

PROLOGUE

THE MESSENGER

I woke up shivering uncontrollably. My family and I were living in a two-room tenement apartment on the second floor of a walk-up building in the South Bronx. My sister and I shared the one bedroom, and my parents slept in the other room, which also served as our living room, kitchen and dining room. The apartment had little to no heat in winter. My mother would often leave a glass of water on my night table, and the following morning it would be frozen solid.

My shivering on that frigid morning in February of 1954 was due to more than the winter storm raging outside; I was very ill with both a sore throat and a high fever. These were the years when such an illness in a child was thought to be a prelude to polio or rheumatic fever, scourges of youth that had affected some children in our building and at school. My mother was in a panic, and my father was absent, as was often the case, at work in his clothing business. Unable to see the doctor in his office, my mother called on the phone, and asked if he could possibly make a house visit. Despite the terrible weather, he agreed to come over that evening after his office hours were finished.

Our family physician was Dr. Albert Goodman, an appropriate surname, to be sure. The waiting room in his office was always full, and no appointment was necessary to see him. He was of medium build, with thick, wavy brown hair. With his large pale blue eyes and kind face, there was a serene manner about him that put his patients instantly at ease. When he greeted me, I always felt as if I were a long lost relative or friend he was seeing again after a long absence. He had an accent foreign to the Bronx, having been raised in a small town in Western Pennsylvania. He had married his secretary later in life, in his early fifties, and they had young children. He drove the only Cadillac in the neighborhood, and lived in a large house in the Pelham Parkway section of the Bronx.

When he arrived that February night, I was still sick in bed, having undergone the usual alcohol and witch hazel sponge bath to bring down my fever. The apartment was freezing cold with the howling wind penetrating the window cracks, and I was doing my best to be brave, despite lingering fears my illness would get far worse before it got better.

The poverty of our existence in the Bronx was aggravated by the constant arguments of my parents over money. Every night my sister and I were awakened by a barrage of insults that my mother would throw at my father as soon as he walked through the door, after a hard day at work. The other sounds of the night were no better, which I clearly heard from our bedroom window overlooking a cement courtyard in the rear; the din of the above ground subway trains, other parents arguing, beggars pleading for charity, cries of babies and children, drunken revelers, loud music and televisions playing, and the squeals of passion, which I would learn to appreciate in later years.

At eight o'clock in the evening we heard footsteps on the stairs outside. Dr. Goodman knocked on the door and was let in by my mother. He came into the bedroom and with the ice and the snow covering his hair, face and overcoat, he appeared like an apparition. I don't know if it was the fever,

or my fear, or the desperation I felt about my family's situation, but on that night I began to believe in angels. Not the chubby-cheeked cherubim that adorn greeting cards with golden halos and wings, but an emissary of healing, good will and kindness that walks among us. The Hebrew word for angel is "malach" which also means "messenger." That evening, Dr. Goodman was my angel, a sublime messenger who not only comforted and soothed me, but also awakened me to my destiny and an escape from the poverty that surrounded me.

After removing his outer clothes, Dr. Goodman came to my bedside to begin my examination. He looked around the room, sensing the cold, and began asking questions to both my mother and I about my symptoms. He was pensive as he began examining my throat, glands, lungs and heart. His stethoscope felt cold against my skin. Dr. Goodman began the abdominal exam with his hands, and while probing me asked a simple question, "Billy, what do you want to be when you grow up?" Not sure of what to answer, I heard myself reply, "a doctor." When he heard my answer, Dr. Goodman smiled and nodded his head while he completed his exam with the reflex hammer. He then reassured my mother that I only had a virus, and would soon recover. I was not going to die, and even the dreaded penicillin injection was not necessary.

He put on his overcoat, with the snow now melted, picked up his black medical bag and walked toward the door. My mother brought out her purse to pay him his customary five dollar fee for a house call. Surprisingly, he paused, pushed her hand away and looked at me steadily with his kind blue eyes while saying, "Billy is going to be a doctor. I am giving him professional courtesy." He then walked out of our apartment, down the stairs and into the blustery storm. My mother started to cry, and said, "an angel has just visited us." It was as if she had read my mind. She was correct, of course. I knew from that point forward what I wanted to do with my life – devote it to service and to easing the suffering of my fellow man. Little did I know at the tender age of seven what would be asked of me in following that destiny. What I do know, is that I would never recall a kinder act in my entire life.