



Three rivers run through the city where I live, carving valleys as rivers do. I live on an isthmus, a slice of land between one river and a great lake. On the east lies the lake, to the west and south winds the river. Along the eastern bank of the river, as it carves the broader and grander channel which made it the backbone of a major city, a series of small crooked streets rise up to the east and south, laying out an ad hoc street grid on that land which forms the armpits of these bends. Hills, too, rise and fall in this small slice of the city, and it all combines to forge a small neighborhood with a unique character, into which other residents seldom stray. That is where this story is set.

I walked along the street one day, a bag of groceries in my hand. The little Italian grocer is on one side of Wolski's Holler, and my apartment on the other. There really isn't a street that cuts the holler straight through, but with a little smarts you can figure a way. That is when I saw Pat, weaving a little bit, on the other side of the street. Pat looked as though he had decided to play hooky after lunch, and been drinking since then. He had a grin on his face which reflected his reverie at some private joke, and his gaze strayed from the gutter on his right to the rose beds on his left, but seldom straight ahead.

"Aye, Patrick. Top of the day." I bellowed across the street. Pat raised one hand in a loose wave, and craned his head in my general direction. "Aye, who... Aye, Nic. How the hell areya," came his slurred reply. "Coming from Wolski's then?" I inquired. "Nah, the little place, ya know. There's gonna be a biggie, a biggie at the little place." he said. "A biggie at the little place, how ironic is~at!" he exclaimed, proud at his own phrasing. He waved that lazy arc of a wave once more, and veered up the pathway that led to his flat.

Before I could shout farewells at him, though, I heard the ruckus and saw the men spilling out of the little place, down the road a bit, and into the gravel strewn yard. They were armed, some of them, with large squirt guns, popular at the time, while others carried over-sized plastic baseball bats. One man wore an animal pelt over his shoulders and a pair of horns on his head, and shouted something foreign to my ears. Suddenly, from the eaves of a neighboring house came a volley of ping-pong balls, spraying this horned man and his front

line of defenders. A great cry went up from the fighters, and more men spilled into the yard from the hidden paths which criss-cross the holler.

A melee ensued.

It was both grandiose and trifling. These grown men assaulting each other with a combination of children's toys and home-made weapons of comical nature. It was like watching the Smurfs battle the Seven Dwarfs. I stayed to the periphery, but edged closer until I was just ten feet or so from the nearest combatants. That is when I heard the order.

"You there, get me some intel, stat," was the bark coming over my left shoulder. I turned to find myself face to face with a horned man, but not the one I had observed earlier. I recognized his face, but did not know his name (a common occurrence in these parts). "But I'm not," I began to protest, but was abruptly cut off. "Look here, we need to know if they have her. I need you to cut around over there," he pointed towards a large stand of deep red peony to the far side of the yard, "and then around to the storm cellar. If she's there, you'll know. Then come back here and report. Got it?"

"Yes, but..."

"Good, now get a move on!"

He pushed me forward and the next thing I knew I was in a mad dash across the open expanse of a driveway with my sack of Italian sausage and provolone swinging wildly. I made the cover of the peony outcropping without even a glancing blow from a ping-pong ball, and then edged my way around to the side of the house and towards the cellar door. I wasn't quite clear in my mind just why I was following his orders. I am not a follower by nature.

Okay, I admit it; it was the girl. I had visions of some Polish Helen awaiting me, a damsel in distress, whom I could free from the clutches of the evil horned man. I got caught up in the fantastical story arc of someone else's play world.

I rounded the corner of the next-door duplex and edged up to the cellar doors. From there I could see her.

I admit that I should have simply returned and reported what I saw, but I was just appalled at the inhumanity of it. There she was, immobile, her face clear and cheeks rosy, but her neck was wedged into the crack between the cellar doors, her body below. No one should ever treat a Barbie this way. That was my undoing. In that moment of hesitation I was spotted and in short order subdued, a hood over my head.

There was much jostling and shouted orders, much of it muffled. What I could make out didn't sound good. I was to appear, I heard that much, as I was dragged along. Down the cellar stairs, if I had to guess, and plopped into a chair. My wrists and ankles duct-taped to the chair, finally the hood removed.

I was face to face with a Bondar brother, and I was confused.

In our next episode, our hero is tempted to switch sides...but, who's side is he on?

And what of OB and Schwartz, what role will they play?

Tune in next time for the further adventures of the Urban Holler