The Candy Store in Massapequa
By Roger A. Stetter

There was a candy store where I grew up, a few blocks from my high school, owned by a guy named Carl Kupperman, or, in his wisecracking words, “Jose DeLuca from the Bronx.” A real character, the kind of guy who one moment could crack jokes and the next give his German Shepherd a swift kick in the ribs.

A kid with some change in his pocket could buy just about anything he wanted at the candy store, from a comic book, the latest issue of *MAD* Magazine or a candy bar, to a roll of cap gun caps, a stick pretzel or an egg cream soda. (There were no eggs in the soda, just milk, carbonated water and chocolate syrup.) Grownups were allowed to buy other stuff like cigarettes and cigars. Knowing Carl Kupperman, they also could probably book a bet on a horse race behind the curtain at the back of the store.

My pals and I used to eat hamburgers or French fries at the lunch counter or at a table in the rear of the store while listening to the latest rock-and-roll songs on the jukebox. An early one I especially liked was Fats Domino’s biggest hit, “Blueberry Hill.” We also played pinball and five-card poker. (Only rarely did I hit a grand slammer on the pinball machine or pull a Straight flush at poker.)

Carl probably never finished high school and didn’t care if we did either. He let us hang out when we cut classes or laid out from school the whole day. One time, my father, a lawyer, found my older brother and me hiding in the storeroom when we should have been at school. He warned Mr. Kupperman not to let boys play hooky in his store or there would be hell to pay. Whether or not that was true, Carl never let us hide out in his store again.

There was a skinny Italian man about 40 years old who worked behind the lunch counter and who all the kids liked. He cooked a great hamburger and made a delicious malted milkshake (made with milk, malt powder and ice cream). More like a teenager than a middle-aged man, he whistled at the pretty girls when he rode in a car with us, especially if they were big busted or were wearing shorts.

I read about the Cuban Missile Crisis in the candy store and the arrival of the Beatles in America a few years later. A bunch of kids and I also watched two teenagers get into a fistfight on the sidewalk outside and laughed when the bigger boy, who had a motorcycle and acted like a tough guy, went down after the first punch.

I learned a lot in the candy store — things they didn’t teach in school, like how to bluff in a poker game, as well as more serious matters. In my first encounter with the death of a
person only a few years older than me, my friend Howie W. called the store and told me that his 17-year-old sister had died due to complications following childbirth. I also learned never to steal or you might get caught.

I worked at the store a few hours each morning before school started. Woefully underpaid, I slipped a dollar bill in my pocket from the cash box (the store didn’t have a cash register). Carl caught me in the act, chewed me out in a most humiliating manner, and told me to never come back again. His rebuke felt like a slap in the face and it took me several days to get over my wounded feelings. But I learned an important lesson: Never help yourself to that which is not yours.

So I credit Jose DeLuca from the Bronx with helping to build my moral character. Unfortunately, he went out of business several years later, the summer before I started college in 1964.

Every kid had a place like my candy store where he was welcome to hang out so long as he didn’t make trouble.

**FOOTNOTE**


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Photo:
*A New York City Candy Store (a/k/a Luncheonette) in the 1950s.*