



Overheard on a NYC Stoop in the Summer of 1938

6:15 a.m. - Francis pauses to light a cigarette before going to his shift at the New York subway station. He comments on the news of the day upon the arrival of Karl, the milkman.

Francis: Morning, Karl.

Karl: Hi, Francis. One quart, one pint?

Francis: Cora wants two creams, she's baking.

Karl: Baking? When it's so hot?

Francis: Birthday cake - for a little celebration today.

(pause) *Karl:* you from Austria?

Karl: Yeah.

Francis: Radio says Germans taking it over - Worried about family?

Karl: Nah. Not much will change - (lifting milk bottle carrier) Gotta go.

Francis: (butting out his cigarette on the brownstone step, begins whistling to break the neighborhood silence and bounds off.)

8 a.m. - Bombo and Ratzy (both 9) are securing their clamp-on roller skates and planning their morning's activities. Bombo has lost his skate key.

Ratzy: You're always losing stuff. (After tightening his skates.) Here's mine. (pause) Where we goin' today?

Bombo: Thought we'd go down to the schoolyard. The kids will be there.

Ratzy: Do you have a 'spaldine'? (*soft, pink handball, a.k.a., Spalding.)

Bombo: No.

Ratzy: Let's get Eddie. He always has stuff.

Bombo: Race you to the corner.

9:30 a.m. - Mrs. Schwartz, on her way to the grocery, pauses to talk to Luiz, the 'Super', who sits on the top step in the shade.

Mrs. Schwartz: Luiz, I'm glad I caught you. I've got a problem with the window to the fire escape. It's stuck shut. I can't get any air. (pause) I'm running the water to cool the apartment.

Luiz: That wastes water

Mrs. Schwartz: It's free. It comes with the rent.

Luiz: I'll try to get to it. The wet weather makes the windows swell shut.

Mrs. Schwartz: I'll be back before long to let you in. (pause) Oh, and the toilet is making a funny noise - and the ice box is leaking a little. (descending the steps) See you later.

9:35 a.m. - Annie (20) emerges from the doorway and sees Luiz, sitting. She primps her hair and stretches to be seen by all. Annie is single and, like most young women of the time, jobless. She plans to go the park today to look, be seen, and pass the time of day.

Annie: Good morning, Luiz. Isn't it a beautiful day?

Luiz: Yes - (tentatively) a little warm.

Annie: I'm off to the park. I brought a little popcorn for the pigeons.

Luiz: If you don't mind the walk, you might go on to the Bronx Zoo - my favorite. I usually cut through the Botanic Garden on the way.

Annie: Good idea. I have the time - and I love animals - and flowers.

Luiz: It's also a good place to meet nice people.

Annie: Thanks, Luiz. You are a friend. (Annie descends with a flourish.)

10:35 a.m. - Harvey, hair slicked down and dressed in a suit and tie, finds Otto sitting on the stoop, waiting. Both in their mid-forties, they are regular partners on a Bocce bowling team that meets regularly at the lanes under the bridge.

Harvey: Sorry I'm late. I won't be able to join you today. I have a job interview.

Otto: Really? That's great. What's the job?

Harvey: It would be at the Post Office.

Otto: Wow, a government job.

Harvey: My wife heard about it from a friend whose husband works at Tammany Hall.

Otto: Would it help if you were Irish?

Harvey: Probably. Maybe, I'll tell them I'm half Irish.

Otto: Soon, people will be coming to you for a loan.

Harvey: Gotta run. I want to be early.

Otto: Good Luck. See you when you get back.

11:30 a.m. - Olive, Eleanor, and Clara, are assembled on the shaded top stoop steps to wait for Josephine. Together, they will walk to hear the monthly lecture at the YWCA. The noon meeting they plan to attend will include a lecture on birth control services and the evolving rights of women. Each has packed her own lunch.

Olive: I'm opposed to abortion

Clara: Me, too. (pause) It's a sin against God.

Eleanor: The lecture is about contraception - about not having babies.

Clara: That worries me too. We know how not to have babies.

Olive: I would like to have another boy, but we can't afford it.

Clara: ... not a girl?

Josephine: (arriving out of doorway) Sorry, I'm late. I had to mend my dress.

Eleanor: You do a lot of dressmaking, don't you. I have some material ...

Olive: (interrupting) Let's go.

As the group descends the staircase, Luiz, the 'Super' appears at the open doorway, easing a baby carriage down the steps. He is followed by Alice, carrying Paul, her ten-month-old baby boy. Alice greets the ladies as she descends to the street and places Paul in the carriage. Paul is adorned with a baby hat and a crucifix. The ladies surround the carriage and, cooingly, express their admiration for the baby.

Alice: We're going to get some fresh air. It's so stuffy inside.

Olive: (somewhat irritated at the delay) We've got to get going. Bye.

Alice: Bye.

11:45 a.m. - As the ladies leave, Bombo and Ratzy skate into view and take seats on the stoop to remove their skates. They have been playing pick-up ball games with friends at their school playground and are worn down from hours of running. They are ready for lunch.

Bombo: My skate wheels are getting worn off.

Ratzy: (removing skates)...cause you're so fat. Here's the key.

Bombo: Our team won most of the games today. We made good picks.

Ratzy: We didn't need Ruthie. She's ugly and stupid.

Bombo: I don't think so. (pause) She's okay..

Ratzy: She's a Jew.

Bombo: See ya' after lunch. Maybe some stoop ball later?

Ratzy: (standing and leaving) Yeah. (thinking) Does your mom have an old broom we can have for a bat?

Bombo: I don't think so. I'll ask.

Cora: (in doorway, calling) Tommy! We've got a surprise.

Bombo (Tommy): Comin', Mom.

11:55 a.m. - Al, the ice man, arrives in his truck and wields his pick to carve a large ice block into 25 and 50 cent pieces. He offers shards of fugitive ice to the attendant group of children that have followed the truck. Al is good natured and enjoys their attention as

he makes multiple deliveries up the stoop and into the apartment building. Finished, he drives his truck a short distance to the front of the next apartment building. Some of the children follow. Most are headed home for lunch.

1:20 p.m. - Olive, Eleanor, Clara, and Josephine (walking and chattering) return from their meeting and promptly start to climb the stairs to return to their apartments. Seeing Harvey sitting, slouched over, on the stoop, Olive, his wife, hangs back waiting for the others to disappear into the building. Olive is agitated, angry. She confronts Harvey.

Olive: Amy told me you showed up drunk; stinking of booze.

Harvey: I wasn't drunk. I just stopped along the way for a beer to calm my nerves. I, ...

Olive: My mother warned me that you were a no-good bum. And what do I see in your pocket? (Olive reaches into Harvey's jacket and removes a quart bottle of beer which she, then, furiously, smashes on the steps of the stoop.) Go home to your mother's - and sleep it off.

1:45 p.m. - Annie returns from the Bronx Zoo, elated. She has news to share with Luiz - or anyone who will listen. - In a few minutes, Luiz emerges from the basement to the left of the stoop, carrying a broom, dustpan, and watering can. He is going to sweep the steps of debris and flush the spilled liquid.

Annie: Luiz, I am so excited. I have a date tonight. I met this nice guy at the Zoo - at the primate house. He works there. We talked and he gave me a banana to stick through the bars to give to a monkey. It was part of its diet since visitors are not supposed to feed the animals. We talked and he asked me for my address to take me out. He will pick me up at 6:00. I can hardly wait to tell mom.

Luiz: Wonderful. I am happy for you.

Annie: I am going in now to get ready.

2:00 p.m. - Alice, returning from the park with baby, Paul, arrives at the steps to the stoop. Mrs. Schwartz, seeing her from her first floor window, calls to her to wait. She will rouse Ruiz to help with the baby carriage.

Mrs. Schwartz: Wait. I'll get the 'Super' to help. I hope the baby didn't get too much sun. You can't be too careful when they're little. I'll be right down.

Alice: We're okay. We found a nice, shady spot to read and nap.

Mrs. Schwartz: (hurrying down the stairs) This is your first baby. You have a lot to learn.

Do you have baby oil, Noxema, Vick's Vaporub, nose drops, a thermometer? Have you learned how to make a mustard plaster yet? I will be glad to show you what you need.

Alice: Thanks, Mrs. Schwartz, you are so kind. So far, Paul has not had any problems baby powder can't handle, but I worry when he cries.

Mrs. Schwartz: Call on me whenever you need help. (Luiz carries the carriage up the stairs.)

2:30 p.m. - Otto, Eleanor, and Clara (all long term tenants) rest on the stoop in the shade as neighborhood children frolic in the street. Someone has turned on a hydrant and the children are splashing water and tramping in the gutter. Otto nurses a bottle of beer while Eleanor holds knitting needles from her basket. Clara passes out powdered muffins she purchased this morning.

Clara: I don't know if it is hotter inside or outside. At least, there is a breeze here.

Otto: I like it better outside.

Clara: Is there going to be a war? I read that the war department may start recruiting air raid spotters.

Otto: If there is war, it will only be in Europe. We are safe here.

Eleanor: I hope so. I think Hitler is crazy.

Otto: Mr. Hitler is not crazy. He is just consolidating the German nation. Listen to his speeches.

Eleanor: There are a lot of Germans here.

Otto: We don't want war.

4:00 p.m. - FIRE! Bombo and Ratzy have been playing with matches and have, inadvertently, started a fire in a trash pile at the rear of the apartment building. Not knowing how to put it out, they yell and scamper away. Fortunately, a backyard neighbor, a gardener with a hose, hears them and attends to the blaze before it can spread. However, the scene has been seen from the open windows and rear fire escapes; the dreaded word has been heard and the authorities called. Almost all the apartment building's residents are assembled on the street and stairwell as the fire engine arrives.

Fireman: Where's the fire?

Multiple Voices: ...in the back.... but it's out now.

Fireman: How did it get started?

Cora (Tommy's mom): Kids playing with matches.

Fireman: After we check, we want to talk to those kids.

Cora: Are you going to arrest them?

Fireman: Just talk to them - scare them. Where'd they get the matches?

6:00 p.m. - John climbs the stairs and rings the bell to Annie's apartment. He is greeted by Josephine, Annie's mother, who has been eager to see him. Josephine is pleased at his neat appearance and feels reassured for her daughter's safety. Annie will be ready shortly.

Annie: (ready to descend the stairs) Where are we going?

John: I thought we would eat at the Italian restaurant a few blocks down the Concourse. I hope you like Italian - and seafood?

Annie: I love Italian - and seafood. Are you Italian?

John: No, my family came from Ireland. My grandmother still speaks Gaelic. And you?

Annie: We're Hungarian (swallows) and Jewish.

John: Then, I guess, you don't speak Gaelic.

Annie: (reassured, laughs and takes his hand as they descend to the still damp pavement.) I love bread sticks.

7:00 p.m. - Harvey returns to his apartment, quietly and contritely, hoping that Olive will let him in. Harvey: (after ringing doorbell, waits on the steps). Olive appears and, wordlessly, lets him enter.

8:15 p.m. - Annie and John stroll leisurely to the base of the stoop, as if to prolong the end of their evening. Twilight has brought moderate temperature and a refreshing beauty to the sky.

John: I want to thank you for a lovely evening. I really enjoyed your company.

Annie: (over the moon at John's declarations) It was wonderful. I never had calamari before.

John: I hope we can do this again. And if you come back to the park, I'll give you another banana.

Annie: Would you like to sit for awhile? (John takes her hand.)

10:15 p.m. - All is quiet now, with the exception of an occasional distant siren and nearby crying baby. A single street lamp faintly illuminates the stoop. In an hour, a patrolman will pass by.

Finally, very early the next morning, the unmistakable sounds of a municipal street sweeper and, shortly thereafter, the sanitation truck, announce the approach of a new day.