

FIFTH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

THE Westchester REVIEW

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 Bronxville Buchanan Chappaqua Cortlandt Cortlandt Manor Crompond Cross River Croton Falls Croton-on-Hudson
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 North Salem North White Plains Ossining
 Peekskill Pelham Pleasantville
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 Tuckahoe Valhalla
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THE WESTCHESTER REVIEW

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CONTENTS

PROSE

<i>Chores</i>	Kate Wheeler	1
<i>Food Chain</i>	Tracy Williamson	13
<i>Enemy in Our Hands</i>	Dylan Gilbert	17
<i>Crazy Joe</i>	Angela Derecas Taylor	36
<i>Smoke</i>	Blythe Hamer	44
<i>Sleight of Hand</i>	Neil Selinger	61
<i>The Devil's Millhopper</i>	Luann Jacobs	67
<i>My Lost Stories</i>	Steve Lewis	78
<i>Purple Heart</i>	Douglas Krohn	85
<i>The Dream of the Broken Thing</i>	Andrew Bomback	92
<i>A Conversation with Billy Collins</i>	Debra Banerjee	105
<i>This Is How I Will Hold You</i>	Don Peteroy	115
<i>Monsters in the Attic</i>	Werner Hengst	127
<i>Lulu</i>	Gary Percesepe	136
<i>Her Majesty's Outpost</i>	A. L. Steindorff	147
<i>Because of Heat, Things Expand</i>	Jesse Hassenger	158
<i>Second Summers</i>	Kevin Egan	172
<i>191 Days of Active Charles</i>	Jonathan Vatner	184
<i>Hurricane Season</i>	Tania Moore	200

ART

<i>Drawings</i>	Mark Podwal	111
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Crazy Joe

Angela Derecas Taylor

IT WAS FOUR IN THE MORNING AND WE FINALLY DECIDED TO CALL IT a night, spreading out our sleeping bags around the living room of Joy's sprawling apartment. We were a gaggle of ten- and eleven-year-old girls celebrating our friend's eleventh birthday, at a sleepover party, a "first" for many of us. Within minutes of settling down into the quiet darkness we heard loud talking and laughter in the hall.

Then a man's voice shouting, "C'mon you little dishes! Open up!" The door lurched ajar, stopped by the chain lock. We were all terrified, then confused as Joy jumped out of her sleeping bag.

"It's just my dad foolin' around," she said. "He and his friends like to play jokes on people." Then to the obscured face standing in the doorway she said, "What are you doing here? It's my birthday party and you're ruining it. What do you want?"

I had a straight-on view of the doorway from where I was, crouched under the dining room table we had draped with blankets earlier to form the *fortune-telling parlor*, where we scared each other with Ouija board prophesies. But because of the darkness of the room and the contrasting bright light of the hallway, I could only make out the silhouettes of three men dressed in trousers, overcoats, and fedoras.

"Your *birthday*? Well, happy birthday, kiddo. How old are you anyway?" Joe Gallo pushed past his daughter and into the apartment. He then turned to the two men in the hall.

"Alright. Youse can take off now," he said.

"You sure, Joey? Cuz we can just stay in the hall."

"Nah. Get outta here. I'm gonna spend some time with my kid."
Then Joey shut the door and secured the deadbolt and chain lock.

"I'm eleven," she said. "Pretty sad you don't even know how old your own daughter is."

JOY AND I HAD BEEN FRIENDS since we were five years old. Kids of divorced working moms, we were both enrolled in the Greenwich House kindergarten and day-care program on Barrow Street in Greenwich Village. Joe Gallo had been in prison serving a ten-year sentence for extortion since just after Joy was born, in January of 1961, so I had never met him. And until just a few months prior to the sleepover birthday party, Joy had never met him either.

I do remember a man whom Joy had always introduced as her "step-dad" but that guy disappeared shortly before Joey was released from prison in 1971 and moved into the apartment with Joy and her mother, Jeffie. I am not sure of the exact dates because it was all very secretive and confusing at the time, but what was very clear, and no secret at all, was that Joy was less than thrilled and often expressed her anger and resentment at her father's sudden appearance into her life and home when she was ten years old. But that was short-lived because by Joy's eleventh birthday party, in January of 1972, Joey and Jeffie had split up again and Joey was living in the same building, but upstairs in the penthouse apartment, with Sina Essary, who would soon become his second wife, and her daughter, Lisa, who was at the sleepover with us.

"TAKE IT EASY. I was just kidding with you. I know how old you are. Where's your mudda? I wanna meet your friends," he said while he made his way across the room, stepping over sleeping bags and turning on all the lights. He sat down on the sofa and cleared everything off the coffee table. "Alright you little Bettys, let's have some fun. Anyone here ever played blackjack?"

"My *mo-ther* is asleep in her bedroom and no, we don't want to play blackjack! You're drunk!" Joy said.

But we all ignored Joy and gathered around the coffee table, mesmerized. Now even though none of us, except Joy and Lisa, knew Joey Gallo personally, we all knew of him and there was something surreally attractive to all of us—city kids, growing up in Greenwich Village in the 1960s and '70s—sitting around a coffee table at four in the morning, about to learn how to play blackjack from Crazy Joe Gallo, this *tough guy*, this real, live gangster.

“NO, IT’S NOT A GOOD IDEA for you to go to Joy’s birthday sleepover,” my dad had said when I told him that I was invited to the party. “I don’t want you in her apartment at all, let alone over night.”

“Why, Daddy? She’s my best friend. And I’ve been to her place, like, a million times. What’s wrong with her apartment all of a sudden?”

“That was before he got out of prison. He’s a bad guy. There are people out there who want him dead and I don’t want you in that building when someone decides to shoot it up.”

“Well, Mommy knows him. She says she sees him at the Copa and that he’s charming and a really good dancer. She said I could go and I’m going!”

“Terrific. Your mother and her wise-guy friends. You’ll see . . . one of these days . . .”

I WAS CONTEMPLATING that earlier conversation with my dad while watching Crazy Joe Gallo deal the cards. He handed each of us a dollar in quarters and then gave a stack of bills to Joy, whom he designated the cashier, the one who would “cash us out,” he explained. And for the next two hours he taught his eager pupils. He showed us how to ante up, when to take a hit, and when to hold; when to see the bet, when to raise, and when to fold. He was sort of charming, just as Mommy had said, and also kind of handsome, with his slicked-back dark hair, light-blue eyes, and cleft chin. Sure, the big mole on his left cheek was distracting at first, but once you got to know him a bit it seemed to disappear.

By 6:00 a.m. I had turned the borrowed dollar in quarters into

a five-dollar bill in winnings, and having mastered the game of blackjack, I decided to call it quits.

"Thanks, Mr. Gallo. That was fun," I said as I attempted to hand him the money I had accumulated.

"You keep the dough. You won it fair and square," he said, leaning away from my extended hand.

"Oh, no, I couldn't keep it, sir. That's your money. I was just playing for fun."

"What's your name, kid?" he said cocking his head to the side and speaking out of the corner of a half smile. "I think I know your mudda. You look just like her. What's that broad's name? Her family owns that restaurant, Angelina's, on Greenwich Avenue, across from the schoolyard, right? That dame's got some set 'a' gams. I seen her dancing at the Copa—she's got a nickname; they call her 'Flo,' right?"

"Her name is Gloria," I said slowly. "I think some people call her 'Glo.'"

I was on guard and feeling uneasy now, keeping my answer short, careful not to confirm my relationship to the restaurant nor reveal my mother's nickname, which was actually *Glo-Girl*, suddenly aware of my father's voice repeating itself in my head: "*Once you accept a favor from a gangster, you owe him, and that's it, there's no way out.*" "*I don't want you in that building when someone decides to shoot it up.*" "*He's a bad guy. They call him Crazy Joe. He's killed people.*"

Crazy Joe leaned forward now, taking hold of my wrist, the one that held the cash, his face sober and unsmiling, and he said, "Let me tell you something, kid. Somebody gives you money with no strings attached, you take it. You hear me, kid?"

Then, shoving my hand away violently, he said, "Naw, you can't be Glo's kid. That broad would never refuse a buck."

He finished his sentence with a broad-toothed smile, collapsing back onto the sofa and throwing his head up toward the ceiling, opening and raising both of his arms up as if in devout prayer, while shouting over and over again, "Glo, Glo, what happened to ya, Glo? Whad-ya do to this kid, Glo?"

And all I could think was, "He is crazy."

By this time, Joy's mother, Jeffie, was awake and came sprinting from her bedroom. "What's all the noise about? What the hell are you doing with the kids, Joey? Get outta here! Go back upstairs to your goddamned *girlfriend*. And the rest of you, go to sleep!"

Once Joey had left I took the crumpled money out of my clenched hand, doing my best to flatten it while sneaking it into one of the many books lining the living room shelves. For years I wondered if anyone ever found that five-dollar bill and how they might have imagined it got there. When I got home from the sleepover later that day, I told my mother about meeting Crazy Joe and the blackjack game.

"That SOB was right," she said. "You should have kept the money!"

ON APRIL SEVENTH OF THAT SAME YEAR, 1972, Joe Gallo was shot dead celebrating his forty-third birthday at Umberto's Clam House on Mulberry Street. He had just a few weeks before married Sina Essary, and she and her eleven-year-old daughter, Lisa, were at the table having dinner with Joey when he was killed. It was on every news channel and in all the headlines the next morning.

"Dad, you were right!" I screamed into the phone. "They shot Crazy Joe . . . in a restaurant . . . full of people! They came in and they killed him, just like you always said they would."

"See," my father said. "Aren't you glad you weren't invited to *that* birthday party?" ◇