Celluloid Activist

Schiavi, Michael

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Early in 1980, Vito Russo joined the staff of London’s Gay News. When he confessed his infatuation with British culture and men to his best friend, activist and author Arnie Kantrowitz, he received this tart reply: “Don’t think you’ll get away with ‘cheerio’ and ‘ring me up’ around here. Acquired British accents crack like stale meringue . . . and we haven’t forgotten that you were born on a hot night in Manhattan from Sicilian thighs.”

Vito wasn’t about to forget his heritage. Had Martin Scorsese’s Goodfellas been gay film critics rather than Mob hit men, he could have joined their circle without missing a wingtipped step. His wide brown eyes, olive skin, and hairy chest bore the stamp of Italy; his frenetic hand gestures crackled with Sicilian snap. And the city of his birth was obvious whenever he opened his mouth. Vito’s take-no-prisoners speech patterns sounded the East Harlem honk known universally as New Yorkese.

Twenty years after Vito’s death, we remember him as the author of The Celluloid Closet, as one of Gay Liberation’s angriest agitators, and as one of the earliest, most eloquent voices raised on behalf of people with AIDS. But we must also recognize Vito as the descendent of four struggling Italian grandparents who landed in New York City some fifty years before his birth. The life that they built for their seventeen children set the stage—or screen, as Vito would no doubt have preferred—for a grandson they could never have imagined on arrival at Ellis Island.

The “Sicilian thighs” of Arnie’s letter belonged to Angelina (Annie) Salerno Russo. Vito’s mother was the youngest of the ten children of Angelina (née Fituccia) and Ciro Salerno, who had immigrated to New York from Messina, Sicily, around the turn of the century. In the Italian enclave of Manhattan’s Lower East Side, they settled at 266 Elizabeth Street and had their first child,
daughter Sarah, soon afterward. Another four girls and four boys followed before Angelina Jr. was born on October 13, 1922, on East 1st Street. As the last in a line of siblings old enough to be her parents, little Annie barely knew her oldest brothers and sisters.

Angelina and Ciro had little means of support for their rapidly expanding family. Saddled with a new child every other year, Angelina was confined to home and unable to work or acquire education. After decades in the United States, she could understand English but spoke very little of it, and she never did learn the correct spelling of her married name. Annie’s next-oldest sister, Jean, instructed their mother to make a cross for her signature.

Though Ciro had no more schooling than his wife, he learned to call himself “Charles” in work settings dominated by Irish immigrants who scorned Italian greenhorns. The new name fooled nobody, but Charles became passably fluent in English from his odd jobs. As a teenager, Jean was startled to find her father selling lemons on Houston Street. She hadn’t heard about this latest gig, one of an endless string. A stint working in New York’s new subway system cost Charles four fingers and made him realize he would have to be more careful in future employment. His loss of manual ability would mean the family’s starvation.

By the time of Annie’s birth, her parents were exhausted from decades of child rearing in a culture that never ceased to seem foreign to them. In 1922, Angelina was forty-four, Charles was forty-eight, and they had had enough of the smelly, jam-packed Lower East Side. Charles got his first glimpse of life north of Houston Street when he heard of a super’s job at a powerhouse on 10th Avenue and West 59th Street. A move was finally possible, and the Salernos rented a spacious apartment at 313 West 69th Street. Abutting West End Avenue, it was situated in the middle of another Italian slum—but with fresh Hudson breezes and elegant 70th Street townhouses a block west and north, the new digs represented a considerable step up for the family. When Angelina first stepped off the subway at Broadway and West 72nd Street, she flushed to see impeccably dressed ladies in elegant hats crisscrossing the avenue. She, in contrast, was sweaty and disheveled from her long train ride, during which baby Annie had thrown up on her shoulder. Thereafter, Angelina took pains to dress “like a chicken in the house and a queen outside” when she ventured into her new neighborhood.

The first apartment that Annie remembered had six big rooms and, miraculously, a backyard where the family could raise rabbits and chickens. While it provided far more space than the Salernos had ever known, 313 West 69th was also a cold-water building, and Angelina had to make do with a coal-burning stove. Eighty years later, Jean remembers the apartment’s blistering heat as her mother cooked vats of spaghetti and pork chops for children and grandchildren. Dinners during the 1920s found fifteen people seated at Angelina’s overflowing table while she toiled in the kitchen. Jean’s next-oldest sister, Marie, recalled precious little
meat at those family dinners. She would later tell her children that a typical meal included pasta, beans, and vegetables. “Once in a blue moon,” Marie noted, “your Grandma would throw a thin sliced frankfurter in a pot of beans. Grandma called it ‘chumbroth.’”

Charles was working inordinate hours to put even “chumbroth” on the table. Serving as super both in his new building and at the powerhouse ten blocks south, he arose at two o’clock in the morning, when he began apportioning the building’s coal. After fifteen years of this grueling double duty, he grew alarmingly weak and thin. In 1939, throat cancer forced retirement on a man who had driven himself to exhaustion. Lying on his deathbed, he told Jean, “If I knew I was gonna die so young, I would have enjoyed myself a little bit more.” In his final moments, he sat up and remarked with wonder to Marie, “The angels are coming.”

To sixteen-year-old Annie, Charles’s death meant the end of a charmed childhood. The baby of the family, she was protected and fawned over by an array of doting older sisters. Blessed with her mother’s pug nose and hazel eyes, teenaged Annie was a striking, leggy girl with long black hair and rambunctious spirits. She had begun ninth grade at the prestigious Julia Richman High School, a modern, five-story facility across town in the tony East Sixties, but her father’s illness forced her to drop out of school and take work in a button factory. Desperate for diversion, she attended dances on Central Park’s Mall. Near the band shell, she began noticing the stylish East Side blades who also came to West Side clubs, where Annie’s moves were attracting attention.

Jean watched in shock as Annie pranced off to Central Park and picked up some vocabulary—“Hello, you frig!”—that would never have escaped her own mouth. Annie’s audacity made Jean giggle, but she went stone sober when their older sister Sally asked, “Jen, do you know that your sister’s going out with a gangster?” Jean took to waiting on the fire escape for Annie to return home from dates with zoot-suited Angelo (Charles) Russo.

Charles was no gangster. He was a sweet-natured East Harlem Lindyhopper whose nimble steps matched Annie’s. The youngest of seven children, Charles was born to Vito and Mary Russo (née Tartaglione), natives of Caserta, Naples, on May 21, 1916. He grew up on 1st Avenue between East 114th and 115th Streets in an apartment directly over a bar. The noise downstairs was no problem, since the Russos were so boisterous that the bar’s mayhem seemed muted by comparison.

Charles was raised in a neighborhood that had exploded with Italian immigrants shortly before his birth. From 1880 to 1910, New York’s Italian population surged from 12,000 to over 340,000. Many found the Lower East Side too crowded and relocated to “Italian Harlem,” or what soon became known as East Harlem, where Vito Russo found work as a stonemason. East Harlem Italians
received a chilly reception from neighbors. Until 1919, the flagship church Our Lady of Carmel obliged Italians to worship in the basement. Moreover, while job opportunities abounded in the neighborhood’s masonry, iron, stone, and rubber factories, the padrone system of labor often forced Italian immigrants to work for starvation wages. Striving for autonomy in this stranglehold economy, Mary Russo opened her own grocery store on nearby Pleasant Avenue.

The store did a decent business but not good enough for the Russo children to remain in school. Charles dropped out in fourth grade to begin supporting his family. His life at home was distinctly Old World. Some fifty years after moving to New York, Mary Russo performed an exorcism on her grandson to cure him of the “evil spirits” that she thought were causing his headaches. Holiday parties at the Russos’ featured bawdy songs and jokes, with Charles decked out as a diapered Baby New Year whose buttocks guests and family targeted with canes. The Russos’ earthy household defied Annie Salerno’s saltiest vocabulary.

Despite their differences, Annie and Charles enjoyed a “real World War II romance.” As a small girl, Marie’s daughter Phyllis (“Perky”) Percoco witnessed her aunt and uncle-to-be’s courtship with swoony awe. “Their was the only romance in our family of aunts that was just out there,” Perky recalled with a sigh. Charles loved to sing, and Annie was mesmerized by his Italian repertoire and his crooning of the sentimental ’40s favorites “You’ll Never Know” and “I’ll Be Seeing You.” Charles also relished performing for crowds. At a Police Athletic League benefit in Secaucus, New Jersey, Perky’s younger brother Vinny beamed to see Uncle Charles’s audience expand beyond one lovestruck West Side girl: “He’s a hoot and holler kind of singer. The audience claps to ‘Shine Away Your Bluesies,’ and dances in the aisles to his robust ‘Darktown Strutters Ball.’ Then he sings ‘Mama,’ first in Italian, then in English. At the end of ‘Mama,’ he starts to cry, removes a big white handkerchief from his pocket, wipes his eyes, and keeps on singing, waving the handkerchief in the air. There’s not a dry eye in the house.”

On the morning of January 10, 1943, Annie’s young niece, Anna, watched rapt as her twenty-year-old aunt, shimmering in white satin folds, left her apartment en route to St. Matthew’s Church one block south. The opulence of Annie’s gown notwithstanding, the strapped young couple settled for a “football wedding” of copious sandwiches prepared by the Salerno and Russo women and served up at the nearby Democratic Club. One expense not spared the reception was the semiprofessional dancers who entertained guests with their renditions of popular steps—no doubt the same ones that had attracted Annie and Charles to each other in the first place.

Shortly after the wedding, Charles enlisted in the army and was stationed in Hays, Kansas. His rendition of “I’ll Be Seeing You” took on new resonance for Annie, transplanted across Central Park and living with her in-laws in East
Harlem. Gazing toward sunsets over the Hudson, she missed her family and her husband. Having never ventured past the New York metropolitan area, Annie decided to join Charles in Kansas, where he was fully occupied with his job of clearing airfields so that army planes could land safely. He had neither the time nor the inclination to focus on his homesick bride. Annie soon rushed back to her mother’s house. She’d had enough of faraway lands, which, to her mind, meant anywhere beyond New Jersey.

In New York, Annie was delighted to discover that she was pregnant. She took care of her fragile health and dreamed about her future family. But within several weeks, she suffered a miscarriage. After fainting at the sight of blood on the floor, sisters Jean and Josephine struggled to find a doctor for a wartime house call. By the time one finally arrived, Annie lay devastated on the floor. The fetus, a boy, looked to her sisters “like a little doll, a rubber doll; it had the eyes and everything formed.”

Annie begged Charles to return to New York. Under the circumstances, he could secure a leave, but he couldn’t yet move back permanently. On one of his visits, Annie became pregnant again and held her breath. Her confidence grew as the baby reached full term. When she went into labor and was rushed to New York Hospital on November 10, 1944, she felt secure. This child would survive, and the Russos would begin their family at last.

At work, Jean received a frantic call. Annie had just delivered a baby boy who wasn’t expected to live, and Jean was needed to serve as godmother at her nephew’s hasty baptism. Upon arrival, she discovered her dazed sister holding an infant with “white, white long fingers; they called him a ‘blue baby’—blue blood, or something.” Jean gently lifted the child from Annie’s arms as the service was pronounced over him. Unnamed, he died in Jean’s arms and was buried in a potter’s field. Annie lay in a daze, unaware that she had just lost her second child in little over a year.

Annie fell into a dark depression. Her husband was still marooned in some ridiculous backwater, and during an era when a young wife’s primary responsibility was the birthing and raising of children, she had suffered two traumatic failures. The V-J Day jubilation that rocked Times Square, just twenty blocks south of the Salerno homestead, barely touched her.

She rallied when Charles returned to New York that fall and rented them their own apartment at 336 East 120th Street. Once more Annie had to leave her family for East Harlem—and this time for a fifth-floor walk-up—but at least the place was hers, with no well-meaning but noisy in-laws to cramp the young bride’s style. Efforts to entertain her family in the tiny living/dining area had the Salernos sitting on top of one another and spilling into the kitchen. But bedroom windows allowed Annie to monitor the 120th Street action while gossiping with her neighbors. On the whole, she was pleased with her new home.
Charles, meanwhile, was suffering a string of professional failures. A Bronx diner foundered, as did a fish store just across the Harlem River. On the store’s closing night, Annie and Charles walked quietly together across the 3rd Avenue Bridge back to East 120th Street. They had no money and no car to carry them home. They also realized that Charles, unlike his no-nonsense mother, was not cut out for business. In his son’s assessment, “if [a customer] came in and gave [Charles] a hard story, he would give in and say, ‘You owe me,’ and they never paid. . . . He was too easy.”

Despite the Russos’ financial struggles, Annie began thinking again of motherhood. The postwar nation was in a cautiously expansive mood, and she wanted to join the celebration. In November 1945, secure in her own apartment, with her husband home to stay, she learned that she was pregnant for the third time.

As Arnie Kantrowitz wrote, Vito Anthony Russo was indeed born in Manhattan and of Sicilian lineage, but not on a “hot night.” Thursday, July 11, 1946, dawned uncharacteristically cool for a New York summer. When Vito arrived at New York Hospital at 7:49 a.m., the temperature hovered below 70 degrees and climbed only to 72 later in the day. It was an ironically temperate entrance for the man who always preferred broiling New York heat to any other climate.

Nearly a year after the war’s end, the country was still wincing with economic pinch. On the day of Vito’s birth, New York Post headlines screamed with relief, “Senate Keeps Rent Control”—announcing the death of an amendment that would have authorized 5 percent increases in July, November, and March 1947. But prices of household staples continued to creep up. On July 11, buyers staged raucous strikes in more than a dozen cities nationwide. Between lamp-posts on Broadway and West 46th Street, protesters strung a clothesline from which dangled a “suit with a $199 price tag, a loaf of bread marked at 40 cents, and a sign that warned, ‘This will happen without price control and the [Office of Price Administration, which had ceased operation July 1].’”

Vito was born into a war-weary country struggling to regain its footing. But he was also born into a swinging Manhattan infected with a party bug that it hadn’t known since the Jazz Age. Spike Jones and His City Slickers were playing the Strand, while Guy Lombardo and His Royal Canadians held court at the Waldorf-Astoria’s Starlight Roof. On Broadway, theatergoers had their pick of Laurette Taylor in The Glass Menagerie, Ethel Merman in Annie Get Your Gun, Orson Welles in Cole Porter’s Around the World, break-out star Judy Holliday in Born Yesterday, or Wizard of Oz (1939) veteran Ray Bolger in Three to Make Ready. Longer-running shows included the Rodgers and Hammerstein smashes Oklahoma! and Carousel.

Films were riding a comparable crest. Orson Welles’s latest movie, The Stranger, opened the weekend of Vito’s birth. Already appearing in theaters were
Eleanor Parker—later the star of his favorite film, the lurid prison melodrama *Caged* (1950)—in *Of Human Bondage*, Lana Turner and John Garfield in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Bette Davis (as good and evil twins) in *A Stolen Life*, Gene Tierney in *Dragonwyck*, and the epitome of 1946 sex appeal, Rita Hayworth, in *Gilda*, the homoeroticism of which Vito would one day analyze in detail. Manhattan’s revival movie houses, where Vito would spend countless hours, offered Laurence Olivier in *Wuthering Heights* (1939) and Fred MacMurray and Barbara Stanwyck—whom Vito would hail for playing America’s first fully realized lesbian screen character in *Walk on the Wild Side* (1962)—in *Double Indemnity* (1944). In other entertainment news, future gay porn superstar Jack Wrangler was born in Beverly Hills on the same day as Vito. From a Hollywood perspective, the boys could hardly have picked a more provocative summer for their debut.

On the morning of Vito’s birth, the *New York Herald-Tribune* ran a plea from renowned Presbyterian minister Henry Sloane Coffin on behalf of East Harlem youth: “Thousands of young boys and girls living in east Harlem, a congested area of New York City, have never seen the country. They play in dirty hot streets, lounge around street corners at night, and try to sleep in stifling tenement rooms.” Coffin urged his readers to send a child—for the steep sum of $7.50 per week—to Bear Mountain Union Settlement. Through this gift, many East Harlem mothers and children could enjoy, for the first time, flowers, trees, lake swimming, and decent food.

It’s unlikely that Annie or Charles read Coffin’s heart-wringer. And while they would eventually slave to get their children out of East Harlem, matters weren’t so dire in 1946. After a loss of five ounces in his first week, baby Vito’s eating habits steadied. By his fourth month, he had doubled in weight, and Annie could relax. This child was going to make it.

Annie took pride in Vito’s animated antics, which she interpreted as evidence of healthy masculinity. Before his first birthday, Vito was in constant motion, prompting his mother’s affectionate observation, “I can surely say he’s a real boy. But I love him that way.” For his first haircut, Annie remarked, Vito “took it like a major, he sat very still and looked in the mirror at himself. He looks like a real man now. But he’s still a baby to me.” At nine months, incessantly jumping up and down, Vito fell hard out of his crib and then out of his kiddy car. At his second and third Christmases, toys were ripe for the breaking, and Vito got right to work.

Shortly before he turned three, Vito’s world flipped with the arrival of baby brother Charles (“Charlie”), on April 1, 1949. With his parents’ attention diverted, the ambulatory toddler was everywhere. Annie rushed to record her older son’s adventures in his baby book: “He has every bad habit you can think of. He crosses street’s alone, goes down cellers exploring garbage can’s, goes in old broken down houses and bury’s dead cat’s, takes walks around the block. I’ll
never forget his play day’s they are all to full of mischief. Vito got lost a few hours, we had to go look for him, he came around the block as tho nothing happened. He also follows fire Engines and crossed the street to get to them. He said he had to tell the firemen how to put out the fire.” By this point, Vito’s reputation preceded him among the Salerno cousins. Before his visits, cousin Joanie would announce to her mother, “Batten down the hatches! Here comes Vito!” Aunt Marie half-dreaded the invasion of the “one-man army” who would arrive at her West End Avenue apartment to “disrupt the whole house” and “consume the whole conversation.”

Vito showed a rebellious streak at age five, when he pulled a 1st Avenue fire alarm. When the huge red trucks showed up, lights ablaze and sirens screaming, he hid in the apartment, trembling over his mother’s admonition that all the commotion was a manhunt for him. He didn’t budge for two days. But he forgot his fear of authorities sufficiently to begin turning in false alarms whenever he got the chance. He was also twice arrested on scorching summer afternoons for opening hydrants with a stick and a piece of wire.

Eventually Vito decided to use the police in a different sort of ploy for attention. During the 1950s, East Harlem boys and men crowded brownstone stoops with nonstop games of pinochle and blackjack. Vito gave them a wide berth. To him stoops were places to read the New York Times, purchased with nickels that other kids his age were spending on candy. Still, he wasn’t going to be ignored. Knowing that his father was playing craps with some buddies in a nearby alley, Vito flagged down a cop car and led officers to the game. After busting the players, the police kept their higher bills as booty. Charles thrashed his son, astounded that the boy would turn in his own father.

Vito inherited his audacity from Annie. One afternoon, skipping along the street while blowing bubbles, he collided with the neighborhood drunk and her baby carriage. When the impact knocked some of Vito’s liquid soap into the carriage, the woman slapped Vito hard enough to mark his cheek. Watching the scene from her apartment window, Annie tore down five flights of stairs and into the street, where, as she reported to nephew Vinny, “I beat the SHIT out of that woman.” Vito learned that survival in East Harlem required a certain fearlessness.

Armed with his mother’s bravado, Vito found courage in unfamiliar surroundings. On visits to Aunt Marie’s, he introduced cousin Perky, nine years his senior, to neighborhood sights she had never seen, dragging her off to explore the nearby railroad so that he could see grounded trains. In his neighborhood, the 3rd Avenue El, the New York Central, and the New Haven Railroad rattle-slammed high above the streets and didn’t lend themselves to easy scrutiny even from 336’s roof, which he and little Charlie turned into their own beach, party room, and sports arena. Perky, a ground-floor dweller, had never thought to visit
her own roof until Vito took her up for a closer look at the sky. Nor had it ever occurred to her to stroll down 79th Street toward the Hudson for a glimpse of the Boat Basin. In shock, Perky could only ask, ‘‘How do you know all this stuff?’’ I mean, he was an amazing, amazing little boy.’’

In his own neighborhood, Vito began to branch out. By early adolescence, he had become “the Pied Piper of the neighborhood” and was happy to play tour guide for less enterprising peers. June 1960 saw the opening of Freedomland USA, an amusement park in the Baychester section of the Bronx. The jingle “Mommy, Daddy, take my hand! Take me out to Freedomland!” clamored over the radio waves. Vito rounded up a gang of ten from his block and trooped them over to the IRT line at 125th Street and Lexington Avenue—having failed to mention his plan to a single adult. At the park, everyone paid his or her $3.95 for all-day admission and access to the new rides. For poor East Harlem kids who could never afford a trip to Disneyland, and for whom Coney Island required long, sweaty rides on multiple trains, Freedomland was like having Pleasure Island at their fingertips. When the group reached the park, Charlie recalls, “each one of us resembled the kids in Pinocchio, running from ride to ride; the theme towns, [the] old-time cars we drove—it was a magical time that none of us wanted to have end.” They stayed the full day and night, finally clambering back on the subway well after ten o’clock, chanting the Freedomland theme all the way back home. On arrival at 120th, they discovered an army of frantic parents waiting out in the sweltering heat. Charlie got a single swat on the bottom while his brother was beaten for organizing the journey. Vito didn’t mind. Seeing new sights justified any punishment.

Vito’s favorite place to go was always the movies. Splashed across the silver screen were colors, fashions, music, and emotions not available at home. When he wasn’t leading Perky to the Boat Basin, he was cajoling her to take him to the Lincoln, the Colonial, or the Beacon, grand old movie palaces near her apartment. Whenever Perky planned a screening with her girlfriends, Vito made the rounds to his aunts and uncles, gathering nickels and pennies. A few years later, boys eager to impress Perky would take her to the swankier Paramount and Roxy theaters in Times Square—and boys who really wanted to impress her would allow little cousin Vito to accompany them. “Awestruck by the lights of Broadway,” Vito rocked violently in his seat while memorizing the actors’ lines and costumes in order to regale relatives with everything he’d seen. Listening to his perfect imitation of James Stewart in It’s a Wonderful Life (1946), Perky shook her head and asked, “How do you remember what he said?” In response, Vito would bear hug his beloved cousin for taking him where he most wanted to be.

Annie and Charles generally indulged Vito’s passion for the movies. Charles enjoyed a good action picture, so when the family attended a film together, it was
along the lines of *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (1956), starring the young Paul Newman as boxer Rocky Graziano, or *The Guns of Navarone* (1961), with Gregory Peck and David Niven as Allies wiping out German artillery in World War II. These macho films didn’t much interest Vito, but any movie was better than none. By age five, he was spending all his free time in theaters. As Annie remembered, “He practically lived at the movies. Saturdays, he never came home. We had to go look for him, that’s where he was. He’d be there seeing the same movie over and over again.” Any dimes earned by running errands instantly went into the admission-and-junk-food fund. As a child, Vito later joked, he developed an aversion to natural light.

Vito’s parents sometimes found his total disappearance into the movies alarming. Once he discovered 3-D films, he was never home. In his own delirious retelling: “I was nine years old, and thanks to 3D the girl in my lap was Rita Hayworth. The picture was *Miss Sadie Thompson* [1953] and even though I was hours late for supper, I was sitting through it for the third time that day.” At *Charge at Feather River* (1953), he “didn’t even flinch when Guy Madison aimed a tomahawk at [his] scalp.” In fact, the film only got scary “when a hand suddenly shot out of the darkness at [his] throat” and Vito “merely thought, ‘Hey, this one’s pretty good.’” But in the next instant, my old man had me by the back of the neck and dragged me screaming up the center aisle. I wasn’t allowed to go to the movies for a month.” Though the “big traumatic experience of [his] life was not being allowed to go to the movies,” Vito defiantly refused to learn his lesson. Soon after *Feather River*, he accompanied some older kids over to far West 125th Street for a *House of Wax* (1953) screening. Vito noted his cool nonreaction when “Vincent Price tossed a severed head [his] way.” Unfortunately, “[my mother] somehow found out where I was and came down the aisle and dragged me out of the theater screaming and I couldn’t go to the movies for two weeks. But for a horror movie, I’d go anywhere.”

And horror films he saw by the gross. Annie and Charles were happy to subsidize Vito’s weekend sojourns to the Cosmo, a 116th Street movie house where Charles had worked as an usher in the thirties. During the 1950s, Vito took little Charlie along with him. With a dollar in Vito’s jeans, the brothers traipsed off to double and triple features, especially repeat viewings of *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), and *The Blob* (1958). Admission cost a quarter each; the rest of the dollar was to be divided between treats and, following the movies, a hot dog or knish and soda at a luncheonette. Vito always blew his lunch money on SnoCaps, Raisinettes, and Mello-Rolls. Charlie had to guard his own quarters against his spendthrift big brother, who had no scruples about muscling in on Charlie’s share. When the smaller boy held his ground, Vito dubbed him “Cheap Charlie” and took revenge by terrorizing him at night.
with Snatchers-style warnings: “Don’t go to sleep! You’re gonna turn into one of them!” Poor Charlie would remain awake all night, praying that a pod doppelgänger wouldn’t claim his life.

But even in childhood, Vito’s tastes extended well beyond horror. At age ten, he adored The Bad Seed (1956), not for Patty McCormack’s turn as killer-in-pinafores Rhoda Penmark, but for Eileen Heckart as the alcoholic, grief-stricken mother of one of Rhoda’s victims. Equal parts hilarious, harridan, and heart-breaking, Heckart delivered one of “those old fashioned star performances” that would obsess Vito for the rest of his life. Heckart had some competition from Leslie Caron, whom Vito claimed as his “first girlfriend” when he saw her play the title ballerina in Gaby (1953). Musicals caught his fancy — as befitting the little boy who, seated in the Peanut Gallery at a taping of The Howdy Doody Show, forgot to yell, “It’s Howdy Doody Time!” because he was busy humming “Sophisticated Lady.” One of his favorite musicals was The Glenn Miller Story (1954), starring James Stewart as the legendary band leader. Other gay kids, such as future friend and playwright Doric Wilson, spent the forties and fifties mooning over such smoking-jacket icons as Leslie Howard, Cary Grant, or Noël Coward, but Vito “always hated all those wimps.” He’d far sooner catch Glenn Miller every day until his exasperated father put a stop to it. When Vito and Charlie got older, they took the 2nd Avenue bus down to East 86th Street, where Loew’s and RKO brought back an occasional musical oldie like Yankee Doodle Dandy (1942). Vito’s enthusiasm was so infectious that even Charlie, already on his way to becoming a gold-letter jock, memorized George M. Cohan tunes right alongside his brother.

The pubescent Vito was also bewitched by a range of melodramas. David Lean’s Summertime (1955) was perhaps the most lasting, so much so that nearly twenty years later, Vito would reference the film in his courting of a new lover. Katharine Hepburn’s lovesick spinster, wooed by suave Rossano Brazzi in Technicolor Venice, somehow spoke to the precocious boy. Adult movies alerted him to the existence of bigotry, as when Constance Ford, playing Sandra Dee’s hyper-repressed mother in A Summer Place (1959), numbered Italians and Catholics among her many hated groups — though the real draw was watching Dee and Troy Donahue buck social convention right up to their teen pregnancy. Vito cemented his lifelong love of sexual outlaws with a screening of Where the Boys Are (1960). Tottering blindly from one Lothario’s motel room, “loose” coed Yvette Mimieux gave what Vito deemed “the greatest performance I’d ever seen.” At age fourteen, anyway.

Following this sun-drenched triple header, Vito sparked to the amorous cowboys of Howard Hawks’s Red River (1948). In early adolescence, he gaped to see Montgomery Clift work himself into a lather over John Wayne and enjoy a homoerotic round of shooting with John Ireland. Vito later drew on this moment in an effort to define his burgeoning gay consciousness: “I want to track
down what is the sensibility that exists where I could be 14 and sit in a movie
house looking at Montgomery Clift in *Red River* and know that there was someth-
ing different there that I couldn’t put my finger on.” Naming that ineffable
“something” wouldn’t happen for many years. For now, Vito simply swallowed
movies whole and didn’t think much about their hidden meanings.

During the midfifties, Annie and Charles saved up to buy Vito the best
possible Christmas gift: his own film projector. Now viewings were possible
at 336 East 120th, where Vito could be curator, projectionist, and critic all at
once. Naturally, screenings were no fun without an audience, and the same kids
who were willing to follow Vito up to Freedomland filled his apartment for free
weekend matinees. Vito began to collect short clip reels of the Three Stooges,
the Little Rascals, and excerpts from *The Invisible Man* (1933) and *Abbott
and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948). Across his living-room wall scrambled Bud
and Lou, frantic to elude Frankenstein as he pelted them with oil cans. While the
reels turned, Vito stood back and studied his friends carefully, gauging their re-
actions, noting what they found funny or frightening, preening in the knowledge
that without his efforts, they would never have discovered these images.

Vito had established his lifelong passion of imposing favorite performances
on others. His choice of subject matter wasn’t always as jovial as Abbott and
Costello. At fourteen, he insisted that Perky and Aunt Marie watch with him the
*Twilight Zone* episode “Twenty-Two,” starring Barbara (*Where the Boys Are*) Nichols
as a harried hospital employee endlessly reminded by a sinister nurse that there
is “room for one more” in the basement morgue. Afterward, Vito wrote out on
some fifty slips of paper, “Room for one more, honey!” and hid them all over
Marie’s apartment—“in her bras, in her underwear, in her stove, in her oven, in
her pots”—anywhere not available for immediate discovery. The notes were a
gift that kept on giving. Marie “would open up something that she didn’t use
[often], like at holidays, she’d take out a tablecloth that she hadn’t taken out for
six months,” only to find yet another “Room for one more, honey!” her
nephew’s cackly imitation ringing in her ear.

Ever scouting talent, Vito became Charlie’s “agent” and built regular family
showcases for his little brother. Charlie liked to imitate Elvis Presley, so Vito
helped him decorate his cardboard guitar with rhinestones and fashioned his
long blond hair into a DA cut. The boys then presented Charlie lip-synching to
Elvis 45s. Another favorite impersonation of Charlie’s was Al Jolson, whose
records Annie had in abundance. Vito enjoyed putting blackface on his brother
for performances of “Mammy” and other Jolson standards. As Charlie now
wryly comments, “You do that today and you’d get arrested—but [such] was the
entertainment” for the Russos during the 1950s.

Vito didn’t confine his agenting to home. Immediately west of their building
was a Mafia-owned candy store complete with old-time marble counter and
elaborate stools. It also featured a jukebox blaring Dean Martin, Louis Prima, Frank Sinatra, the Coasters, Teresa Brewer’s “Music! Music! Music!” Patti Page’s “Tennessee Waltz”—a constant, pulsating soundtrack of fifties pop. Vito was the only kid who dared interrupt the beat. He had taken a professional interest in a neighborhood girl named Louise Messina, whose sweet soprano voice he admired and wanted to share with others. Vito’s own coins paid for the operatic tunes that brought a rare change of program to the jukebox’s Hit Parade. As Louise trilled a succession of crystalline high notes, Vito beamed from a leather stool and tried to ignore the dangerously sour faces of Louise’s older brother Johnny and his gang, the Lords. Charlie couldn’t resist this golden clowning opportunity: “Louise was getting ready to hit her high note for a big finish. She drew a deep breath and I spun around on one of the counter stools and yelled, ‘Can I please have a chocolate ice cream cone?’”

Johnny and the Lords brayed laughter. They’d only kept silent during Louise’s aria because she was family and because Vito made a strangely compelling emcee. But Charlie’s interjection broke the spell. Mortified, Louise flushed and took flight. Vito rounded on his brother in a rage. Relieved to be delivered from Maria Callas, Johnny and his buddies leapt into the fray, ruffling Charlie’s hair and offering to pay for his cone. Vito threw Charlie a scorching glance and stalked off to comfort his wounded client.

Vito enjoyed promoting Louise. But this wasn’t his first run-in with Johnny. He no longer felt secure in a neighborhood where his intelligence and indifference to athletics made him a very visible target.

During his infancy, Vito’s advanced verbal skills had Annie reaching for the baby book: “At six months, he knew where the radio is, when you ask him where it is he looks right at it, also the light.” As he moved into toddler days, Annie noted, “Vito doesn’t like to play with his toy’s very much, he prefers book’s, paper’s, and pot’s and pan’s.” With baby Charlie squalling in her arms, Annie decided it was time to send her older son to kindergarten at P.S. 80. Just two months past his fourth birthday, Vito made a smooth adjustment to his new routine. Full of melancholy pride, Annie remarked of Vito’s first school day, “he loves it and didn’t even miss me.”

But school didn’t agree with Vito for long. During his first year, he missed 37 days and had to repeat kindergarten. For his second year, he was absent a whopping 73 of 190 days. Vito’s teacher expressed grave concern about his social skills, noting that he required an “inordinate amount of attention,” was “moderately aggressive,” “usually not dependable,” “usually restless, hyperactive,” had “numerous nervous habits,” did “not possess leadership qualities,” and “frequently seem[ed] unhappy.” The cause of these problems is unclear. Vito suffered a bout of ringworm that may have kept him home and crotchety; he
may also have resented the attention that Annie was lavishing on the noisy new stranger in their apartment. In any case, by the end of his second kindergarten year, Annie and Charles decided to take Vito out of P.S. 80 and enroll him at Holy Rosary, a parochial school around the corner from their apartment.

Founded in 1949 by the Pallottines, Holy Rosary School sat on Pleasant Avenue between 119th and 120th streets, less than a minute’s walk from the Russos’ building. Tuition cost three dollars per month per child—not a minor amount when the family’s rent was twenty-eight dollars per month. But the neighborhood was changing. Annie and Charles were determined to keep their boys in Catholic school because it kept them at a distance from the racial tensions then starting to simmer in East Harlem’s public schools.

Vito soared at Holy Rosary, bringing home a series of stellar report cards. As soon as possible, he became an altar boy by memorizing lengthy prayer cards in Latin. Spurred by his new success, he befriended the nuns and priests and began spending as much time as possible at school. He found a close friend in Sister Jane Francis, a progressive nun who, before Vito’s eighth-grade graduation, came to a party at his apartment in “civilian” clothes. She had left the order and gave Vito his first glimpse of an intellectual life outside the church. She was also among the teachers who encouraged him to follow his dream of being a writer. At age eleven, Vito taught himself how to type on an old manual by transcribing, verbatim, his favorite novel, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). The nuns may have been less than thrilled by his choice of text, but they blessed his professional ambition with a doctrinaire nudge: “We need good Catholic journalists to teach the world about Catholicism.”

Charlie, meanwhile, was beginning to realize a truth that became inescapable as the boys grew up. “If ever there were two brothers that were complete opposites, it was Vito and I.” Vito looked forward to reaching Holy Rosary each morning; little Charlie considered school “prison.” He had no ambitions to be an altar boy, much less a devotee of language and literature. Long before puberty, Charlie discovered the joys of sports. He spent his days at Holy Rosary “getting into trouble and waiting for 3:00” so that he could escape to the streets and Central Park for any available game. In school, Charlie seldom kept his vocabulary to parochial standards. His first-grade teacher was a “short, wire-rimmed linebacker” named Sister Benigna (“Italian for ballbuster,” the adult Charlie speculates), who, at the end of each day, marched her paired charges out to Pleasant Avenue with military precision. One afternoon in May, six-year-old Charlie spotted Annie waiting for him and raised aloft the Mother’s Day gift that he had belatedly collected from Sister Benigna. “Ma, now she gives me the fucking thing!” rang out over the street. Annie decided on the spot that Vito was old enough to walk his little brother home. She didn’t realize that in the short distance from Holy Rosary, Vito needed far more protection than Charlie.
With his barbed vocabulary and love of sports, Charlie was a natural fit on East 120th. His teacher’s-pet brother wasn’t so lucky. Once Annie relinquished the job of shepherding her sons home from school, the journey became a daily gauntlet for Vito. Immaculate in his uniform of pressed dark slacks, crisp white shirt, and blue tie embossed with a gold HRS, Vito was an irresistible target to Johnny Messina and the teenage Lords. For Charlie’s sake, he worked hard to ignore the taunts of “faggot” and “queer” that chased him down the street. One day, however, his smart mouth got the better of him.

When Johnny spied the uniformed Russos trotting along 120th, he yelled to his buddies, “Look, here come the Girl Scouts.” Vito’s patience snapped. There were too many shameful associations bound up with this particular jibe. He’d tried to be a Boy Scout and found it an agony. “I was always the one who, when they gave wrestling lessons . . . would sneak behind the screen and try to play the piano. Then they would come and drag me out and say, ‘You’re supposed to be in boxing class.’” The Scouts were also filled with boys who would readily fool around with each other on camping trips but refuse to talk about it afterward, never admitting that they liked each other in ways that were starting to obsess Vito.

He stopped dead on 120th and turned to face Johnny. “And your mother’s a Campfire Girl” emerged. Not the most prudent comeback, and enough to propel Johnny up off a parked car while his greaser friends egged him on. “You gonna take that from that faggot?!” The answer was an unequivocal no. “You fuckin’ homo! I’ll kick your faggot ass!” Johnny knocked Charlie over and lunged for Vito. Grabbing his prey by the neck, he slammed the boy against the nearest building and lifted him off the ground head first. Vito’s first challenge to homophobia might have been his last if news of the fracas had not reached his father.

Between construction gigs, Charles was home in the middle of the day and in no mood for nonsense. Clad in a tank top, muscles bulging and eyes on fire, he barreled down five flights of stairs and into the street, tearing Johnny off Vito with a powerhouse yank. Vito clutched his injured throat and collapsed to the sidewalk. Charles began to throttle Johnny with such force that several burly men had to be summoned from the corner candy store to free the teenager. The enraged father issued Johnny a parting warning: “If you go near either one of my kids again, I’m gonna wipe the fuckin’ streets with you.” For a time, Johnny and the Lords kept their distance. But they would be back, and they were far from alone in their attacks on Vito.

The East Harlem of Vito’s youth was a crucible of troubled Italian machismo. The Italian Americans once considered immigrant scum by Irish squatters had come to dominate the area by World War II. Pleasant Avenue and its surrounding streets were dotted with Italian social clubs that served as neighborhood
anchors. Between 3rd Avenue and the East River, 104th to 120th streets became known as “Little Italy” and took on a flavor familiar to anyone who has seen Scorsese’s early films. When Vito watched Mean Streets in 1973, he recognized the trappings of his own youth transposed 120 blocks south to the “real” Little Italy. Scorsese’s characters, he wrote, “are products of the candy store Italian storefront generation whose mothers iron their handkerchiefs and shirts but otherwise don’t exist. They come from scapulars around the neck, blue confirmation suits, envelopes for Sunday Mass, football weddings, Friday night novenas, and flowered print wallpaper. . . . They sat on the stoop at night, opened the fire hydrant in the summer, wore strap T-shirts, made scooters out of wooden boxes, a two-by-four and the front and back of a roller skate. As they grew up they wore silk suits and acted like big shots, mouthing off a lot for the children they used to be. Big fish in a little pond doomed to die without a piece of the real action in life.”

Vito knew the authenticity of Mean Streets’ characters from observation of his own family and neighbors. His uncle, Tony Russo, had been a rodeo rider and amateur boxer at Madison Square Garden, albeit under an assumed Irish name, as Italians weren’t allowed to box for money. With dreams of a flashier life, Tony got involved with the Mob, which was omnipresent in the uptown Little Italy of the early to mid-twentieth century. Along with a couple of his brothers, Tony drew a short prison stretch—“went away to college,” the family called it.

Vito grew up with plentiful Mob presence in his own building. In February 1957, he and Charlie barely missed a hit in their lobby. After returning from a visit to Grandma Salerno’s, they discovered that East 120th Street was crawling with lights and sirens. As they pushed past police barricades, they saw that the action was centered at 336. On the lobby floor lay a bullet-riddled body in a pool of blood. The victim was Tony De Simone, manager of the corner candy store and father of the boys’ good friends Donald and Philip. The De Simones lived on three, the Russos on five; on many evenings, Vito and Charlie entered the building with Tony and climbed with him to his apartment before continuing on up to theirs. His body was found in front of an alcove where Vito and Charlie often played hide-and-seek. Spotting the cigarette butts littering the area, the boys realized that the killers had been awaiting Tony for some time. They wondered what might have happened if they’d skipped their visit to Grandma’s that day and decided to play in their own building. Or what if Tony had been coming home at the same time they were, as he had on so many other nights? Would he have been spared, or would they all have been killed?

Bullet holes remained in the lobby wall.

Unlike his brothers, Charles did his best to steer clear of the Mob. He had offers to join, but having seen the risks up close, he focused on construction work with his brother Tony. As city planner Robert Moses busily turned New York
into his personal Monopoly board, jobs were plentiful. One of the Russos’
biggest projects was helping demolish the legendary Astor Hotel in Times
Square and build what is today the Minskoff Theater.
At home, Charles was beginning to share his wife’s dislike of their sur-
roundings. The neighborhood’s violence only underscored the family’s more
routine problems. Even for relatively young parents, bundling two children and
groceries up five flights of stairs every day wore on the calves and the lungs—
particularly for Annie, a heavy smoker. Also, given Annie’s Sicilian volatility,
it wasn’t always easy for the family to tolerate each other’s moods in such close
quarters. When Vito and Charlie were young, Annie took a job making artificial
flowers at home and enlisted the boys’ help. With his mother’s taste for the
verbal kill, Vito began teasing her about this frou-frou job. Annie repeatedly
warned him to back off, but he persisted until reading imminent doom in her
face. Although he took flight, the heavy pair of scissors she hurled at him ended
up embedded in his leg. Tending to the wound, Annie begged her sons not to
report what had happened to their father.
Overrun by two active boys, the apartment became impossible to navigate.
Charlie and Vito were forced to share a “very, very small room that today
wouldn’t even be called a bedroom.” With space for only one bed, the brothers
doubled up. The room itself wasn’t conducive to quiet sleeping; over their bed
was an opening through which kitchen noises carried easily, competing with the
oath-laden stickball and card matches that dominated East 120th day and night.
The boys certainly didn’t sleep the night their father hid Joey D, a professional
boxer, in the tiny closet behind their bed. Running from the law or a jealous hus-
band, Joey arrived over the roof at 336 and directly into the Russos’ apartment.
Vito rolled over in bed and thought about nearby 2nd Avenue, where downtown
buses whisked people away from the craziness of East Harlem.
For now, the only escape was further down the block, to 318 East 120th. The
parents-in-law of Annie’s niece Camille owned this brownstone and invited the
Russos to take up residence one floor above them, on the second floor. Though
Annie and Charles agonized over the doubling of their monthly rent—from $28
to $60—the brownstone meant big improvements for the family. They were
leaving behind tenement housing in favor of French doors, parquet floors,
ample light, and a break from suffocating top-floor summer heat. Unlike 336,
318 had a fire escape, so the boys’ play space increased as well.
The Russos’ move occurred at a time of tremendous social and architectural
change in East Harlem. In the aftermath of World War II, the neighborhood’s
predominantly Italian composition shifted as Puerto Ricans began arriving en
masse. With the area’s unofficial Italian border fixed at East 104th Street, Puerto
Rican immigrants generally stayed further south, between 97th and 103rd
streets, and further west along Lexington Avenue, where each block was “its
own self-sufficient world, with its own bodega, cuchifritos stand, beauty salon, Laundromat, bar, and church.” In 1940, public housing came to East Harlem and inaugurated a trend that would stretch into the 1950s as tenements were bulldozed in favor of the projects that African Americans began to fill. Tensions soon smoldered between the disparate groups, particularly as tenement dwellers, largely Italians and Puerto Ricans, looked with envy on the brand-new accommodations enjoyed by neighborhood newcomers. According to resident Thomas L. Webber, the East Harlem social hierarchy of the fifties put tenement dwellers one step above “homeless junkies.” Tenants who contributed to their buildings’ upkeep earned grudging respect, but their image plummeted as tenements became rat- and roach-infested and suffered devastating burglaries and fires. Projects, meanwhile, enjoyed regular heat, hot water, fewer if any rats, reliable maintenance, and even occasional gardens. White East Harlem residents were bitterly aware of who had access to this gracious lifestyle and who did not.

As hostility mounted, East Harlem blocks became sharply segregated. Webber recalls that in the 1950s, though an occasional Puerto Rican moved into the predominantly African American projects, he never saw either group spending time on Italian blocks, nor did Italians spend much time in Puerto Rican or African American sections. Boys in the neighborhood parsed themselves in rigidly territorial terms: “Your block or project is part of your identity. It’s your turf, where you’re from. When guys introduce themselves, it’s first name, short pause, block number or project name, as in I’m Freddie . . . Freddie from 105th, or I’m Ray Ray . . . Ray Ray from Carver Houses, or You know Moody . . . Moody from 100th Street.”

East Harlem boys came together in two places: the Boys’ Club on East 111th Street, and the new Wagner Community Center, which appeared directly opposite the Russos’ when the entire north half of East 120th Street between 1st and 2nd avenues was razed. Vito much preferred the Boys’ Club, where contact and competitive sports were available but far from obligatory. In addition to basketball, ping-pong, billiards, and knock-hockey in the game room, boys could learn how to play chess or swim in a pool where nudity, oddly, was mandatory. Charlie won medals for his freestyle and backstroke prowess and was named New York City’s champion ping-pong player in the eleven-to-twelve-year-old set. Vito hung back while his little brother excelled. At the pool, he cautiously watched the action and kept his telltale reactions in check. He found far greater safety in the drama club, where he could express himself through someone else’s words. The young “agent” who preferred to oversee other performers’ showcases finally reached the spotlight himself as orphan Sparky, the resourceful lead in Charlotte B. Chorpenning’s children’s drama *Radio Rescue* (1938). One adult admirer praised Vito for his “enthusiastic responses to telling scenes.”
Upon leaving the Boys’ Club, Charlie and especially Vito entered much more dangerous territory. Punks lining the nine blocks between the Club and 120th Street remained eternally vigilant for boys wandering onto “their” turf. “Many times coming up 1st Avenue from the 111th Street Boys’ Club,” Charlie recalls, “I remember us running home, trying to get away from bad things.”

Homophobia dogged Vito back to his home block, where he found an equally unwelcome reception at the Wagner Center. Puerto Rican boys loudly branded him a faggot, though with a Spanish epithet that escaped Charlie: “I can still hear them using the word maricón; every time he passed by, they would say, ‘Maricón, here comes maricón!’ and he would just kind of sulk away” to a neighborhood library, where he scored “shopping bags full of books.” An inveterate reader, Vito treasured the library both for its holdings and for its shelter from abuse.

Though Charlie frequently witnessed his brother’s victimization, he didn’t understand its roots. To him, Vito was just Vito; he didn’t see whatever it was that other boys saw and attacked. Charlie received an abrupt education when Radio Rescue director Carole Schwarts slapped him across the mouth for calling one of Vito’s friends, fellow actor Anthony Cuomo, “Cuomo the Homo.” In bewilderment, Charlie turned to Vito for clarification. “What’s that? Everybody says that.” Vito knew the definition but didn’t elaborate beyond a gentle rebuke. “You don’t understand; it’s not something you should say.” To his little brother, he wasn’t yet ready to admit the sting he felt every time such names blasted him. As far as Vito knew, only one gay man lived on his block: an overweight, brassy platinum blonde named Charles. Even as a child, Vito found Charles hard to miss, so he laughed over the following exchange between an upstairs neighbor girl and her mother:

**daughter:** Why doesn’t Daddy dye his hair if it’s going gray?
**mother:** Men don’t dye their hair.
**daughter:** Oh yes, Charles down the street does.
**mother:** Oh, that’s glandular.

The mother’s ignorance was funny, but the realization that Vito might be linked with such a ridiculous figure was not.

In any event, he did not focus long on his fey neighbor. Racial tensions were tearing the neighborhood apart. The new apartments, unsupported by proper city maintenance, were falling into disrepair. Charles Russo’s sister Yetta and her two children became rare white residents in one project. Charlie remembers enviously visiting his aunt and cousins when they moved in. Their building had elevators, large rooms, and outside lighting that illuminated the structure at night and made it glow in the dark. Within a few years, things had changed. The elevators stank of urine, and drugs were omnipresent on nearby streets. As white
East Harlemites watched the buildings they’d once coveted deteriorating into slums, they blamed African American residents for bringing down “their” neighborhood. War was on the horizon.

When Vito became friendly with an older black boy named Lucky, he invited him home for a visit. Lucky responded, “Oh, no,” and would not elaborate. Vito persisted until Lucky relented and accompanied him to 336. Annie and Charles took pains to make him comfortable, but the boy sat rigid on the edge of the living-room sofa, too tense in a white household and on a staunchly white block to let himself relax. He spent only a few minutes at the Russos’ and did not return. Though sensing there was something amiss, Vito did not understand what fueled Lucky’s discomfort. The experience provided one of his first glimpses of bigotry beyond homophobia.

Charlie learned the same lesson, if much more violently. At Wagner, he cultivated a friendship with a black boy who shared his love of basketball. He was immediately branded a “nigger lover” and began to suffer regular taunting from his peers. One day the ridicule became too much to bear. In one seething second, he remembered his father’s advice: “If anybody bothers you, pick up anything near you and use it on them.” Charlie heaved a metal milk crate at one heckler and smashed a stickball bat across the back of another. The blow was so severe that he thought he had killed the boy. Neighborhood parents instructed their sons to avoid Charlie. For the Russos, East Harlem had lost its cozy cohesion. The safe neighborhood of Charles Russo’s childhood had degenerated into a battleground.

Charles reluctantly recognized this change after he moved the family to 318. Though he, Annie, and the boys loved the extra space, their second-floor vista put them much closer to the street. Racial confrontations became impossible to overlook. Once as Charles watched from his window, he witnessed a couple of thugs beating a cop. When he barked at them to turn the officer loose, they hollered back, “Shut up or we’ll come up there.” Despite Charles’s obviously muscled physique, he realized that he was unable to protect his family. Annie took the hoods’ threat as an ultimatum. “That’s it. We’re gettin’ outta here. This is bad. This is gettin’ bad, this neighborhood.”

In Thomas L. Webber’s memory, those at the top of the East Harlem social ladder were the ones most eager to abandon the neighborhood. Residents of all races looked up to the “favored few who [had] saved enough money to move out of El Barrio altogether [to] honest to God one-family houses on Long Island or in Jersey.” Annie shared this grail view of New Jersey. For years, as their only vacations, the Russos had taken day-trips to the Old Mill picnic grounds and swimming hole in Paramus. Charles got the family up shortly after dawn on summer Saturdays and Sundays and drove them out to the country, where the extended Russo and Salerno clans gathered by 8 a.m. Starting with morning eggs and
continuing on through a hearty lunch and dinner, Charles treated the entire group to a day’s lavish meals. The party ended only when the park closed at 10 p.m. Throughout those lazy, languid days, Annie looked about the woods and sighed, “Oh, I want to die in New Jersey! I love New Jersey. This is where I want to be. I don’t want to be looking out a tenement window; I want to be in New Jersey with the trees!” Fear for her sons’ safety on East 120th Street made it easy to forget that her one exposure to “nature,” in wartime Kansas, had sent her running back to Manhattan’s grime and crime.

Joe Mortillo, an army buddy of Charles, lived in Lodi with his wife and children. During the Russos’ occasional visits, Annie realized that Lodi was where she wanted to transplant her family. The Mortillos began to search their neighborhood for available housing and soon discovered a modest Cape Cod at 24 Blueridge Road. A lifelong apartment renter, Annie fell in love with this sprawling new property. It boasted front and backyards, separate bedrooms for the boys, a proper dining room, and an unfinished game room in the basement. The $18,000 price tag was staggering but ultimately immaterial. Annie had to own this house, had to offer her boys a safer, more civilized life than they could ever enjoy in East Harlem. She set about raising the $500 down payment—nearly nine months’ rent in the brownstone. Weeks of begging and borrowing from Russos, Salernos, and friends finally produced the coveted sum. The Russos became the first among their extended families to own a home in the suburbs.

Quite out of nowhere, Annie and Charles fulfilled the postwar American dream. Three members of the family were overjoyed. The fourth left New York in a funk.