

Directions

Back in the 1950's when I was in high school, if you stood in the middle of the Busy Corner in Utica, N.Y. I mean the exact center of the intersection, right on the manhole cover that I always wanted to open when I was a kid and descend into the inner workings of the city and meet the mayor and the Common Council ... you might eventually get run down by a delivery truck on its way back to the Boston Store or you'd get asked for directions.

Sure enough, as I arrived at the manhole after high school classes on a fine autumn day and said Hi to my Uncle Billy, a man pulled his Ford to a stop and rolled down the window to ask for directions from downtown Utica to Fairfax Place in the southern end of the city.

"Well, you go up this street right here, Genesee ..." began my Uncle Billy.

"Do you mean North?" interrupted the driver, confused.

"No, up," Billy replied.

"North is down in Utica," I interjected, "if you're from Cornhill."

"Then you make a right on the Parkway" said Billy.

"It's called Burrstone Road after it crosses

Genesee," I said. I've always believed in being accurate.

"Well, anyway," said my uncle, "where the orphanage is."

"Torn down five years ago," I said to no one in particular.

Billy turned to me and asked, "What's that street where your Mom smashed up the Mercury?"

"It was the Buick," I said.

"That's where you want to turn," said Billy to the perplexed man, "but you have to go up Sunset Avenue first."

"Which used to be called Perkins Avenue," I added for historical value.

"So a left down Sunset?" said the man.

"No," my uncle said, "a left *up* Sunset."

"Past the fire house," I said.

"And over the tracks," said my uncle.

"Stop, look and listen," I added.

"No trains there any more," said Billy, as his fingers played lightly across the bullets on his wide black belt.

"Probably no tracks, either," I said.

"Look for Cornwall Ave. on your left," said my uncle. "Make a left and go down to the end of the street and you'll be at Our Lady of Lourdes School."

"I graduated from there in 1957," I added,

helpfully.

"And your brother, too," said Billy. "Didn't he graduate the year before?"

"They were gonna kick him out," I said.

"The boy just had a little extra spirit, that's all," said Billy

"He kissed the May Day girl after she crowned the statue of Mary with flowers," I explained.

"Kind of a romantic kid, I guess you could say," chuckled Billy.

"Ran up in front of the whole assembly and caught Mary Lou Ryan coming down off the ladder. Kissed her on the lips," I said, relishing the memory. Half the kids were laughing, the others sat stunned, clutching their rosaries. The nuns for once found themselves caught with their holy pants down.

"Why did he do that?" asked the man in the Ford.

"On a dare, a bet," I said. "He won a quarter and a pack of Juicy Fruit gum. And Mary Lou's eternal enmity."

"Eternal what?" said Billy, pushing his policeman's cap back on his head.

Down the street ... to the north ... I could see cars backed up and a few trying to pull out into the next lane to get by our little conference. Closer, a Boston Store truck was edging out into traffic to get around us.

"Hey," said the man in the Ford.. "What about Fairfax Place?"

"It's right there," said Billy. "The school is at the

foot of the very street you're looking for."

"But not Mary Lou," I said, "she's joining the convent."

"Your brother must be devastated," said the man, but I'm not sure he was sincere.

"My brother is convinced she loves him deeply, to this day," I said.

"That's crazy," he replied.

"Maybe not," said my uncle. "After all, our hearts ..." and here he paused and stood tall and pulled his gun belt up over his pot belly ... "our hearts are held intact by our egos."

The man in the car looked at me. I shrugged and turned toward my uncle.

"That's kinda poetic, Uncle Bill," I said. "Here, hold my Geometry book while I write that down."

"I can't," said Billy, "I'm supposed to be directing traffic."

"You're both crazy," said the man as he pushed down the accelerator and zoomed off up the street. Up would be south.

"I think you annoyed that man," said my uncle.

"Not me," I said, "I just supplied the footnotes."

"Let's do it again tomorrow," he said.

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