1974, I was lying in bed with my wife, Sun Oak, our 6-month-old daughter, Lee, asleep between us. It was well past Johnny Carson, but I was wide awake. The only light in the room came from the full moon high in the sky and the flickering black and white images on the portable TV at the foot of the bed.

I won't say I was worried, particularly, but I was getting close. The year before, I had left a steady newspaper job in Connecticut on a gamble. I'd taken the money Sun Oak and I had saved for a house over the last three years and instead used it on my tuition at the Columbia University School of Journalism in New York City. I'd been working in the news business since my college days in Boston, where I had free-lanced photos of student demonstrations to newspapers. I'd covered town news in Connecticut for the Hartford Courant and after graduation covered Guilford for the New Haven Register. After three years there, I calculated that my wife and I needed a leg up to get out of local news, and a graduate degree would do it. At least, that's what I told Sun Oak. Now I had nearly five years of experience and a master's degree but no job. We had a few hundred dollars left in the bank and six weeks on the lease of our apartment at West 119th & Morningside Drive.

As graduation approached, I made the usual calls and did the usual interviews. I got a good reception but no offers. I'd been turned down flat by papers in a dozen cities and by magazines, radio and TV outfits, trade newsletters and one university press. If things didn't break soon, I might be forced to go back to my hometown of Hartford and look for work in the insurance industry. I hadn't given up, but I was heading into the ninth inning two runs back.

All this weighed on my mind as I turned the TV dial looking for something to watch. On an old-movie channel I came upon the beginning of something called *Call Northside 777*. It was a 1948 B-grade black and white film starring Jimmy Stewart as a reporter for a Chicago daily. This looked like a good choice, I thought, a newspaper movie. I settled back and watched.

The film was based on the true story of a Chicago newsman who investigated the conviction of a young man, played by Richard Conte, for killing a cop in a Chicago speak-easy 11 years earlier. The man's mother washed floors and saved her money to give as a reward to anyone who would help free her son from life in prison. The Chicago reporter got on the case after his editor saw the scrubwoman's classified ad promising \$3,000 to anyone with information; the ad said to call her at Northside 777.

In the film the reporter, at first reluctant to believe the con's claims of innocence, eventually became convinced that he indeed had been wrongly charged. The movie had a film noir, nonsensical quality about it, capturing the tough-guy ambience of the Chicago newspaper world. At the film's end the reporter did right, finding the evidence that convinced the parole board to free an innocent man.

That's what it was all about, I thought, floating on the noble quality of this crusading newsman's achievement. I could do that kind of thing. Sure. The film's Chicago connection made me think immediately of New York's mass circulation tabloid downtown, the *Daily News*, which was owned by the *Chicago Tribune*. The *News* had the largest circulation of any daily in the country, with some two million readers. If ever there was a hard-boiled newspaper, the *News* was it.

I hadn't thought to apply for work there because both Sun Oak and I hoped I'd find work in a place where we could settle and raise a family in a less hectic environment than New York City. But in the light of the full moon, I decided that perhaps Providence was at work.

The next morning I got to the typewriter and wrote to Dick Oliver, the new city editor of the *News*, who had taught a reporting class at Columbia earlier that year. I hadn't taken the class, but I knew him well enough to acknowledge openly that my letter was just another snowflake in the blizzard. A couple of days later I called him.

"Sure," Oliver said, "I got your letter. I sent it over to Mike

Clendenin, the metro editor, and he said he wants to see you right away.”

This was too much. The News! The next morning I took the subway to midtown and the News building at 220 East 42nd Street. At midmorning on a Thursday the city room on the 7th floor was quiet and empty except for a handful of men in shirt sleeves around the city desk at the center of the room. The city desk was actually a collection of desks in a square, outside of which perhaps 20 battered metal desks were arranged in twin lines. Over the city desk hung a square, worn-looking wooden clock with four faces. Other desks were parked in two rooms on either side of the main floor. On desks throughout the room were piles of debris—stacks of copy paper, old newspapers, gluepots, rulers, books, spikes holding old copy and notes, reams of wire service copy and, buried under all this, the typewriters. The first deadline was 5 p.m., still hours away. The city room had the feel of a saloon in the early afternoon before the regulars showed. The aroma of stale cigars hung in the air. If anyone on the rewrite bank wanted to take a nap, now was the time.

I walked over to the city desk and introduced myself.

“Right on time,” Clendenin said. “Come on in.”

We went to his office, a nearby room enclosed by windows. There the hard-nosed interview I had expected turned out to be more a friendly chat. My work in Connecticut and degree from Columbia apparently were just what Clendenin had in mind for the few new hires that had been just approved for zoned editions the News planned to launch in Queens and Brooklyn. Clendenin figured that my work with school boards, zoning commissions, municipal politics and police was the kind of community reporting the News needed to do more of.

Clendenin, who had started at the News as a copy boy in Washington then rose to reporter before coming to New York, had been hired to replace an archetypal hard-boiled city editor with iron power over careers both in the newsroom and in city politics, and replace him with a new style of leadership. Clendenin, who had first worked in Queens and later covered organized labor, brought an entirely different attitude to the city editor’s job. A tall, rotund Irishman, Clendenin was congenial and well liked. His news judgment was precise and fair, and he treated reporters with respect.

A few months before my interview, Clendenin had been promot-

ed again to metropolitan editor, his challenge to help the paper transform itself so it could collect more local advertising. This required local stories for the zones, and reporters to produce them. This was where I came in.

My letter came in just a day after Clendenin began looking for somebody to cover Queens. “Your background looks like a fit,” Clendenin said. He then led a series of other editors in and out of the office so they could get a look at me. They raised no objections.

“Well, if you’re not lying and your background checks out, we might have a place for you,” Clendenin said. “The rules say you’ll be on probation for 90 days, but I figure if I hire you, you’ve got the job for 90 years.”

“This is going fast,” I said, my mind racing. Clendenin gave me a week to discuss the possibility with my wife; he said he would call me, more than likely with an offer. Before I jumped at going to work for 90 years in New York City, I owed her a piece of the decision. But with a baby to care for, she and I both knew that I needed to be employed.

Clendenin called earlier than I expected. I picked up a message from him that Sunday night, saying he wanted me to call him as soon as possible. I spent another sleepless night, this time from anticipation. Sun Oak and I had decided that if the News made me an offer, I had to grab it quickly. I took a cab to LaGuardia before dawn the next day and flew down to North Carolina in time for a previously scheduled interview with the editors of newspapers in Winston-Salem, who were polite but not sure this Yankee would do. It was nearly noon by the time I finished the interviews and had a chance to call the News.

“Where are you?” Clendenin said.

“Standing at a pay phone in the Greensboro airport.”

“Well, get your ass back here,” he said, laughing, “We want you to work for us.”

Chapter

2

Becoming A Sweeney

THE DAILY NEWS WAS LIKE NOTHING I'D EVER EXPERIENCED. I wouldn't say I was a rich kid, but I'd grown up in fancy neighborhoods and gone to boarding schools since age 14. But it wasn't all rosy. My family had fallen apart before I finished high school. By the time I got out of college I was a hard case about a lot of things. Among them, I'd told my father to cop a mope. I was determined to make it on my own.

Still, I was like a lot of post-World War II products of the baby boom: a bit prosperous growing up, and full of myself. Maybe I felt the world owed me something. As I finished my degree at Columbia, I fantasized that a soft job at some TV network awaited me, or that I'd be able to move in as a high-minded editorial writer at a prosperous newspaper.

Now, instead of comfort and security, what I had was a union job with the Daily News in Queens. I was part of neighborhood life, where people built and maintained complex alliances revolving around ancestry, school, parish and social habits. Such tribal loyalties I had known only from afar. I was about to join the pack of people just trying to do the best they could, like them a recent arrival without connections.

Sun Oak and I found an apartment in Queens, one block north of Hillside Avenue and three blocks east of the 179th Street stop on the E and F trains. With our daughter, Lee, and soon our son, Micah, we made our home in a six-story brick building shared by perhaps 150 other families on the outskirts of a section called Jamaica Estates. Many of our neighbors were the families of immigrants, or corporate transfers from companies based in Europe, Asia and Latin America. In the vest pocket park near our apartment, mothers gathered with their

pre-school children. Sun Oak told me a few of the other mothers she became friends with were German and Japanese. A few of the elderly women who sat in the sun in the park benches were refugees from Europe; some had concentration camps tattoos on their forearms.

By New York standards, the neighborhood along Wexford Terrace just east of Midland Parkway was very pleasant. Yet it still had city horrors. You took care walking outside at night. Even during the day, an occasional street punk would do a snatch-and-run on a woman carrying a purse. A man was murdered four blocks away in front of Immaculate Conception Cathedral one Saturday night when a mugging got out of hand. And somebody tried to break into our apartment as we slept early one morning, only to be scared off by a crashing Venetian blind. But as New York went at that time, this was ordinary life.

Our building was in just the kind of spot where the middle-income folks of New York lived, raising kids who either went to public school leading to Jamaica High or to parochial schools leading to Mary Louise Academy at Immaculate Conception or to Bishop Molloy High School in Kew Gardens, near the Queens County Criminal Courts Building, where the News assigned me in July 1974. I was satisfied to give it a shot.

In the courthouse I took over a tired gray metal desk in a room called “the press shack,” which was shared by reporters from the Daily News, Associated Press, Long Island Press, the New York Post and occasionally the New York Times, which would send a reporter in a three-piece suit from time to time. Mostly, though, the shack was dominated by the News, which had three reporters stationed there to the other news outfits’ one apiece. There we all worked stories given to us by our editors in Manhattan, or tips from the courthouse habitués such as cops, lawyers, prosecutors and judges, who happened in at all times of the day for conversation, coffee and cigarets. Many came in to call in a bet, using the pay phones on the wall.

Occasionally we would find one of these denizens snoozing on the couch in the room. At times a game of cards consumed the day, while a nip or two was taken on bottles and cans discreetly wrapped in brown paper bags. Our meals were takeout from the Pastrami King or the Sturgeon Deli across Queens Boulevard, or perhaps a visit to Nick’s, an Italian eatery and bar where the Borough Hall crowd down the

block would join up with the courthouse regulars beginning at mid-morning. It was a cozy world of insiders, guys who ran the local government and guys who threw folks in jail or tried to keep them out.

Within a few weeks I felt like part of the crew. One particular ritual of my new community was the habit of courthouse regulars to make the rounds, often daily, asking for “a pound for a basket of cheer.” I learned within hours of my arrival that that meant you should donate \$5 to a charity for a sick relative, wounded cop, ailing friend or some other courthouse regular’s family member. This was how the community looked after itself and established its boundaries. In the Queens Criminal Court House, newspaper reporters were as much a part of the operation as the court reporters taking down the judges’ words. By tossing in a “pound,” you earned the right to the loyalty of all the others in the community; they would make sure that as long as you did the right thing, no wrong was done to you. In my new world, the Daily News was more than just a newspaper. It was a way of life and had been for more than 50 years, a cultural phenomenon unique to New York and its tribal neighborhoods. I became so dependent on this world, so at home in its rhythms and so completely at ease in the regularity of its rules that I came to adopt this new Queens family as my own.

One evening that fall, I wrote in my journal how it was that I came to be in Queens and not, say, working for some insurance agency in Hartford or tire factory in Akron. I traced it back to events in 1958 when my father suffered what he believed was a career defeat. At age 48 he was passed over for the post as General Manager of General Motors’ New Departure Division in Bristol, Connecticut, and was forced to find alternate employment elsewhere in GM. He landed a manager’s post at Delco Products Division in Dayton, Ohio, where we would all move in the summer of 1959. Among my father’s business contacts was the midwestern advertising sales manager for Time Magazine, who lived in Hudson, Ohio, a small town between Akron and Cleveland. In Hudson was Western Reserve Academy, a first rate New England-style boys’ prep school founded in 1826, which caught my father’s fancy.

My father, a striver Irisher who strained at the confines of tone

New England, was obsessed with education. It was the ticket to respectability and prosperity. His father, a master mechanic for New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad, figured he'd been passed over dozens of times himself because he only had a high school education. He would ensure his own son had the education he would need to get the jobs and respectability they ensured. At 14, Dad was sent to Classon Military Academy in the Bronx, which would relocate to Oakdale, Long Island and be renamed LaSalle Military Academy. Dad later was graduated from Allegheny College, in Meadville, Pennsylvania, his own father's hometown, and also received an engineering degree from the University of Pennsylvania.

He graduated in the Depression and found steady work as a teacher. He received graduate degrees in education from Boston University before the World War put an end to such doings. He was by then employed as a professional in "vocational guidance" in labor relations at the New Departure ball bearing plant. Among his duties were to keep labor peace with the CIO and enable the plant to maintain its standing as the largest manufacturer in the world of bearings for war essentials from wheels to bomb sights. For such chores, Draft Board No. 1 in Hartford declared Dad's job essential to the war effort.

As he approached his 50th birthday, Dad was in Ohio and, among other things, obsessed that I should get an excellent education. I went to WRA in the fall of 1962 and by the time I was ready to graduate I had performed perfectly well as a member of the Class of '66, but proved to be an indifferent student, being consistently in the middle of the bottom half of my class.

Meanwhile, my father's social drinking had turned ugly. He became abusive. He became violent. My home become a kind of emotional torture chamber that I avoided as often as I could—in summer schools, vacation trips, camps, visits to relatives. Whatever I could manage. By April 1966, as graduation loomed, I had been turned down by my college choices. I discussed my fate with a guidance counselor, who found out my father had gone to Boston U., which had a dean of admissions my counselor knew well. A day later, on the strength of a phone call, I was enrolled in the freshman class of Boston U.'s College of Business Administration, owing to the fact that the Liberal Arts College was already filled up. At Boston U., I would leave the

Business School behind after my freshman year and migrate my courses and ambitions to the university's College of Liberal Arts, whose curriculum to which I was more suited and for which I had been trained to go all along.

While attending Boston U. between 1966-70, my academic aptitudes were adequate but indifferent. I cast around and found taking photos a handy way to strike an inner pose, create an identity, relate to the world in what I fancied was an artful and meaningful way; I could even earn some money for beer and smokes. Besides in the emerging media culture, being a photographer was cool. My younger brother, Bill, had taken to cameras first at WRA. I learned about photography from him first in the summer of 1967 in Woodstock, New York, where I joined him as a apprentice at the Woodstock Summer Playhouse, and later when he came to live with me in Boston in the summer of 1968. That summer, I became more serious with photography and worked at Jordan Marsh's warehouse to earn the money required to purchase photo equipment and build a darkroom in my apartment. I embarked on a low-energy drive to sell news photos to student newspapers and penny throw-aways. Eventually I would take tens of thousands of pictures, mostly of Sixties college and city street life, develop and print them on my own; only a few of which would survive.

At the time, among my college pals was a guy whose older brother worked as a reporter at the New Haven Register. In the summer of 1969, because of my parents' divorce, matters became arranged in such a way that I found myself without regular funds or a home to go to where I could sleep through the night. Seeking lodgings and society where I could find it, I aimed at the home of my college friend in Madison, Connecticut, a shoreline community on Long Island Sound, where coincidentally I had spent childhood summers at my family's then beach home, which by 1969 had been consumed some time before by my parents' combat. Being in such climes was a bittersweet brew of loss, envy, melancholy and warm memories. Looking back now from this vantage, it was there I found a writer's muse.

In talking with my friend's brother about photography and journalism, I got it in mind I could be a reporter. By chance, the Hartford Courant was looking for a stringer to cover Clinton, a town down the road, and I obtained the post by lying when the chief of the Old

Saybrook bureau asked if I could write a news article. I was quickly found out, but my persistence (and kind hearts and patient instruction of the guys in the Bureau) paid off. It was in the summer of 1969 that my writing spirit was nurtured along, coached on a newspaper style. For two months, I bunked on the couch in my friend's apartment, located over a five-and-dime soda shop called "The Old School House" in Madison. It was here I learned to sit alone in the quiet in front of a typewriter and try to make sense of life. Two months later I had acquitted myself well enough with the newspaper to cover municipal events reliably, and had the ambition and whitt's to have crafted my own legwork into a narrative a rewriterman on the Hartford Courant Sunday Magazine wove together into a provocative piece on the need to conserve the shoreline's wetlands. The story was printed in as a full-blown magazine article with my byline at summer's end. In addition to the magazine piece, I crafted up some wildly overwrought autobiographical fiction that proved to be rookie-league material. But it was a start.

Also, my own brother, Bill, himself now graduated from WRA, was, like I, cast adrift that summer without a suitable place to go before he entered NYU in the fall. I believe he stayed in Cleveland at his girl friend's house, but maybe he just moved early to New York to live with our sister, Tara, who by that time had moved to Manhattan to finish her undergraduate years at the New School in Greenwich Village, after quitting Denison in Ohio. It was that year-1969-that my brother, sister and I became cast on our own, taking our own paths and separate survival gear along as we could find it. We lost family coherence.

My journalistic gymnastics encouraged me through my senior year at Boston U. to believe that I might try journalism upon graduation. But this was 1970 and the Vietnam War was on. As school ended, there was only one path ahead of me: be drafted into the U.S. Army. After I graduated in June 1970, I responded to my draft induction notice, believing I was bound for service in the Army. I dreaded the prospect and had worried about this turn of events for years. But I believed I had no choice. Yet, as fate would have it, I learned during my draft pre-induction physical in New Haven that the U.S. Army would pass me up owing to an obscure ailment at the base of my butt-bone called "jeep tail." Such a view would be confirmed by Draft Board No. 1 in Hartford weeks later, when my hind-end's version of

flat feet rendered the declaration that I was physically unfit except in the case of a national emergency. It was only later that I suspected that the local Draft Board, by then unconvinced about the value of the war, used every excuse it could to grant deferments.

With this convenient and most happy news, I returned to the shoreline where the Hartford Courant told me they had nothing. Without missing a beat, I drove to the Register's office in New Haven looking for my old friend. As it happened, a metro editor was looking to hire someone to cover Guilford and I was hired.

Now employed and with my draft status resolved, I wrote the girl I had fallen for the previous fall, Sun Oak, but who I believed I could not pursue. Sun Oak had come to America at age 14 from South Korea in 1962 to join her mother who married an Irish guy from Salem, Massachusetts. By the time we met in 1969, Sun Oak had graduated from high school and had to quit college after two years because she could no longer afford tuition. Sun Oak, articulate and, well, beautiful, found work as an airline flight attendant. We met in Boston while she was in training. We had let our budding relationship drift in part due to my own reluctance to make any commitments because of my draft status, and also because Sun Oak had relocated to Miami with her new airline job. By the summer of 1970, Sun Oak was living in New York and working for TWA on flights to Europe. After we resumed seeing each other, our path became clear quickly. We married in April 1971 in Guilford, where I remained employed as a reporter covering town news for three years. Sun Oak found employment nearby, first in the Griswold's department store and later a travel agency in Madison. We lived a frugal life, intent on saving for improvements that could lead to children and a home.

I had successfully told my father to leave us alone, but his voice—get an education—echoed in my mind nonetheless. After considering opportunities, I focused on Columbia Journalism School and was admitted in 1973. Sun Oak, who was then pregnant, and I loaded our belongings into a U-Haul truck and drove to New York where we moved into Columbia housing on West 119th St. and Morningside Drive. Now a year later, we were in Queens to begin anew.

The Daily News, I learned, would be more than my employer. It was a way of life. It was founded on June 26, 1919, by Capt. Joseph Medill Patterson, with the financial help and blessing of his cousin, Col. Robert Rutherford (Bert) McCormick, boss of the Chicago Tribune. Patterson and McCormick were grandsons of Joseph Medill, who came to Chicago newspaper publishing after a stints in law and turned the failing Tribune into a thriving newspaper whose growth and prosperity matched that of Chicago. Robert Rutherford McCormick, the son of Medill's daughter Katherine, went to work for the Tribune and stayed. Joseph Medill Patterson, son of his other daughter, Elinor, had more wanderlust.

Joe Patterson, a son of privilege, was educated at Groton and Yale, dropping out for a while to be a Hearst correspondent in China during the Boxer Rebellion, then returning to graduate in 1901. Over the next decade, he worked as a reporter for the Tribune, served in the Illinois House of Representatives, was a radical reformer in Chicago, became a Socialist and in 1908 campaign manager of Socialist Party presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs, and later wrote plays, novels and socialist tracts.

By 1912, he had fallen away from the Socialists and was soon back working as a correspondent for the family paper, which by that time was operated by his cousin Bert, the Tribune's boss from 1911 to 1955.

McCormick enlisted Patterson to cover the Mexican revolution in 1914, and the following year sent him to Europe to cover the war between France, England, Belgium and Germany. Upon his return Patterson joined the Illinois National Guard. By the time the United States got into the war in 1917, he had been promoted to captain, and he served for 13 months overseas. Hence the moniker "Captain Jack," which he took with him to his grave in 1946.

Patterson came home from overseas in January 1919 and, wishing to strike out on his own, pooled some capital with McCormick and established his own paper in New York City, modeled after the London Daily Mirror, a picture tabloid that the two men had grown fond of during the war. The name tabloid came from the "tablet" style of the newspaper. Rather than the full broadsheet style of the regular newspaper, the tabloid could be easily folded and was thus more convenient in urban settings, such as saloons, buses, trams and subways.

Patterson's timing was perfect. After World War I, New York became a mecca for the nation's restless. More than 1.6 million soldiers had passed through New York's harbor on the way to Europe, and they were seen off by hundreds of thousands of family members. The city and its images had become an integral part of the war and its mythology, with innocent departures and knowing returns, hopes and despair, fear and release, celebrations and sadness. For others, the city, with its extremes of wealth and poverty, came to mirror the war itself, which had so shaken their faith. At war's end artists, writers, musicians and the restless headed for New York and the liberation they craved from the Old World and its boring values. The Jazz Age was born.

Into this urban stew were poured other volatile ingredients: the socialist ideals of European intellectuals, trade unionism, Freudian analysis, sexual license and feminism, rampant capitalism and speculation on Wall Street, bootleg liquor, and the growth of organized gangs with their secretive tribal warfare.

In the 1920s, Americans were learning how to mass-market pop culture, ideas and styles with abandon, a social transformation that would also shape 20th century journalism. Political commentator Walter Lippmann wrote of this new process in his landmark 1922 study called *Public Opinion*. Lippmann coined a new word—stereotype—as an oversimplified pattern of thought that helped people find meaning in the world and satisfied their needs to define their preferences, desires, fears, wants and prejudices. Lippmann was particularly interested in how stereotyping applied to political discourse and how people in a democracy define political parties and candidates. Stereotyping, Lippmann argued, was how they differentiated what they liked from what they didn't, which ideas they found appealing and which ideas they rejected. The following year, Lippmann's book was followed by *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, by Edward L. Bernays, which described how to create public opinion, generate brand identity and use celebrities to tell a story or sell a product. Thus began the modern practice of public relations.

As citizens absorbed fads, responded to fashions and never seemed to tire of publicity, radio arrived and national magazines mushroomed. A national media consciousness was developing, a sort

of collective mentality dictated by popular magazines, tabloid newspapers and radio. Publicity agents became part of the popular cultural landscape.

The celebrity, this new creature, was nurtured by tabloids such as the News and later popularized in films and on radio and television. Celebrities came from the worlds of sports, entertainment and society; they were daredevils, cops and gangsters. They were the great actors in the community's collective story, and tabloids such as the News were their forums. A new American mythology was being manufactured and consumed every day. In sports, there was an endless stream of baseball heroes, boxers, golfers, football players, jockeys and horses. In the world of entertainment, there were radio and movie stars. The society pages were filled with the tales of parties, debauchery, divorce and scandal among the rich.

Of particular fascination were the new personalities from the world of crime who came to dominate prohibition and bootlegging. As with any good melodrama, all's well that ends well. At the Daily News, there was no confusion about the good guys and the bad guys, but the paper spent truckloads of printers' ink in telling their stories. Bad guys came to suitably gruesome ends, day after day after day, but along the way they were a popular avenue for a morality play and gave readers a chance to be entertained while good triumphed over evil.

The News, in its early days, was just one of 17 daily papers in New York writing in English about this world. The paper became a phenomenon, developing a style and message unique in American journalism and intensely popular with its readers. The creators of the News viewed Manhattan and its polite society, the world of literature and the arts, the Jazz Age showoffs, the Prohibition-era thugs and habitués of speak-easies, and the endless variety of rootless crazies trying to throw off the effects of the Great War and have a good time doing so as simply grist for the newspaper mill. Every deed and every person was a simply a story waiting to be written, needing only a dramatic picture to illustrate it. These stories were for the pleasure, illumination or instruction of people whose daily existence was far removed from the foolery of the time and on whom the editors of the Daily News had their eyes firmly fixed.

By 1919 the city had a population of some 5.8 million, of whom

about 2.5 million were employed right in New York City. New York had the most important harbor on the continent and was the nation's largest manufacturing center, with more factory jobs in the city than in Philadelphia and Chicago combined. The largest employer was the apparel industry, turning out half the clothing worn in the nation. Other major industries included printing and publishing, food, tobacco, millinery and lace goods, bread and bakery products, drugs, chemicals, leather goods and jewelry.

The advertising department of the News called New York City's average workaday family "the Sweeneys." Quite simply, the Sweeneys did the work. They were the "whole people," without privilege and without pretense. They lived in the neighborhoods, built the buildings, worked in a nearby factory or for some municipal service, shopped in local stores, visited family members down the block on Sunday and followed the elaborate social rituals of neighborhood life in the most ethnically diverse city in North America.

In the days before spot news and entertainment on radio and television, the News gave the Sweeneys what they could get nowhere else at a price of a nickel: information, amusement, distraction and something to do before work in the morning and between dinner and bedtime at night. The paper gave its readers something else besides: rather than an anonymous population in the background, or some mass of people requiring reform, or a target of derision as in so much popular fiction and contemporary culture, the Sweeneys were, as far as the News was concerned, objects of respect. The Sweeneys of the city knew it and in the code of ethnic New York neighborhoods repaid the Daily News with an intense, almost tribal loyalty well beyond what is normally enjoyed by a newspaper.

The readers identified with the world the News portrayed. The big shots would get their comeuppance in the end. Money didn't always mean happiness; in fact, most of those who got it didn't deserve it and blew their chances anyway. Then again, the innocent, hard-working person sometimes took a hard fall, too, in accidents, fires, from corruption in their officials and from crimes of all description. But that's the way it was: Life was unfair and you had to stick it out and find your happiness where you could, in your family, in your faith, in your work and in your sports.

This vision was captured by Patterson in the newspaper's first editorial on June 26, 1919: "this newspaper always will be fearless and independent...it will have no entangling alliance with any class whatever—for class feeling is always antagonistic to the interest of the whole people. "

The Daily News brought with it an attitude. There was a gritty feel to the stories and a raw honesty to the writing that gave readers a sense of shared sensibility, as though newspaper and reader had a common street knowledge: This is how the world works. You, the reader, and the Daily News understand that, and we're giving every event and person a fair shot, but we're calling them like we see them. We will speak in a shorthand English and with terms we both understand: posh, swank, gangster, mob, politicians, bigwigs. We'll toss around such knowing language because that's how we see the world.

Such sensibilities would become the stuff of pop myth in tough-guy films of the '30s and '40s by Jimmy Cagney and Humphrey Bogart, and in the crime fiction of pulp detective magazines such as *Black Mask* and the stories of Dashiell Hammett. What these storytellers did was accurately reflect the codes of New York's neighborhood streets.

Within four months of its founding, the Daily News had a circulation of 200,000. Within ten years, the circulation had grown to 1.2 million for the daily edition, 1.6 million for the Sunday edition. The paper's success meant that change came quickly. Its first home was in the Evening Mail building at 25 City Hall Place, but within two years it was forced to move to a converted loft building at 25 Park Place, where it operated for nearly a decade until more permanent quarters could be established.

By the late 1920s, with the construction of the 56-story Chanin building at 42nd Street and Lexington Avenue, and the 77-story Chrysler Building at 42nd and 3rd, midtown Manhattan was becoming as vital as downtown and a suitable spot for the News to set up a new home. In 1930, Patterson moved the paper into its new headquarters at 220 East 42nd Street, between 2nd and 3rd. The building was magnificent. The lobby was four stories high and circular in shape, with panels of black glass. In its center was a globe, 17 feet in diameter that turned slowly in a well of illuminated concentric steps. The terrazzo

floor was inlaid with bronze compass points showing the mileage from New York to other cities of the world. Outside, the face of the building was dominated by a massive marble facade that included eight carved panels, with the News etched at the top and the bottom showing working men and women with the legend “He Made So Many Of Them,” which came from a quote attributed to Abraham Lincoln’s “The Lord must have loved the common people—he made so many of them.”

To the outsider, the News formula for its coverage was wine, women and wampum. Around the newsroom, the favored description was crime, cunt and corruption: titillating stuff that got the blood coursing, stories in which you read about the forbidden and the sinful. The News was written to please “the truck driver in everyone,” wrote the *New Yorker* magazine in 1938, “purveying to the masses the forbidden thrills enjoyed by the few.” As one Madison Avenue advertising executive put it: You go to the Times for class, the News for mass.

By 1939, 20 years after its founding, the daily circulation of the News was 1.8 million, Sunday’s 3.3 million. The newspaper’s peak year was 1947, a year after Patterson’s death, when the circulation was nearly 4 million a day. In the years following, circulation declined steadily, as with all newspapers. But when I signed up in 1974, it was still more than 2 million a day and about 3 million on Sunday. The News was the most widely read daily newspaper in the United States.

The Sweeneys loved the paper and, in its embrace, so did I. After all, I had become a Sweeney, too.

Chapter

3

In Queens

My FIRST DAY OF WORK ON THE QUEENS DESK was a Sunday in the city room at 42nd Street. There I met John Baird, born Catholic in Ulster's Belfast and raised in Queens. He had spent World War II working his way across the Pacific, island by island, as a sergeant in the Marine Corps. His teeth protruded somewhat, which made his chin seem to recede. Braces could have fixed such a minor cosmetic problem had his family been able to afford such extravagances when he was younger. He was just a bit taller than I and, though he had a belly, you didn't have to stretch your imagination much to see him looking on the lanky side in the baseball uniform I heard he'd once worn.

He called me "bunky" or "bunky hoople," and when he gave me an assignment, he would say something three times in a slight brogue, as in "now, now, now" or "hurry, hurry, hurry."

He was a tough guy who could bark orders at drunks and curse a cop on deadline. He was not one to give way to the emotions of the moment. One Sunday I came back to the office after spending several hours at Engine Company 285 in Ozone Park with the bereaving friends and fellow firefighters of three who had been killed in an early morning blaze in Richmond Hill.

The display of pain over the dead firefighters had been almost too much for me to bear. At one point, Ed Kehoe, an oil burner repairman and a pal of one of the dead firemen, came in the firehouse. He wore a stocking cap and well-used heavy overalls. His red face was flushed with pain. "Is it true," he asked several of the firemen, "is Tommy Earl dead?" When told it was, he burst into tears.

I explained this scene to Baird and told him how, a few moments later, another fireman became enraged that I was there witnessing such

pain; he had screamed that I was a vulture seeking to live off Tommy Earl's death. Perhaps my demeanor betrayed to Baird that I might have agreed with the distraught fireman. Baird said, "Aw, tell that Joe to stuff it. He's got his fat pension because of us telling stories."

Baird could drive people nuts with his single-mindedness. He was the kind of Irishman that folks sensitive to ethnic nuances called "a donkey." This meant that once such a person got a notion in his head it was there forever, even though it might have taken a while to get there. A donkey Irish, though, always had a good heart and meant well, though people tended to shake their heads in bewilderment after a conversation with one. Baird was loyal and hard working and from the first day subtle in ways not recognized in street stereotypes.

"I expect you to work hard and to do as I say," he said at the end of my first day, after I turned in some passable copy about a veteran being reunited with his Marine buddies at the St. Albans VA Hospital. "If you see things you don't understand, be patient and just ask questions. When you eventually find out I don't have all the truth at my fingertips, you will give me the slack not to hold my mistakes against me when I make them now and then, which I will. Fair enough?"

Baird became a harsh task master, but unfailingly fair and honest. His word was iron and his only obvious eccentricity was to insist on the complete ban on whistling in the newsroom. For the most part, my work for Baird was at the end of a long umbilical cord. He stayed in the city room in Manhattan as chief of the Queens desk, while I worked out of various locations in Queens along with five other News reporters. Aside from handling all the spot news from Queens, Baird also negotiated with other borough editors about staffing, story placement and which local stories would go to the cityside edition. Most of Baird's news was confined to the zoned edition in Queens and Brooklyn, but the city editor sometimes took a borough story and used it for all editions. Though an outsider might imagine all reporters want their stories to run in as many editions as possible, the facts of news were that plenty of the borough stories were main news anyway. After all, in 1974, when I joined the paper, the News circulation was evenly divided by the East River. One million readers lived in Brooklyn, Queens and Long Island, while one million lived in Manhattan, Bronx, Westchester and New Jersey.

The reporter from the News who broke me in was named Harry Danyluk. Harry was a legman, the kind of reporter who did not actually write the stories himself, but who gathered facts and called them into a rewriter in the Manhattan office. Harry's view of the news business was very basic. He got the information he had to; the issues of the First Amendment or the public's right to know were for others to worry about. All Harry cared about was the story.

On one of my first assignments, I got bogged down trying to find out why a woman wasn't getting her Social Security check. She was a deserving widow and had called the News for help. In tracking down her story, I got the run around in the Social Services bureaucracy and expressed frustration that I couldn't get a bureaucrat to send the woman her check.

"Hey," Harry said, impatient with me. "Forget that. You're not her welfare agent. You write the story. Once it's printed, let them worry about fixing it."

Another guy who broke me in was a photographer about to retire named Tom Gallagher. Gallagher lived in Richmond Hill, Queens and drove what we called a "radio car" in Queens and waited for assignments via the radio. I first met him under the No. 7 elevated tracks near Shea Stadium where he was assigned to pick me up. I had been anxious about finding him; I was told not to worry. Sure enough, Gallagher came right over to me within a few moments of me hitting the sidewalk.

"How you recognize me?" I asked.

"Easy," he said, "all I had to look for was an eager face."

As a junior man in the borough, I was content to get assigned any story. However Baird had to fill his zoned pages, even as his best stories were being taken for other editions. One of Baird's most troublesome chores was to produce feature stories for the Queens Sunday section, which wrapped 90 pages of classified and display ads for Alexander's, Macy's, A&S, Korvette's and other department stores. Writing these stories was a task that the older shack reporters simply would not do. As one reporter explained, "Hey, what are you going to do? You're working on some piece of shit for Sunday and in comes the big one, and what have you got? Ungotz!"

This forced the suburban editors to look for fresh talent whose notions weren't so grand, or to rely on lightly warmed-over press release

material from the schools, hospitals and various public and private agencies that covet such coverage. In me, Baird had a new dog who'd hunt. Clendenin wanted more feature writing. How about we break the new kid in doing stories about the history of the neighborhoods, Baird suggested. Being the junior guy in the shack, I was getting the dregs with spot news anyway, so I began looking at old news clips and historical accounts in the Queens public library in Jamaica and producing 2,000-word stories about the borough's complex galaxy of neighborhoods.

In this way I learned the lessons of Queens, which at root is a story about the dignity of the overlooked.

Baird had me write, for instance, about the old World's Fair Park at Flushing Meadows. The park had been renamed to include the neighborhood of Corona, as a political gesture to the African Americans and Hispanics from across the way. But this label changed nothing. The under funded and decaying park facilities had once been visited by millions during two Worlds Fairs conducted there in 1939 and 1964 amid promises of future economic benefits for the neighborhoods. When, after the shows were over, the benefits failed to flow as promised and the parks were left to decay, people in the neighborhoods told me of their frustrations at lies told and dreams broken by remote municipal power.

In contrast, being isolated suited the residents of Broad Channel, a small landmass in the middle of Jamaica Bay, just fine. I found them to have strict codes as to who could visit their neighborhood and for how long. Outsiders were routinely questioned about why they are there and how long they planned to stay. Being a neighborhood with a fast road going down its center leading to John F. Kennedy Airport, and with barely paved side streets leading to dozens of loading points from Jamaica Bay, Broad Channel people kept a watchful eye on all movements, keeping their backs covered and their eyes alert to danger.

Farther to the north and east, long-forgotten boosters of eastern Queens had once tried to attract the attention and money of John Jacob Astor by naming a section of the county after him, to no avail. Astoria, Queens, is known less for his namesake than as home to more Greeks than reside in Athens.

Bayside was a community with less noble connections. Once a

home to actors and sportsmen such as boxer Gentleman Jim Corbett, it had been considered as a potential site for a movie studio. But the filmmakers fled Thomas Edison's patent lawyers for the more predictable sun of California, and Bayside in time became the prototypical neighborhood of Archie Bunker, his wife, the Dingbat, his daughter, Gloria, and her husband, the Meathead, which everyone from Queens knew was an undeserving smear from Hollywood that some ingrates had concocted.

My map of Queens was dotted with stars and stains. I discovered Steinway, founded as a company town by a German immigrant of the same name, where beautiful row houses still stood that had been put up for craftsmen to live in while they built his pianos, and College Point, on the shore of Long Island Sound, which was a smuggling point for slaves and bootleg whiskey.

Many of these neighborhoods were just like small towns—until progress tore right through them. In Whitestone, progress was the construction of the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge. As roads carried commerce and people around the great metropolis, they also cleaved neighborhood patterns, showing the residents that remote powers talk big but can usually screw things up pretty good and often never even know it.

In Forest Hills, some middle-class folks learned this when housing experts and social engineers at City Hall in Manhattan decided in 1971 to build high-rise, low-income housing in the middle of low-rise, middle-income Forest Hills without asking anybody in the neighborhood about it. The resulting upheaval was an ugly display of bitterness, partly motivated by racism but mostly just by frustration directed at the distant and arrogant powers in Manhattan—"the City," as it was called in Queens.

A Queens lawyer named Mario Cuomo, who taught at St. John's Law School down Union Turnpike, helped fashion a compromise for the Forest Hills housing project, which Baird had me write about in November 1974. Cuomo was available and a good quote, and his obvious skill in public debate made this a seductive moment for him. He later ran for mayor and lost, ran for lieutenant governor and won, ran for governor and won and opted not to run for president in 1988. By the time the first low-income tenants moved into Forest Hills in 1975, the fact was noted in the News only because Baird had me do a story

for the Queens Sunday section.

Another politician who was part of this courthouse world was Geraldine Ferraro, an assistant district attorney on the staff of her cousin, Nicky Ferraro, the Queens DA. She was a bright, attractive young prosecutor who was waiting her turn in the family business of politics, which she got when she won a seat in Congress, caught the eye of Speaker Tip O'Neill and ran for vice president 10 years later.

Donald Manes, borough president and central to power distribution throughout the county, was another story to which I was a witness. Manes was distant from the local reporters, confining his News contacts to the City Hall reporters. However, I had lunch with him one time and he was a genial companion. More than a decade later Manes got caught taking bribes. He plunged a knife into his heart in the kitchen at his Jamaica Estates home while his teenage daughter watched.

Queens became my center. In the "outer borough" I understood that the native's sense of separation could be worn as a badge of honor. I became acutely aware of the world's arbitrary forces, and how you could live life in the certain knowledge that others would likely be the ones destined to possess and use power. On reflection, perhaps the fall in my own family's prospects due to my father's circumstances reinforced this sense of arbitrary loss. Such wisdom matched perfectly the renewed growth of my own ethnic identity. The Irish after all were a people scattered to populate other countries rather than control the destiny of their own. And in Queens a sense of my own Irishness grew. The historical pieces I wrote about Queens' neighborhoods and my experiences in the courthouse made me view my own history in a different light than the casual ethnic identity I had grown up with.

It happened that at the time I was becoming identified with the Irish in Queens, a cousin sent me a letter our great-grandfather, James Collins, had written in 1919 about how he came to the United States with his father, twin brothers and sister from Kilrush in County Clare. They had landed at Manhattan's South Street Seaport in April 1863, just weeks before the murderous Draft Riots. James and his bride, Mary Langan, who had been married at St. Bridgit's on Duane Street in Manhattan, escaped the chaos of the city, moving across the Hudson to Jersey City. There the Collins men found work in the Erie Railroad yards as blacksmiths.

I had known the broadest outline of this story growing up. Now, as I established a foothold in Queens, it had renewed meaning. I welcomed the greetings of Sgt. Joe Collins of the Queens DA's squad, who called me a cousin. When he left the shack, he'd repeat the salutation: "Well, see ya! Don't leave the parish."

I also took to reading as much as I could about Irish history, my own and others'. One of my first interests as a reporter was Thomas O'Connell, a Brooklyn patrolman who possessed the name of my grandmother's father and might well have descended from my great-grandfather's first marriage, told me a compelling account about how City Hall bureaucrats did not know what it meant to ride a shift of duty in East New York. I turned his story into a well-received feature article that, in an era of budget cuts, demonstrated how cops worked hard for their overtime pay.

An insurance investigator named Dan Collins, who enjoyed the camaraderie of the press shack, took special time one day to give me a copy of a paperback book entitled *Michael Collins, Ireland's Patriot*, an unashamedly biased account of Michael Collins' successful quest as a leader of the IRA to establish the Irish Free State in 1919, only to be murdered in the Irish Civil War that followed. From this book and many others, I learned the cruel details of Irish history, and also the fact that this patriot and I shared lineage in the O'Coileain clan.

Among my teachers was writer Jimmy Breslin who had taken a break from writing a weekly column to finish a few books, out of his Forest Hills home. A friend of Breslin's came to the courthouse in 1975 to publicize her efforts to find a friend who was imprisoned in Long Kesh in Northern Ireland. His name was Oliver Kelly, a 24-year-old lawyer. He had helped Breslin earlier when he was writing his book *World Without End, Amen*. The story of Kelly's imprisonment without trial as an IRA sympathizer made great melodrama. One of his champions was a local congressman, Lester Wolf, who was happy to get notice in the paper for his efforts to get the British to reform their Ulster policies.

I was able to weave my historical education into the features that Baird needed to feed the presses. One in particular struck the nostalgic chord that he so prized. A Manhattan artist named Bernard Borok of East 28th Street had gotten me interested in his quest to save an ancient

building in Long Island City, the industrial district on Queens' western shore across from Manhattan. Our joint investigation led to a story about the First Ward School, of Hunters Point. Truly a Queens landmark, it had once been known as Paddy Gleason's Folly.

Patrick Gleason was mayor of Long Island City from 1886 to 1892 and from 1895 until 1899, when the city lost its municipal independence and was incorporated into New York City. Gleason was a showman who favored taking an ax to public structures that displeased him; he earned the moniker "Battle Ax" Gleason. Among his targets were the powers outside his jurisdiction—the banks, corporations, railroads, such as the Long Island Railroad, and John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company. Gleason was a colorful advocate. A giant Irishman with a large mustache, he kissed babies and delivered coal and turkeys to the armies of Irish in Long Island City's tenements. His constituents loved him, and he loved them, for their favor allowed him to build "his" school beginning in 1889 and completed three years later at a cost of \$300,000, which would be \$30 million in today's money.

The project created a scandal, which delayed the building's opening until 1905. Its 50,000 square feet provided room for 56 classrooms for 2,000 students, who also received playground space of 20,000 square feet, unheard-of luxury for the children of poor immigrants. Throughout, Gleason employed all his friends and relatives and lived in a colorful style that his impoverished constituents approved as befitting such a fine public servant who articulated their views so well. Gleason's legacy taught me that just because a political figure may waste the people's treasure, he could also fulfill other aspirations for his constituents. Paddy was a showman whose audience loved him.

One assignment in Queens led to another, but I began to run out of easy Sunday feature material. At about that time, happily, the Queens desk had a change in personnel. Baird had a new deputy editor who encouraged us to write opinion columns for the Sunday section, and I jumped at the opportunity. In the final months of 1975 and in early 1976, I produced column after moralistic column—unashamed attacks on city administrators downtown, essays of support for small Queens businesses, tirades against too-high taxes and wasteful government, sympathetic serenades to ignored neighbor-

hoods, and smeared people who had the power but who ignored those who didn't.

I wrote regularly, for instance, on the subject of illegal aliens. There were tens of thousands of such undocumented workers in Queens. I first learned this a few weeks into my job when I did a feature for the Sunday section demonstrating that the Immigration and Naturalization Services was ill-equipped, poorly funded and understaffed to stem this wave of arrivals.

The editor who gave me the assignment directed me to a story he had done 10 years before, estimating the number of illegals to be 100,000 in New York City alone.

"Don't let that figure bother you," he said. "You can make up your own number. Nobody really knows what it is, but whatever you pick it will be lower than the reality, no sweat. You'll see."

I was surprised to hear such a lack of respect for precision from the editor. However, I would learn that, as troubling as it sounded, he was right. Politicians, bureaucrats, social scientists, academics and advocates of this program or that made up figures all the time, which were routinely printed in stories and repeated later as facts.

But the number of illegals was the least of the problem. They were invisible on the books but not on the streets. They came from everywhere. About a third of them originated south of the Rio Grande, others in Poland, Greece, Italy, Eastern Europe, Israel and the Middle East, Asia and, to my surprise, Ireland. To hear government officials, labor unions and other "haves" argue, the undocumented workers were like a plague of locusts knawing at the harvest. This was bunk, I discovered through my reporting. The immigrants worked hard, lived honestly and paid taxes on lousy wages, but they were afraid to accept public services because they might be thrown back to their homelands, which many dreaded. They numbered in the tens of thousands in Queens alone.

In late 1974, in the weeks following my first story, politicians in Elmhurst, Newtown and Corona set up a task force on the subject of undocumented immigrants and held community meetings. Residents' concerns were a complex of racism, fear and genuine human concern. At community meetings, they spoke out about exploitation of the immigrants, competition from the sweatshop labor they could provide,

and the cost of public services they used. In January 1975, Rep. Mario Biaggi of the Bronx, ever eager to make points with Italian, Greek and Irish ethnic groups, attacked the INS for its “police state” tactics in rounding up suspected aliens in Astoria. The raid was well publicized and staged, I suspected, to build a case for more government money. In July, the citizens’ task force asked for more federal help in dealing with the issue. At this point, other politicians chimed in, calling for public hearings. The INS said the illegals were hurting the city. Others called for more city and state laws to demand proof of citizenship for schooling, to get welfare benefits, rent an apartment or receive medical help at a clinic. The rhetoric escalated: The nation’s security was at risk. The illegals were stealing from hard-working Americans. They were playing Americans for suckers!

One of the relatively few public figures who smelled the garbage in these arguments was the Bishop Bevilacqua of Brooklyn, who called for an amnesty to let the illegals here now stay unmolested. My favorite column, written in February 1976, came to his defense. In it, I wrote about how my great-grandfather had come to New York in 1863 to find opportunity, just like most of us—and the modern illegals. It was the illegals that needed defending, I wrote. They were exploited as workers and discriminated against as second-class citizens despite their considerable productivity. In this nation of immigrants, what was needed was to do what the bishop advocated: declare an amnesty and start over. More than a decade later, that’s what Congress did.

But exploring pockets of Queens and investigating the problems of illegal immigrants, as much as they taught me, were not what I was striving for in my new job on a major urban daily. Fortunately, in between these early assignments I was able to grab my share of harder news. My first story to appear throughout the city was one of crime, bureaucracy and inattention, a formula familiar to Queens.

Nobody else was in the press shack one day in early July 1974 when I took the call from Susan Centrone, of Jackson Heights. She was in tears about her husband, Anthony. The 29-year old former Marine, who served in Vietnam from 1966 to ’69, had been out of work for weeks. Tony drove a bread truck for a living, but since May 14 he and his wife had been living a nightmare. Late that night they

had stopped at a red light at the intersection of Northern Boulevard and 91st Street when they saw a man later identified as dentist Eugene Zucker running from a man wielding two knives. Tony got out of the car, locked the doors to protect his wife and ran after the mugger to distract him. The mugger turned on Tony, and the two men chased each other around the car. Susan screamed as the mugger crashed his fist and knife into the windshield, shattering the glass.

In the meantime, the dentist escaped and called for help, leaving Tony to fend for himself until the police arrived. To draw the mugger away from his car, Tony took off on foot; the mugger gave chase. Finally, Tony turned on the guy and they went at each other. Tony was stabbed three times but was able to keep the mugger on the ground long enough for the police to come and grab him.

Tony was taken to Elmhurst Hospital, where he stayed for five days. His injuries would prevent him from driving the bakery truck. His wife explained to me that the money was going to run out soon, forcing her husband to go back to work even though his pain continued and threatened his health. “We’ve got two bank loans we need to pay, and I don’t know what to do,” she said. “Somebody told me about the Good Samaritan law, and how if you help out like Tony did you can get some help. But I called the city controller’s office and they said it could take a year to get the money. I don’t know what to do.”

Right there, I had all I needed, a decent news angle.

I checked it out. On July 4, the Daily News ran the story on page five under the headline: “Samaritan Needs One Now—City Aid Is Delayed by Red Tape.” The article revealed that in the nine years since the law’s passage in 1965, its administration was a joke: Of the 71 applications made for assistance, the average wait for paper pushing was 18 months. Some had taken up to three years. Rather than helping Good Samaritans, the program added to their trauma. A News reporter from police headquarters did a couple of other pieces about the Good Samaritan law to follow up. City Controller Harrison J. Goldin blamed the law and called for reform. Because of the publicity surrounding Tony Centrone by now, Goldin called a hearing that week to pursue changes. The red tape was accelerated, and Tony got a check for \$2,150 on Aug. 15, three months after his courageous actions, in a ceremony at City Hall.

Not only that, but after the ceremony he was invited to Riccardo's Restaurant in Long Island City, where five Queens Lions Club chapters together gave him \$250. I attended the celebration in Long Island City. Tony told the group: "Today has been an exciting day for me. I've had my faith in people restored. People do care." On Aug. 17, the Daily News ran an editorial patting itself and me on the back for exposing the neglect of Good Samaritans.

The Centrone story had it all, from the beginning to the middle right through to the end. Now I prayed particularly hard for my first Page 1 story. My prayers were answered Sunday, Sept. 29, 1974, when I found on arriving at work a phone message telling me to check with the Queens detectives. A guy from the district attorney's squad came down to see me and said I should go to the New York Police Department's Queens detectives' headquarters in Forest Hills, where I would hear about a party thrown the night before. A squad of Queens' detectives, it seemed, had been operating an undercover fence operation on Hillside Avenue for about six months and had gotten chummy with the local banditry. In appreciation for their business, the "fences" invited their suppliers to a gala party at a local Knights of Columbus hall. What happened next became the best story in the city that day, a combination of sly humor and dead-serious police work.

The Page 1 line in the Daily News Monday was: "Cops Toss Bash, Hook 42 Hoods." The story told how the thieves and burglars, who thought they were walking into a party, walked into the arms of the law that Saturday night as Queens detectives closed the door on the undercover fence outfit. In all, the six-month operation had taken in \$700,000 in stolen property and \$200,000 in stolen welfare and Social Security checks.

We took the light touch, playing the story for laughs. But the arrests were no joking matter. After I had interviewed the cops and arranged for photographers to take shots of the bad guys being led around in chains at the station house, Chief of Queens Detectives Edwin T. Dreher took me into his office and explained why they had pulled the party stunt. The last fence operation the Queens detectives ran had ended in gunfire the previous Christmas Eve when an attempted arrest resulted in a shootout. A suspect and a detective were killed; another detective was wounded. "We didn't want to do that again. So

we cooked up this party idea. Listen to this,” Dreher said. He took out a cassette tape and put it into a recorder. I heard some badly muffled conversation and then suddenly some shouts. “HEY. DROP IT. NO!” Then there was about 10 seconds of explosions, pops and cracks. Dreher’s eyes were riveted to the tape, his mouth stretched into an artificial smile. Suddenly the firing stopped. “Sonaofabitch. Goddamn almighty,” the voices said. Dreher pushed the stop button and looked up at me. That was how the Christmas Eve bust had gone. “The language gets pretty rough at this point,” he said, as if what I’d already heard wasn’t rough enough.

Floating on the Page 1 piece, I looked for my second shot. It came in December. But this time I would learn how much bigger mistakes look in 120-point type. On Sunday, Dec. 8, I went to a meeting of striking milk deliverymen and plant employees at the Lithuanian Citizens Club, 69-63 Grand Ave., Maspeth. There the strikers of the 3,000-member Teamster Local 584 voted down their leaders’ recommended contract package and opted to continue their strike against 115 dairies, by just a few votes more than the two-thirds needed. The strike was interrupting milk deliveries to 10 million consumers in the metropolitan area.

The Page 1 line Monday said, “Milk Pact Down Drain by 11 votes.” The only trouble was that the paper’s labor reporter, calling me at the Queens shack, informed me that the figure was 18 votes, not 11!

“Clendenin wants you to call him,” the reporter said.

“Okay,” I said, nervously, sure that this older guy was chuckling at my fate. I got Clendenin on the line.

“Think you screwed up?” Clendenin asked, a light tone to his voice.

“Yeah, I guess, but I don’t know how I could get it wrong. I watched the union guy count the vote out, and he said it was 11.”

“I know, Tommy, don’t worry about it. I understand. No problem with me. Just remember: Union guys can’t count.”

More often, the stories I did were of tragedies, in Queens mostly, the kind that were routine in the world of Daily News readers, coming one after another, day after day, each one heartbreaking in its own way.

On Aug. 4, I wrote a story about Elizabeth Sanchez, 12, of Edgemere, who had jumped into 15 feet of water called Norton Basin off Jamaica Bay at 10:30 a.m. on a Sunday morning. She was trying to save Gilbert Diaz, 10, who had been shoved into the water by a 14-year-

old who had been teasing Gilbert because he couldn't swim. Gilbert panicked. There were shouts for help. As the older boy fled on a bicycle, Elizabeth jumped in to save the struggling boy—although she herself couldn't swim. John Shepard, 67, who had been walking nearby with his son, Daryl, 31, a former city cop, jumped in to get the kids. They found the boy in five minutes and Elizabeth's body a few minutes after that.

On Aug. 5, the day the story appeared, I went to Elizabeth's home at 439 Beach 43rd Street, a dirt street near the high grass of the swamps on Rockaway Peninsula. There, sitting among school photographs of Elizabeth, her four sisters and three brothers, her mother spoke in Spanish through her tears as her 16-year-old sister, Evelyn, translated. We spoke for fewer than 10 minutes. The high-pitched sound from the cicadas outside pierced the humid air in the living room open to the swampy terrain outside. This seemed to me the saddest place I had ever been. The story the next day had the headline: "Grave in Puerto Rico Awaits Girl Who Died for Pal."

Death took many forms in Queens. Later that month I wrote a story that some Flushing residents were upset with the city parks department for not maintaining and policing property next to the P.S. 203 schoolyard. The ill-kept site had become more than a haven for liquor, dope and sex parties—it had become deadly, and they wanted a curfew. The night before, Leslie Zaret, 17, had been abducted on her way home near Mount Hebron Cemetery on Main Street, near the Long Island Expressway in Flushing, and then driven to P.S. 203 at 53d Street and Springfield Boulevard, where her nude body was dumped on the park property in the early hours of the morning. The fate of this teenager made me realize I could never ignore the dangers that haunted people who called the News for help about a neighborhood problem.

I soon learned that death could be stupid, too. At the Tipperary Arms, a saloon at 149-30 Northern Blvd. in Flushing, some guys were giving their buddy a going-away fling one Saturday in November 1974 before he went off to the Navy. One of the bar patrons came over and tried on the hat of one of the party boys. Words were exchanged. The patron showed a gun in his belt and gave the hat back. Everybody thought this little episode was over, but when the Navy group broke up at 2 a.m., the man with the gun followed the boys outside and said he'd

been shown disrespect. The boys broke and ran, but not before 19-year-old Joseph Mangan had been shot in the left eye and killed. The next day police arrested Vincent Capanelli, 28, an unemployed bartender.

Despite the clichéd callousness of big-city residents and the reporters who covered them, every new tragedy had the potential to make my readers—and me—cry. In January 1975, I followed firefighters to 143-02 Lakewood Ave., South Jamaica, where they found the bodies of Horace Newton, 25, and his 18-year-old fiancée, Janice Lomax, clutching each other beneath a smoldering mattress on the floor of a back room in the Newton home. The two had planned to be married in a few weeks. They died early that Sunday morning because the padlocked gates on the windows, installed to keep burglars out, had trapped them inside. Others in the 12-member family were able to escape the fire, which had started in the kitchen, near the room where the couple died. By the time they tried to exit through the kitchen, the fire had taken over.

So many of the tragedies were unnecessary. Take the story about Alice Friedland, 70. Despondent after undergoing cancer surgery two years before, she committed suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning in the garage of her Forest Hills home, at 67-46 Exeter St. In doing so she accidentally killed her husband, Jacob, 74, who was asleep in his second floor bedroom.

And so many of the victims were innocent. The screams of two children sent police to a Queens apartment at 2 o'clock one winter morning at 144-77 41st Ave., Flushing. When Debra Mackall, 20, answered the door, she said her children—Rodel, 2, and Candy, 4—were fine. But neighbors had told police that they had been awakened by shouts, curses and screams. Mackall told police: “Everything’s all right.” Two days later, she reported her daughters lost in Alexander’s department store in Flushing. Two days after that, the children’s incinerated bodies were found in a Harlem lot. It turns out everything that night hadn’t been all right. The mother was murdering her children.

Not all the tragedies were deaths, though, and not all the deaths took place right in Queens. In October 1975, I went to the Garden Jewish Center of Flushing, at 24-20 Parsons Blvd., where 200 survivors of the concentration camp at Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia’s Sudetenland were gathered for a 30-year reunion. Gerte Taugsig and Helga Liebman told me they had organized the event after meeting

unexpectedly two years before on a cruise. Said Liebman: “It was a few moments, and then I realized this was Gerte who I had slept next to for three years. We had a friendship forged in horror. We were all very close then. when you go through something like that you develop, well, a strong common bond.” Siegrid Ansbackher said that he had met Hilda Bodenheimer when he stumbled while walking in a line at Bergen-Belson; she caught him, stopping his fall. At the time they were both 16. They both ended up in Theresienstadt. German-born Martin Spier, 46, told me he couldn’t sleep the previous night, “remembering what had happened 30 years ago. I lost my family at Auschwitz, and I have today a strange feeling of depression and joy. You see, I just saw the man who saved me from dying in the ovens.”

Some were simply stories of serendipity—for example, the story of Emil Gonzalez, 40, of 19 Stanhope St. in Bushwick, who happened to be walking home from a party around 7 one morning when he saw smoke coming from an apartment building at 23 Evergreen Ave. He shouted “Fire!” and went down the block to pull the box, then returned to the building and ran down the halls, waking tenants in six apartments. Gonzalez carried three girls safely from the third floor, one under each arm and another on his back with a blanket over their heads to keep the smoke at bay, and later helped firemen rescue eight other people. Gonzalez also had information to offer on the suspicious nature of the fire; he had seen three men running out the back of the building.

The News also liked the occasional story blending humor and crime. On April Fool’s Day 1975 a woman at a Queens bank was the victim of a prank and, briefly, the suspect of attempted robbery, for which she was subjected to a pretty rough grilling by the police and FBI. Officers from the Metropolitan Savings Bank, 64-02 108th St. in Forest Hills, said the woman had walked in at 1:45 p.m. and filled out a withdrawal slip for \$20. Unbeknownst to her, a prankster had written on the back of the slip: “This is a robbery.” The teller tripped the bank’s silent alarm. When the woman walked outside, police took her back in for questioning. Said manager Robert Zmack: “I guess some kids were playing an April Fool’s joke, but none of us thought it was very funny.”

Then there were stories that teased law enforcement and criminals. One summer day in 1975, the News told of the red-faced Queens

district attorney's office arrest warrant for "the con who conned the cons." The suspect's name was Howard Johnson, 29, a k a Johnson Howard, Frank Gatewood and Preston Gatewood. Johnson, who originally called himself Preston Gatewood, had been arrested June 25 for an armed robbery. In jail, he appeared despondent and told his fellow inmates that his wife, son, daughter and brother had all been killed in a traffic accident in North Carolina and that he wanted to attend their funeral. He spoke with such conviction that his fellow inmates in the Queens House of Detention raised the \$2,500 necessary to get him out. With the agreement of the prosecutor and public defense attorney, the prison chaplain on July 10 convinced a judge to reduce the prisoner's bail so he could attend the "funeral." When Johnson failed to return to jail July 15, police knocked on his apartment door in Queens and realized that he'd skipped—after giving them the phony name Preston Gatewood—and that there was another outstanding warrant for his arrest as Howard Johnson. There was no family in North Carolina, and there was no funeral. But there were several red faces around the courthouse in Kew Gardens that day.

Some of the murders I covered were grim in the extreme. In late December 1974, I covered the murder of Mary V. Browne, a 57-year-old widow who was found strangled in her apartment bathtub in Woodside, Queens. How she came to such an end was recounted in some detail, summed up in the headline: "Queens Mother Strangled; Invalid Son Tags Brother." The woman's son, James, 17, who had cerebral palsy, watched helplessly as his mother was beaten by his older brother, Dennis, 25. Helpless to prevent the frenzied attack, James crawled with agonizing slowness from the fifth floor to the third to find a neighbor, for whom he spelled out with his fingers a plea to call police. But it was too late. When the police arrived they found her body, clad in a nightgown and half-submerged in the bathtub in her apartment at 31-84 51st St., Woodside Houses. Police from the Forest Hills station summoned family members elsewhere in the city and learned that Dennis was at his sister's apartment in Manhattan, where they found him asleep on her couch. We never did learn his motive.

Over a three-week period in the summer of 1975, I covered the Queens detectives' investigation of the murder of Andrew Katch, 22, of 1823 East 13th St., Flatbush, whose body parts were found one

Sunday in June in a dozen garbage bags in Rockaway Beach. Katch, a salesman of used foreign cars, worked with his father at the Veribest Foreign Car Service, 1329 Utica Ave., Brooklyn. His leg was found in a Pantry Pride parking lot near Holland Avenue and Beach 9th Street, Rockaway Beach, by a passerby; other parts of his body were discovered nearby. The victim's severed head, detectives told me, had apparently been crushed in a trash compactor.

That was just the beginning of the story. On July 6, I did a follow-up about the arrest of two Brooklyn teenagers in the murder. Police explained that Katch had been lured to a car on East 37th Street, between Park and Madison avenues in Manhattan, on Friday, June 13, by a girl for whom they were now hunting. Katch had met her the previous day; she asked him to meet her and repair her car. When Katch got there, five people grabbed him; that was it. He was stabbed 21 times, and then dismembered. Police suspect Katch was killed because of he owed loan sharks money.

Tales of fires and firemen were another staple. My first major fire story occurred in March 1975. Played on Page 3, it was about the third major fire in a week at a phone company building on Broadway. It broke out in a switchboard storage room in Elmhurst and disrupted service to 500 customers for six hours. Fire marshals ruled the blaze an arson after they found papers and cardboard wedged between two switchboards and in two other places where fires had been ignited. But what was most notable about the story was the quote I got from Willing Ellinghaus, New York Telephone & Telegraph's president, at the scene: "These fires make you begin to wonder. I'm even afraid to answer my telephone."

Naturally as an ambitious reporter, I looked for heroism wherever I could find it. I found it in, among others, former Marine Sgt. Charles Erhardt, 26, of 18-19 College Point Blvd., College Point, and his pal, telephone repairman Frank Hartman, 22, of nearby Whitestone, who spearheaded the rescue of a woman and her 10-year-old daughter, trapped on the third floor of a burning building in Flushing in September 1975. The two heroes also helped a woman and her two sons. To accomplish this, Erhardt climbed a ladder, broke windows with his fists, jumped from the third story to the second and shinned up a brick facade. "I didn't think too much about it; me and these other guys just did what

we knew had to be done,” Erhardt told me.

Occasionally, we were able to tie several fires together for an even bigger story. In late 1975 and early 1976, I covered a series of fires that seemed too pat. On Nov. 2, I went to a Crown Lumber storage yard at 60th and Metropolitan Ave. in Ridgewood where I got details of the third suspicious fire in five days in a six-block area. One of the yard’s co-owners, Vincent Napolitano, told me he didn’t know why it had been hit. Marshals said witnesses saw a car drive away at 8:22 a.m. that Sunday, just before the blaze, which was started with an incendiary device. The other fires were at LF Knittings warehouse on Menahan Street the previous Wednesday, and the German Hungarian social club, also on Menahan, Saturday.

This disconnected version of events held until a tragedy occurred on Saturday, Feb. 7. The Page 1 story the following morning told of three firemen killed and six injured in Richmond Hill when the roof of the Jolly Jiant grocery collapsed in a fire. The grocery was one in a row of one-story businesses to go up in the early morning, three-alarm blaze, trapping the firemen under tons of rubble. I was in the firehouse of Engine Company 285 in Ozone Park when Ed Kehoe asked desperately: “Is it true, is Tommy Earl dead?” We later found out that the huge air conditioner that crushed the men apparently had been operating without a permit. The event was so compelling that we pulled out all the stops.

That Monday, the Daily News published a story that fire marshals were appealing for information on why Richmond Hill had had 15 fires in two months, 10 of which were suspicious. Two days later, acting on a tip, marshals nabbed three men while they were trying to burn down a building with 10 people inside. Then the story died out, despite the paper’s attempt the following week to revive community interest by publicizing the fact that several neighborhood leaders from 250 block associations were organizing to find other guilty parties in the fires. We knew there was an arson conspiracy, and helped organize a reward fund, but unfortunately it came to nothing.

Being in Queens, Kennedy and LaGuardia airports often figured into stories. In 1975, I had a hand in three memorable ones. One was in April when I had a Page 1 story about the arrival of 66 orphans from Vietnam. The photo showed a white-haired cop, Thomas Twyford, and his wife, Katherine, carrying twin 7-month-old boys, over the cutline: “Queens

cop hits the double.” These 66 kids were part of an original load of 407 who had left Saigon 40 hours before, with half getting off in Seattle. The children, 3 weeks to 10 years old, were going to families in eleven states. They were among the lucky ones. An earlier flight of Vietnamese orphan children had crashed after takeoff in Saigon, killing hundreds.

The other stories dealt much larger doses of grim news. Two months later on June 24, several of us Queens reporters were in our new bureau on Queens Boulevard, across from Borough Hall, when the calls came over the emergency fire and police radio scanners. Suddenly, our Queens editor at the desk shouted for everyone to be quiet.

Within seconds we knew that an airliner had crashed at Kennedy. Over the next hour or so we gathered the basics: An Eastern Airlines Boeing 727, Flight 44, had crashed during a turbulent thunderstorm as it approached Runway 22L, killing on impact 110 of the 115 passengers and eight crew members aboard. At that time it was the worst airline crash in New York history and the second worst in the country.

Just moments after the crash, I was sent to Jamaica Hospital on the Van Wyck Expressway, just 20 minutes from the airport, where dozens of the dead and injured were being taken. I walked through the emergency room taking notes and interviewing medical personnel as they worked with a deliberate and grim frenzy to repair the unrepairable, to treat skin burned crisp and straighten mangled limbs. The next day I went to the crash site and walked through the debris, talking to rescue, fire and other personnel combing the site for clues and debris. The ground where the dead had been lined was still dark from blood. Shoes, photos, personal items from pocketbooks lay scattered among the wreckage. I was low man on the staff, and the senior guys got the big bites of the story. I did a story on the Salvation Army people handing out free food to the workers.

The next horror struck LaGuardia in December. I was eating dinner with Sun Oak and our two children at our apartment in Jamaica Estates when I got a call from the city desk telling me to get over to Elmhurst Hospital. A bomb had gone off in the lower concourse of the two-story terminal building at LaGuardia near Gate 22 between the TWA and Delta baggage claim areas. The blast killed 12. The injured, about 70 in all, were being taken to Elmhurst. With that I went to the

emergency room, which was jammed with cops, rescue workers and paramedics. A gang of TV, radio and print reporters was gathering around the front, waiting for officials from the hospital to say something.

At one point, a blond pretty boy who worked for WNBC Channel 4 news and his crew got just a little too close behind me. This guy had just come in from a Midwest market with dreams of being in the big time. Trouble was, he didn't have any manners. The lens of his crew's camera hit me in the back of the head, and I turned and shoved the cameraman back. The on-air guy started flashing me an attitude.

"Can't you see? My camera is here?" he said to me.

He was silenced by a Daily News photographer who saw what was up and turned to speak in a low voice heavy with the accent of Brooklyn.

"Hey, glamour boy," said my friend to the TV reporter, "shut up or I'll fix it you're good for air work. Get me?"

This threat was delivered so evenly, so carefully and so honestly the on-air boy shut up, and his crew behaved themselves. But this waiting was a loser's game. I separated from the pack, turned my collar up and went around to the other side of the hospital, where I saw a priest standing just outside the doors. He was from the local parish and had come when he heard the news on the radio. Just then, an ambulance arrived with two more injured. Paramedics ran to take the gurney, and the priest walked inside the room. I followed him.

The injured were lined up on stretchers along the wall, evaluated by the staff to see who needed help right away, who could wait, and who could not possibly be helped. I saw people wandering around—looking for family members, they said—and I couldn't help but notice that they were free to wander. So I imitated them, but I bent over some of the conscious victims and told them who I was. They gave me colorful quotes and facts about the incident. One woman explained how she was about to get onto a bus just outside the terminal when she was blown instantly onto her backside. After an interview with another young woman, I asked if there was something I could do for her. She asked if I could call her family in Greenwich to tell them she was okay. I did.

The bombing story ran on Page 1. My piece about the survivors was among the many sidebars that accompanied the main story, which

was written in the city room. But I was satisfied I'd performed my job well as part of the reporting team. The entire package won the Page One award from the New York City Press Club that year.

The story has an odd postscript. On Jan. 14, 1976, an eccentric fellow named J. J. Armes showed up at the airport saying he had been hired by an "anonymous client" to solve the LaGuardia bombing. Armes was a well-publicized Dapper Dan gumshoe whose arms had been blown off in a childhood mishap. He had worked for 14 years as a private investigator and wore artificial limbs fashioned so that they could function with guns. Armes had been profiled in magazines in recent months as having solved dozens of crimes around the country. His arrival in New York to solve the LaGuardia bombing had the look and feel of a promotion, which of course it was. The entire Armes story, though based on truth, was orchestrated by Marvin Glass & Associates, a PR agency from Chicago. It smelled so bad I did some digging on my own. It turned out that Ideal Toys, one of Queens' premier companies, had purchased the "story" about Armes from Glass the previous October with the intention of bringing out a J.J. Armes doll. After the bombing, Ideal promoted the LaGuardia angle and rushed the doll into production in time for a toy industry trade fair in late February. The deal stank, I thought. I got Ideal to admit that it was the "anonymous" client in a story, and then wrote a sanctimonious column criticizing the company for exploiting the bombing and the public's fears about it.

I drew the most enthusiasm to pursue a story was when I got a chance to explore and explain some of the injustices of daily life. In early July 1975, Baird forwarded to me a seemingly routine phone call from a woman with a complaint. Her name was Gladys Johnson; her complaint turned out to be anything but routine. She was from the tenant patrol of Queensbridge Houses, a public housing project in the shadow of the Queensboro/59th Street Bridge in Long Island City. Her patrol duties included operating a lunch program for 700 kids in the project. The lunch program had begun July 1, but for the past couple of days the bologna delivered had been green and the milk spoiled.

"When I called the supplier to get the food replaced, all I get is the runaround. I called the government, and they don't know what to do," Johnson explained. "What am I going to do? They are delivering bad

food for my kids and I can't get anybody to do anything about it. Mr. Collins, this isn't right."

I took down all the details she could give me and checked out her story. I interviewed people in the projects and called the agencies. Within a few days I had my story. What Johnson, a respected elder in her community, had described was a government anti-poverty program gone wrong.

On July 8, 1975, I did a story about the 700 kids in Queensbridge Houses getting spoiled and inedible food. It turned out to be the first of dozens of stories about problems in a \$21 million U.S. Department of Agriculture program in which 976,000 youngsters were taking part citywide. I found myself sifting through a wave of tips and complaints that came in as a result of the stories, as I kept the narrative going with details of Johnson's progress and the government's reactions.

I learned that a summer feeding program, established in 1968 to take the place of the national school lunch program during off-school days, had turned out to be a boon to at least some New Yorkers. Federal officials figured that at least one-third of the \$70 million spent nationwide went for kids in New York City. The program in New York called for 128 "nonprofit community-based sponsors" to contract with 40 "food vendors" to deliver free lunches to 976,000 kids at 3,700 locations across the city. For each meal, the feds gave the "sponsors" 75 cents for food and 6 cents for administration.

Of course, as the stories of mismanagement began appearing in the Daily News, the Department of Agriculture defended itself, saying that no money would be paid for bad food. But they had set up the program according to procedures and practices established for the bureaucracy. They didn't figure on the greed and political influence of people who saw the welfare program in the same way that a hyena sees dead meat.

As I had hoped with a program so vast, more and more calls came in to me, telling of problems with spoiled and wasted food elsewhere in the city. By the end of July, the city's recreation commissioner got into the act. He said that lunches were being passed out willy-nilly to passersby on the street at some city parks. True; I went to a park in Forest Hills and was offered food. A photographer and I, in search of the source of this mismanagement, went to a row house in Forest Hills, the address of the man whose name was listed as a sponsor for the park

site. Though it was obvious that people were home, no one answered when I went to the front door. I walked around back to try another entrance. At that point, apparently thinking I was gone, someone ran out the front door and down the block and refused to come back as I ran shouting after him.

I surveyed all 75 sponsors of the program citywide, along with dozens of community associations and tenant groups. In comparing names and addresses of the sponsors I found a trail of associations and conflict of interest so wide a drunken blind man could have found his way. It turned out that the program was well intentioned and fashioned for established groups such as a parish council, YMCA or fraternal order with multiple locations where children gathered. The umbrella organizations would be nonprofit and would take responsibility for contracting with a local food vendor. The vendor would prepare lunches for the councils, which would distribute them to the children's locations. That was the concept, anyway.

There were many worthy organizations helping to feed hundreds of thousands of hungry kids, I found. But too many such councils were fiction, the distribution sites their creations. This network of bogus councils with bogus sites was a guaranteed market for food vendors, who would kick back money to the organizers. I learned how a politically well-connected Brooklyn rabbi named Leib Pinter put together a citywide organization of interlocking directorships to distribute free lunches in a poverty enterprise so vast, it cornered 20 percent of the New York City program. Their organizational success had made the 1975 program twice the size of the previous year. The smell of sweetheart contracts and rigged bids was ripe.

On Aug. 7, the Daily News ran a story revealing that five sponsors received most of the free food. The focus of the story was an organization headed by Pinter, chairman of B'nai Torah Institute of Brooklyn, who had friends in high places. In recent years his yeshiva had given banquets in honor of a range of political celebrities, including Vice President Gerald Ford, Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz, and Democratic Party Chairman Robert Strauss. He also counted as friends many members of Congress.

But Pinter also had enemies, and they were calling me anonymously every day to offer information. They were bitter not just about

his success with the politicians but also with his organization's tactics in signing up unsuspecting community groups such as Johnson's tenant patrol. They said Pinter and his crew had expanded their network 400 percent from 1974 to 1975, allegedly by offering bribes and jobs to neighborhood leaders and promises of extra meals to the community groups with no questions asked. Their sign-up tactics had effectively blocked many legitimate food sponsors and vendors who could not offer better terms or break earlier sign-up agreements.

Pinter had fronts in four boroughs—two in Brooklyn and one each in the Bronx, Manhattan and Queens. The previous year, there had been three, delivering 47,500 lunches. This year, with two new groups, Pinter's organization was supplying 209,135 lunches a day to 677 locations in the city, including Queensbridge Houses. The group also used a collection of kosher food vendors, and because of Pinter they were able to dominate the free food system. Despite the fact that they claimed to serve kosher food to black and Hispanic kids, they were the source of the putrid bologna and sour milk.

As the stories became more and more detailed, Queens District Attorney Nick Ferraro on July 25 confirmed to me that he had called a grand jury to look into the matter. Ferraro later asked me to come to his office for an interview with his cousin, Gerry, who was in charge of youth, family and social crimes. I spent three-quarters of an hour in DA Ferraro's office one late afternoon, answering their questions. Essentially they wanted to know what I had found out. They were polite, listened and took notes. I didn't waste any time worrying about the separation of the press and the prosecutor. I laid out what I knew and was happy to do it. The more the DA's office got involved in the issue, the more stories for me.

Soon allegations were coming in from groups in the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn and Manhattan. On Aug. 11, just a month after I wrote the original story, the Daily News ran an editorial under the headline: "Profits From Poverty?" The Agriculture Department's internal investigative unit was looking into the matter, and its Food and Nutrition Service said it was holding up payment of money to all suspected community groups. Pinter and company were in trouble, but their work continued through the summer and into the following year.

Clendenin promoted me out of Queens in the spring of 1976, and I began working nightside for the city desk. My nightside shift kept me in Manhattan from 5 p.m. to 1 a.m. But I continued to follow the progress of the summer lunch investigation and wrote stories about it from time to time. In preparing for the coming summer, the feds, state and city were entangled in a dispute over who should control the program, which became the focus of the News' coverage. All three bureaucracies pointed fingers, all had recommendations for the others, but no one agency was eager to assume responsibility. The state said the city should operate the program at the schools, but the city said nix. Meanwhile, some of the sponsors, including Pinter, began to squirm because some \$7.8 million in payments, nearly one-third of the program, was being held up pending investigation. They were pressuring their friends in government, urging that the money be paid and the program be left alone. And overall, the program that summer was pretty much the same as the previous year, with some 146 sponsors authorized to hand out free lunches at 5,200 locations in the city at a cost of \$1.5 million a day.

From my point of view, despite the News' reporting showing obvious abuse, it looked as though other poverty rackets had copied a page from Pinter's book. But in my nightside assignment, I was too busy on other stories to revive the story. It would take someone with clout, doing something concrete.

That opportunity came in Washington, D.C., that summer when Rep. Elizabeth Holtzman of Brooklyn testified before a House subcommittee that she and her staff had looked at the summer lunch program and found it was "an administrative nightmare. nobody is in control of it." She said U.S. Attorney David Traeger of Brooklyn was conducting a preliminary investigation, picking up from the grand jury probe that Ferraro had begun. Traeger's office empanelled a grand jury and assumed jurisdiction in the matter.

I called Holtzman's office in Brooklyn and asked her staff what they had going. Dan Feldman, one of her assistants, knew the stories I'd done, and we agreed to meet with Holtzman the following Saturday in her Brooklyn office. I found Holtzman, in her mid-thirties, to be bright, plain and extremely intense, and I liked her plenty. She

had sand and didn't seem bothered one bit that Pinter was a political power in her district. There was another element to be leery of, too. Let's face it, a Daily News guy named Collins going after an Orthodox rabbi and his network of kosher food vendors could be labeled simple, old-fashioned anti-Semitism. Holtzman, however, as a Jew, could not possibly be labeled anti-Semitic if she went after a rabbi, his yeshiva and a kosher food program. Her notion was that if a guy was stealing, let the chips fall where they may.

I'd done my homework on Pinter. He had set up B'nai Torah Institute in 1968 in the interest of building a top-notch yeshiva, and in 1971 he incorporated and moved to Borough Park, one of the centers of Brooklyn's Orthodox Jewish population. Apparently, it was at this time that the 27-year-old English teacher discovered the Federal Register, the fine-print guide to federal program regulations. He established contacts in the community with connections to New York Gov. Hugh Carey and key congressmen. In 1973, Pinter purchased a two-story brick building at 4722 18th Ave.

Pinter's method was to identify key politicians, give them money and honors and then use those relationships to win government contracts to deliver social services. In early 1973, for example, Pinter paid speaker's agent Harry Walker to have Walker's client, House Minority Leader Gerald Ford, appear at the yeshiva's annual dinner and receive the B'nai Torah Humanitarian Award. By the time of the dinner in October 1973, Ford was vice president. Pinter had friends tell reporters, "Gerald Ford knows only one rabbi, and his name is Leib Pinter."

In December 1974, Pinter gave awards to Agriculture Secretary Butz and other bureaucrats at a gala dinner attended by some very distinguished politicians, including Arizona Rep. Morris Udall, Bronx Rep. Herman Badillo, Brooklyn Rep. Stephen Solarz, and Indiana Sen. Birch Bayh. The following year, Pennsylvania Rep. Daniel Flood, a ranking member of the House Appropriations Committee and chairman of the House Subcommittee on Labor and Health, Education, and Welfare, got a Public Service Award, and Democratic Party National Chairman Strauss got a Humanitarian Award.

Using our conversation as a guide, Holtzman's staff used her oversight power to review the contracts between the food vendors and

Pinter's organizations. On Aug. 10, 1976, the Daily News ran my story with the headline: "Holtzman Hints at Lunch Contract Collusion." Finally, some pol said what I could only allude to in print. Based on her staff's preliminary review of just 20 to 30 contracts, Holtzman said that nonprofit organizations had signed multimillion-dollar contracts with private food companies before opening bids and therefore had "engaged in what seems to be collusion." The legal requirements of independent, competitive bidding had not been met, she said. In fact, there were substantial defects in legal notices, the appearance of signatures on contracts before bids were opened and other irregularities.

This was serious stuff, and between the efforts of Holtzman and Traeger, I knew Pinter's social welfare empire was bound to collapse. At this point, other politicians got into the act. Mayor Abraham Beame denounced Pinter. Manhattan Borough President Andrew Stein said that if Pinter wasn't a crook, he would resign from office.

I was moving on to other assignments, and my sense of pride in doing the initial investigation that triggered this feeding frenzy was passing. The story didn't belong to one reporter or newspaper anymore. By the end of August 1976, the summer lunch fraud was part of the background music. Life in New York went on.

Then I got a call from Pinter. For more than a year, he had refused to talk with me; now, as his world was coming apart, he wanted to chat. The next day before work, I went to his office in Manhattan's Herald Square. His office had recently been renovated with the kind of wall panels favored by handymen who redid their own basements in their homes in the boroughs. The phone equipment was cheap imports, the furniture gaudy. The place looked like someone with bad taste had wasted a lot of money.

Pinter, then 32, was slight and had a trim, full-face beard. He wore a conservative dark suit. Despite the bad publicity he had received and the subsequent investigations and attacks, he was still chairman of his own school, ran an upstate summer camp, owned two prime pieces of Brooklyn real estate, had offices in five states and controlled a \$25 million anti-poverty empire including programs for summer lunch, winter breakfast, job training, vocational education and resettlement of Russian Jews. His operations extended to New Jersey, Chicago, St.

Louis and Philadelphia, and he had plans to expand into Miami and Los Angeles.

He was defensive and hostile, but he was perplexed, too. He explained that he had considered suing me the previous year, but a libel lawyer had advised against it. “You worded your attacks on me very carefully. You think I’m a crook,” he said with great conviction. “Well, I’m not. I simply am trying to supply a service to people who need it.”

On the couch in the corner of the room, an assistant, Victor Mayer, 21, sat quietly. Mayer, thin and gaunt, said nothing, but his dark eyes never left me. This guy wanted me to die, I thought to myself.

What particularly bothered Pinter was the attack earlier that week by Manhattan Borough President Stein, a spoiled son of a rich father who had earned his political reputation attacking Bernard Bergman for the shameless way he operated nursing homes in the city. Stein implied Pinter was in the same league of infamy.

“How can Stein say such a thing?” Pinter asked. “I swear, I have done nothing wrong.”

Listening to Pinter, part of me believed him. Maybe he had no criminal intent. Maybe he believed he was doing good. Maybe, who could tell? Our conversation ended without resolution. But the machine of justice kept humming.

With the U.S. attorney’s investigation in Brooklyn, the inquiries by the federal departments of agriculture and labor, and Holtzman’s congressional grilling, Pinter was banned from the food programs in early 1977. Then, in June, City Controller Goldin blasted B’nai Torah’s jobs program. On June 29, the U. S. attorney indicted four B’nai Torah officials for bribery, including Mayer’s mother, Clara. All four were tried, and three convicted, on perjury and fraud charges. They received suspended sentences.

In January 1978, Stephen Elko, Rep. Flood’s administrative assistant, told the U.S. attorney in Los Angeles that Pinter had paid bribes to Flood and Elko. Investigators later discovered that Pinter began bribing Flood in late 1974; afterward Pinter got Labor Department contracts for job training.

On June 22, 1978, Pinter was sentenced to two years and fined \$10,000 for paying Flood \$5,000 in bribes. Pinter said he had given him

\$1,000 on five occasions. Mayer, then 23, was given up to six years for conspiracy to defraud. Flood, 74, a 15-term congressman, denied wrongdoing, but his reputation was disgraced. His activities were being looked at by federal agents in Brooklyn, Manhattan and Philadelphia.

By the time these details at the end of the story occurred, I was on to other stories. It is rare to own a story from beginning to end. Often what is required as a newspaper reporter is just to move the story along a day, or a week, and keep it alive for the next development and next reporter. With the summer lunch scandals, I was satisfied that the long story had begun because I had asked questions about why those people in Queens weren't getting the bologna sandwiches they'd been promised.

As a reporter, I had come to understand that my mission was to explore the friction points of life, those precise moments when calm can erupt into violence, when decisions about justice are made, when one is decided to be guilty or innocent. It was in these briefest of instants that I learned to do my work, asking exact questions about every movement, every address, the location in the building or on the block that an event occurred, the time, anything about the surrounding atmosphere: the weather, the smells, the sounds. In those moments of truth, everything was important, because in the friction of such moments lay the dramatic tension that tabloid newspapers like the Daily News lived on.

Every time I learned of a crime, I put it under this microscope to find any aspect that could supply the dramatic tension readers expected. Thus my notion of reporting soon changed from the political to the mythical. After working in Queens for the Daily News, the assumptions about human behavior I had developed at the newspapers in Hartford and New Haven, not to mention the lofty principles I had studied in depth at Columbia, seemed quaint.

A murder or death or mayhem was now judged as to whether it was "good" or not—meaning could I turn it into a story? If not, I didn't waste my time. Normal emotions such as empathy for victims, demands for justice, or outrage at the arbitrary consequences of random circumstances were put off.

Now everything I did was for the story. I had to find the facts necessary for the event to be told quickly in about ten paragraphs so that it

made an essential point about human existence. Politics and politicians were essential only if they served the greater story. And that was that. As a reporter for the News, I was driven and my ambitions aimed at Page 1.