

## Crazy Bob

by Barbara Iuviene

Long ago - when I was a teenager -and far away - on a corner in Brooklyn, NY, my friends and I hung out at a place called The Snack Bar. In the winter, along with girls and guys from other neighborhoods, we stuffed ourselves inside the postage stamp-sized building like chickens in a coop. In summer, we spilled outside to loiter across the entire corner sidewalk.

The guys all had nicknames – Joey Meatballs, Nick the Greek, and Vinnie ‘Schnozola’ Mascola. One late afternoon, I was sitting on the narrow bench that ran along one wall of the petite building, the jukebox cranking out A6, and B13, when someone shouted, “Hey, it’s Crazy Bob.” I looked up to see a tall, skinny guy with slightly bulging, wild eyes that darted left and right and back again. The guys clapped him on the back as he made his way through the crowd. Someone teased him about having a crush on one of the girls and his cheeks turned pink as he laughed a guttural guffaw, exposing a mouth of some rotted, some missing teeth. When he got to where I was sitting, I said hello. He turned his head to look at me, turned away and then looked back again, before moving on. I quickly realized that Bob didn’t speak but communicated with grunts and nods.

Bob was what would now be called severely developmentally challenged, but back then he was just Crazy Bob, bestowed with a moniker like all the other guys. Once I got over the shock of Bob, I watched him sometimes as I sang along to early rock and roll, often ambitiously singing both lead *and* backup, and noticed

he had the most beautiful green eyes and strong Roman nose. His hair was combed perfectly, his nails always clean and he wore starched button-down shirts and fitted sweaters. He kept his head down slightly, mouth pressed on the knuckles of his hand, and looked at the world with head tilted to one side. Sometimes, Joe Sparacio would egg Bob on to sing. Joe would start, repeating the first line to Old Man River, until Bob would slowly straighten his head and then belt out the song like a trained opera singer. When he finished, he would return his hand to his mouth as everyone applauded and Bob's face beamed bright red.

The guys took care of Bob, taking him with them for a ride to Coney Island or for a burger basket at Mitchell's Drive-In, the Verrazano Bridge sparkling in the background, where they would point to one of the overworked and underappreciated carhops laden with a tray of food and suggest that she had a crush on Bob, which always made him smile. And if anyone dared even look crooked at Bob, one of the guys was sure to set them straight.

One day, someone said, "Hey, Bob, your ride's here." Bob bobbed his head at everyone and left. I went to the door, curious to see who was picking him up. I saw an older, white-haired gentlemen standing by his car with the passenger door wide open. He wore a button-down shirt and a fitted sweater and a big, loving grin on his face. He hugged his son, closed the car door behind Bob and drove off.

There were many kindnesses bestowed on Crazy Bob, from George, the owner of The Snack Bar who treated Bob like the rest of us annoying, loud, to-be-tolerated human beings, to the garbage men who let Bob pick up and hand over

the dented metal cans that lined the curb along the street. But the kindest of all was Bob's father, who raised his son alone after Bob's mother left him as a baby. A father who one day approached a bunch of young people hanging out on a corner and asked a few of the guys if it would be okay if he brought his son around sometimes so he could socialize. A father who combed his son's hair and dressed him in neat, clean clothes, who dropped off his only son to a place where Bob was one of the crowd, with a nickname and a place to hang, where he could sing Old Man River on the top of his lungs to a hearty round of applause.