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## WHAT'S WITH THE WATER IN BROOKLYN?



There's something in the water in Brooklyn. I don't know what it is, but growing up there lights a fire in some people. They start hustling from the time they're little. I'm thinking of people like Jay-Z, Joan Rivers, Woody Allen, and Mel Brooks. Eddie Murphy and Barbra Streisand. Larry King and Rudy Giuliani. Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Mike Tyson. Spike Lee. Joe Torre. Sandy Koufax. Growing up in Brooklyn, you gotta have balls.

My family lived above a kosher butcher shop at 539 Kings Highway, near Ocean Parkway in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn. We were working poor, but we lived in an upper-middle-class neighborhood that had large Syrian Jewish and Italian populations. Many of them were first-generation immigrants. It was a diverse culture, to say the least.

The butcher was called Weingarten & Weiss, and it was glatt kosher, which meant, among other things, that chickens and other

animals were slaughtered on the premises. The entire building was always uncomfortably cold, on account of having to store all that raw meat there.

I'd wake up in the morning to the sound of condemned chickens screaming "Bwahhkhk!" followed by the sound of the death blow—"Thwack!"

We never saw Weiss, but we saw all too much of Mr. Weingarten, who was also our landlord. Sometimes I think he considered us to be additional slabs of raw meat.

He and I were always in each other's faces: me scolding him over the living conditions and lack of heat in winter; he, deflecting the issue, scolding me about our rent being late. True, the \$62 we paid every month wasn't exorbitant. But it was all we could afford, and the welfare check came when it came.

Mr. Weingarten seemed to be particularly fond of turning our heat off on Friday nights, when he would close the store for the Sabbath. During the harshest winters, it got so cold on those weekends that we'd call the police. But when the cops went to his house and ordered him to turn our heat on, Weingarten told them that they had to take his keys, go to the store, and do it themselves. He insisted that he couldn't work on the Sabbath.

Occasionally I would take a hammer and break the lock on the cellar door, to go jump-start the boiler myself. The basement was filled with our fellow tenants: bugs and other animals of unknown origin. I could usually hear them scurry and crackle under my feet.

We probably could have lived in a bigger place, maybe had nicer furniture and more food, if we had lived in a different neighborhood. But our neighborhood had good schools and community centers, and places where my brothers and I could go and be safe while our mom worked. Her logic was that it was better to raise kids in a decent neighborhood—even if it meant stretching every dime to make ends meet.

It took me a long time to realize that the *S* on all the towels in our house stood for *Sheraton*—not for Steiner. After that, I made it my duty to stock up on towels, robes, glasses, and soaps any time we stayed at a hotel. In a way, that was the first time I collected memorabilia.

We certainly knew hunger. We were often on food stamps, a fact I was very embarrassed about, even as a little kid. I've always said I saw the light at a young age—unfortunately, it was the light in the fridge.

My father, Irving Steiner, left when I was five. He suffered from epilepsy, and he was sick most of my childhood. I saw him sporadically until he died, when I was 11.

My mother, Evelyn, basically raised me and my two brothers by herself. Cary is my older brother, I'm the middle child, and Adam is the youngest. The three of us shared a room; Cary had his own bed, and Adam and I shared a bunk bed, with me on top and Adam on the bottom. Three boys, growing up in a single room, smaller than the office I sit in every day.

My mother was a force of nature. She was a brilliant, tireless woman. She was a pretty woman, but she fought with her weight most of her life. At a couple of points, she weighed well over 400 pounds, close to 500 even.

She ran a beauty salon for a long time and was always made up, with gleaming nails. She did amazing things with her hair, changing the color at least once a month, and styling it high and big, like a hedge sculpture. And she usually wore some incredible outfit. You would notice my mother walking down the street from a mile away.

She carried a huge pocketbook with her at all times. She would use it to smuggle home food from weddings and other events. Once we were at a bar mitzvah with an extensive buffet, and there was a problem with the electricity, temporarily leaving us all in the dark. It was a golden opportunity.

“We’re at a big buffet with Mom, and the lights are out,” Cary said. “We’re going to be eating this food for days!”

My mother had a measure of confidence equal to her stature. She had been a real firecracker; as a young woman, she threw herself into political activism and canvassed the city, stumping for Henry Wallace in the 1948 presidential election. She was a magnetic public speaker. But after Wallace lost the election, and the Progressive/American Labor Party ticket went down in flames, she became disillusioned with politics. She turned her attention to her various business ventures.

My mother was constantly promoting her salon, called Evelyn Sachs, after her maiden name. No matter where we were, she’d be marketing herself. We’d walk into a room, and my mother would whisper to us which woman was wearing a wig, which women needed to do something with their look.

“You should stop by the salon,” she’d counsel the women in the room. “I could give your hair some color, do your nails—give you a completely new look.” She loved getting people excited about changing their looks. She knew her stuff. In those days, there weren’t as many manicurists and hair colorists as there are now. But she took classes to learn it all.

My mother had some very clever marketing strategies.

She taught me the value of using your best day to promote your worst day. Beauty parlors were usually packed on Fridays and Saturdays, because women went out those nights. As a result, it was a struggle to get good business going earlier on in the week. So my mother offered a special price for a wash and set on Wednesdays and Thursdays. She never stopped coming up with all sorts of deals, trying to get the place busier during the slow parts of the week.

The salon was two blocks from the Kings Highway stop on the elevated F train. After school I'd linger at the exit of the station, handing out fliers during rush hour. Then I hired some friends to do it. Since most kids didn't want to go hand out fliers for a beauty parlor, I compensated them, paying them in fireworks—which weren't quite legal. Needless to say, I made a little bit of a vig on each kid.

One day, while I was standing underneath the train and giving out the fliers, I thought, "Why just give out fliers for the salon?" I decided to stop by other stores in the neighborhood to offer our services.

"I have three, four, five kids with me every day at rush hour," I told the owners. "We're handing out fliers underneath the train. Do you want us to hand out some fliers for you?" I created my own little side business, making a bit of extra money.

I was always thinking of new ways to pass time and always eager to make an extra buck.

On Saturdays, I worked at the salon, sweeping, cleaning up and doing other chores. Going to the salon was a 10-, sometimes even 12-hour affair for women. They got their nails done, their hair colored, the wash and set; it was a big part of their day. So to make some money, I brought the women their lunches. I took the orders, went to the delis to get the food, and I brought it all back. They gave me good tips.

In reality, despite all the special discounts my mom came up with, the conversation and the camaraderie she kept up in her salon was really what lured women in and brought them back. My mother was warm and gregarious, and often served as a surrogate therapist to her clients. She was always ready to listen to their problems, and to talk them through as long as they needed.

In the salon, I learned that relationships and trust are as important as anything else in business—as crucial as the work

that you do or the products you sell. When people feel their best, they *do and act* their best.

I was lucky to get that lesson so early in my life. Back then, men and children rarely went into beauty parlors.

And to this day, I always know which women have colored their hair, and which have their original color. I may not be the best husband in the world, but I at least can tell when my wife has been to the salon.

When my mom was healthy enough, she was always moving a mile a minute, hustling to make an extra buck for my brothers and me. She was incredibly resourceful.

Back when I was younger, airlines used to pay for travel agents to take “familiarization trips” to certain destinations, so they could sell the travel packages from firsthand knowledge. Some summers during high school, I’d watch my mom work two or three phones at the same time, selling warm weather honeymoon trips—just so she could take me and my brothers somewhere. For a few years during our schools’ holiday break, we escaped the New York winter by going to Jamaica and other sunny islands. We went on a few cruises in the Caribbean. We even got to go to Disney World right after it opened, in 1971. Even though we were poor, we traveled fairly well, compared to other people in the neighborhood.

And my hair and nails always looked good.

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Although my mother, my brothers, and I did a good job of making the best out of so many situations, I also went through some dark periods growing up.

During my elementary school years, I spent as much time as possible at the after school center in my Brooklyn neighborhood. The place was amazing; it offered everything from arts and crafts,

to music lessons, to basketball leagues for kids whose parents didn't have the time or resources for those types of activities. I particularly liked playing floor hockey there.

The two men who ran the center at that time were Peter Foti and Mel Kerper; Mr. Kerper also happened to be my fifth grade teacher. We had a good relationship, and I was glad to be in his class.

One day we were taking a test when Mr. Kerper called me to his desk. He pulled me in close.

"Brandon," he said. "I want you to know, we took a collection of money, for you to buy new clothes." He handed me an envelope stuffed with bills.

I just stared at him. It completely took my breath away.

"What?"

"You know, we thought you needed some new clothes, so we took a collection."

"How do you know that?" I said.

"Well, you've been wearing the same pants for three weeks in a row," he said. "There's a rip in the right knee."

I wouldn't have noticed if I wasn't even *wearing* pants at that point. I felt naked.

I took the money home. As soon as I saw my mom, I started crying. I told her what happened. I told her I felt humiliated.

"You don't have to worry," she tried to console me. "I was just waiting because I wanted you to lose a little weight before I took you to the store to buy new clothes."

I lay awake in bed that night, thinking about my mother's explanation. It didn't ring true to me. I knew we simply didn't have the money.

It was all I could think about for a few days. I felt embarrassed and sad, but I also felt hungry and determined. I knew my mother was doing the best she could. But I also felt that I needed to be responsible for myself.

“You don’t have to worry about me anymore,” I announced to my mom a few nights later. “I’m going to make some money. You don’t need to buy me any clothes. I got it covered.”

I was 10 years old.

That Saturday, I woke up and trolled our street, walking into every store I passed. I canvassed a good two miles of shops, from one end of the street to the other.

“I’ll sweep for you,” I told the owners. “I’ll deliver for you. Anything you need.”

Finally, the man who ran a vegetable stand down the block from us took me up on the offer. His store was called Freddy the Fruit Man.

“I could use some help on weekends,” the Fruit Man said. “Sweeping up and stocking the vegetables.” Shortly after, I began making deliveries for him, as well.

Looking back, it’s bittersweet; no 10-year-old should have to go looking for work. But on the other hand, that experience served me well.

That was my first real job.

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While my memories of my mother are as colorful as she was, my memories of my father are somewhat hazy and gray. The going wisdom in my family was that my mom was always the smartest person in the room, except when Dad was home. But epilepsy had derailed a promising life. He graduated from the Bronx High School of Science and got a scholarship to Columbia, but he had to drop out of college after a couple of years due to health problems. He ended up becoming a shipping clerk in the garment district. By the time I came into his life, the barbiturates my dad

had to take to control his seizures had robbed him of much of his vitality.

We saw him on occasional Sundays, and our interactions were usually tense; when we went out with my father, there was always the danger that he might have an attack at any moment. As a little kid, it was incredibly scary and humiliating to be standing on a street corner with my dad when he'd suddenly begin seizing. One time he fell on the sidewalk and broke his jaw; he had to have it wired.

I was a father's dream son: I had a job working before and after school; I was a Cub Scout and Boy Scout; I had a ton of friends; I was crazy about sports, out in the park every day, playing ball. But my dad's health problems and fractured relationship with my mom prevented him from becoming engaged in my life. It didn't help that he was more into music and art than sports. Those weren't two of my favorites.

I remember liking his drawings, though; he could always draw really well. And he could be very funny. He was kind of corny, but when he was feeling well, my dad was capable of really making us laugh. But my brother Cary was a lot closer to him than I was.

When my dad passed away at the age of 48, there were only eight people at his funeral—that included the four of us, and his sister; so you can do the math. At a Jewish funeral, you're supposed to have a minyan, which means at least 10 Jewish adults have to be present. We had to grab a couple of passersby just to say the prayers at the side of my dad's grave. There was barely any service at all, really. It was raining. We weren't there for very long.

My father's death had a profound effect on me. I felt terrible that he wasn't missed by more people. I remember thinking that I could never let that happen to me.

I think it's a healthy exercise to think about who will miss you when you die. What have you accomplished while hanging out on this planet? What kind of effect have you had on others—and on yourself? What are you leaving behind? Will our world be better off because you were here?

I do have fond memories of my dad taking me bowling several times, probably the only sport we ever did together. He took me to a place called Spa Bowl on Coney Island Avenue, where every lane had one red pin mixed in with the white ones. If the red pin was set in the very front, and you bowled a strike in that frame, you got a cherry Coke on the house. The two of us won our fair share of sodas.

As he taught me to bowl on those sunny days, my dad was fluid and graceful. Those were times we could be athletic together, however fleetingly. So when my wife, Mara, and I built our house a number of years ago, I made sure that we installed a bowling lane in the basement—to remember Dad by.

Though certainly better off than my father, my mother was rarely in perfect health herself. Her weight was a dark cloud on almost every aspect of her life. She initiated many discussions about her dying with my brothers and me, even when we were young. She'd make sure she had our attention, and then launch into her go-to hypothetical.

"If I die . . ." she'd say to us, then provide specific instructions for money, the apartment, and taking care of each other. Death hovered around her.

My mother was one of the first people to get gastric bypass surgery, in 1970. The operation caused a lot of complications; it was scary. She was in the hospital for about five months, and my brothers and I had no idea what was going on. Our Aunt Lee lived four miles away, with my mother's father, and she kept a bit of

an eye on us. We took a bus to my grandfather's house for dinner many nights. My aunt meant well, but she was not the warmest person. She resented having to look after us, and we felt it.

I know she had her own issues to deal with, but I've always had difficulty understanding why Aunt Lee didn't put on a sunnier face for us. If she had assumed her caretaker role with a little more generosity in her heart, it would have made a world of difference to my brothers and me. And the whole thing would have been easier—and maybe even gratifying and enjoyable—for her.

If you do somebody a favor, why not do it in good faith, with a positive attitude? If she had been a bit kinder, I would have built Aunt Lee a statue by now. Instead of feeling ambivalent about her my whole life.

It was a very troubling time, and at one point, my mother almost died. Her liver was on the brink of failure. All of a sudden we were rushed to the hospital, totally bewildered.

Children under 12 weren't allowed in the intensive care unit, which was on one of the upper floors. But since the doctors thought my mom was likely to die, they lifted her out of bed, plopped her in a wheelchair, and took her to the lobby to say goodbye to us.

I'll never forget how my mother looked at that moment, slumped in that chair, practically falling over the side. It was very sad. She was so depleted. I felt like I was looking at death.

That night, there was a lot of tension back at my grandfather's place. I remember getting into a screaming fight with him and Aunt Lee, who worried that my brothers and me were about to be foisted on her, permanently.

Somehow, my mother made a miraculous recovery. I still don't know how.

“I was about to pass to the other side,” she liked to say to us. “But the thought of Aunt Lee raising you brought me back.”

Despite the traumatic complications of the weight-loss surgery, a year later, my mother was set on losing still more weight, so she checked herself into an in-patient weight loss clinic at the hospital. She was away another few months. In a span of three years, my mother wasn't home for over a year. It was just my brothers and me, living in that little apartment with virtually no parental supervision, other than my mother calling sometimes. Even though Cary was the oldest, I basically took on the role of running the house—as much as anyone was running anything. I did most of the shopping, bill paying, cooking, and other essential chores. Many times I had to take my mother's checkbook to write out the rent check myself, then beg the landlord to hold it for a few days while we paid for some other necessities.

I even made trips to the local Con Ed office when we were unable to pay our electric bill, to plead for an extension. I had to stand at a distance from the counter so I could angle my head to see the lady behind it. I begged her not to cut off our power.

Having to take on so many responsibilities at a young age was amazing training—the kind that makes running a company feel almost easy. But those years caused profound problems for me, Cary, and Adam, because we had too much independence. We never had anyone looking over our shoulders to help us with our homework, make sure we stayed out of trouble, or show us how to do the right thing. Drugs and alcohol found both of my brothers too soon. But it was different for me. From a very young age, I learned to find more productive things to keep me busy through all of the family drama. That was how I first came to fall in love with sports—it offered an escape from my home life. On any given day, I did everything I could either to go to a game, watch a game, or play in a game. When my friends and I got

too old to play in the schoolyard, many of them transferred that energy to girls, drugs, or alcohol. But I wasn't yet into any of that.

Instead, I started going to the Jewish Community House of Bensonhurst every day after school. The JCH had a pool, a basketball court, and everything else you could think of. It also had a small tuition requirement that I couldn't afford, but my mom found a way to take care of that.

The executive director of the JCH was a former Lincoln High School gym teacher named Milt Gold. Milt was a local legend of sorts, having served as a father figure to hundreds, if not thousands, of Brooklyn kids in his decades running the JCH. In addition to coaching, he took a real interest in improving the lives of young people, encouraging them in their hobbies and passions, and steering them away from dangerous or illicit behaviors. My mom went to him personally to implore him to spend some time with me. He took a real liking to me, and effectively gave me a scholarship to attend the JCH for free.

I'd run there the minute school ended, and play ball right up to dinner. Sometimes I even went back there after I ate, and played until they had to kick me out and lock up for the night. For a couple of years, I was also a forward on the JCH's basketball club team. We played teams from other community centers from all over the tri-state area. Milt always made sure we had some of the nicest uniforms in Brooklyn. That might sound like a small thing, but to a kid like me, who could never afford nice clothes, putting on that jersey was like becoming someone else for an evening—someone deserving, and special, and cared for. I'll always be grateful to Milt for those particular memories of my adolescent years.

When I wasn't at the JCH, I was spending time at my friends' houses, each of which had the advantage of a potential meal. I was usually starving. I could always count on Charlie Marcus's place to have a big home-cooked dinner, while David Badar always

had money for Chinese food or pizza. There were a number of parents in the neighborhood that looked after my brothers and me when they had the time.

I worked at making friends anywhere I could, with people from all different social circles and ethnic backgrounds. I was friends with the Italians, the Syrians, the Jewish kids; I was friends with the nerds and the jocks. I was able to get along with folks from all different walks of life; I needed to keep busy, and that meant being able to move between groups effortlessly.

For a long time while we were growing up, my mother took in boarders—random people she knew who were passing through Brooklyn for one reason or another. She felt that she was accruing good karma hosting these transients. I welcomed the houseguests, because I felt there was so much I could learn from them. I would ask them endless questions about their lives, their jobs, the things they'd seen.

That was one of the great things about Brooklyn. You had to have balls growing up there, but being part of such a diverse community of people—all trying to get by—also gave you a big heart. On a daily basis, I interacted with and relied upon so many different kinds of people that it was impossible *not* to develop a strong sense of empathy. Now, kids can go on the web and discover hundreds of lives unlike their own. In Brooklyn, we got that experience every time we got on the subway. It was priceless preparation for adult life, and for my business.

Understanding different types of people—being able to channel their wants and needs—gives you an edge in business. Having a network of friends with very diverse personalities, from all different backgrounds, can lead to amazing opportunities that might not otherwise come up.