***Fist Sticks Knife Gun***

Geoffrey Canada

*Excerpt from Chapter 1: Codes of Conduct*

I was probably four when I first became aware of violence. We were living in the Bronx on Cauldwell Avenue. My mother, my three brothers, and I in a small apartment. My father lived there for some small portion of that early part of my life but he was not a strong presence in our family. My mother and he were already breaking up. His drinking was becoming intolerable, his financial support sporadic at best, as he seemed incapable of keeping a job. The images from this part of my life are cloudy today, and memories of my father are neutral. He was not a bad man; he treated us well. He was just not much of a father. Even as a very young child I knew our survival depended on my mother. This didn’t bother me at the time. Later the fragility of our ability to survive would have a profound impact on my brothers and me, but I was four and the world seemed fine.

My father and mother separated sometime that year. He left us, four boys, no child support, no nothing. For the next fifteen years we would go visit him every now and then. He was lost to alcohol and took on the job of superintendent of a building in Harlem. He later remarried. We barely noticed his leaving. When we visited we mostly went to see what he looked like after a few years. Whatever pressure and stress his leaving put on my mother, having to raise four boys alone, she didn’t show to us. We thought everything was fine. But we were young, still living in a childhood period of innocence.

Down the block from us was a playground. It was nearby and we didn’t have to cross a street to get there. We were close in age. My oldest brother, Daniel, was six, next came John, who was five, I was four, and my brother Reuben was two. Reuben and I were unable to go to the playground by ourselves because we were too young. But from time to time my two oldest brothers would go there together and play.

I remember them coming inside one afternoon having just come back from the playground. There was great excitement in the air. My mother noticed right away and asked, “Where’s John’s jacket?”

My brother John responded, “This boy. . .this boy he took my jacket.”

Well, we all figured that was the end of that. My mother would have to go and get the jacket back. But the questioning continued. “What do you mean, he took your jacket?”

“I was playing on the sliding board and I took my jacket off and left it on the bench, and this boy he tried to take it. And I said it was my jacket, and he said he was gonna take it. And he took it. And I tried to take it back, and he pushed me and said he was gonna beat me up.”

To my mind John’s explanation was clear and convincing, this case was closed. I was stunned when my mother turned to my oldest brother, Daniel, and said, “And what did you do when this boy was taking your brother’s jacket?”

Daniel looked shocked. What did he have to do with this? And we all recognized the edge in my mother’s voice. Daniel was being accused of something and none of us knew what it was.

Daniel answered, “I didn’t do nuthin’. I told Johnny not to take his jacket off. I told him.”

My mother exploded. “You let somebody take your brother’s jacket and you did nothing? That’s your younger brother. You can’t let people just take your things. You know I don’t have money for another jacket. You better not every do this again. Now you go back there and get your brother’s jacket.”

My mouth was hanging open. I couldn’t believe it. What was my mother talking about, go back and get it? Dan and Johnny were the same size. If the boy was gonna beat up John, well, he certainly could beat up Dan. We wrestled all the time and occasionally hit one another in anger, but none of us knew how to fight. We were all equally incompetent when it came to fighting. So it made no sense to me. If my mother hadn’t had that look in her eye I would have protested. Even at four years old I knew this wasn’t fair. But I also knew that look in my mother’s eye. A look that signified a line not to be crossed.

My brother Dan was in shock. He felt the same way I did. He tried to protest. “Ma, I can’t beat that boy. It’s not my jacket. I can’t get it. I can’t.”

My mother gave him her ultimatum. “You go out there and get your brother’s jacket or when you get back I’m going to give you a beating that will be ten times as bad as what that little thief could do to you. And John, you go with him. Both of you better bring that jacket back here.”

The tears began to flow. Both John and Dan were crying. My mother ordered them out. Dan had this look on his face that I had seen before. A stern determination showed through the tears. For the first time I didn’t want to go with my brothers to the park.

I waited a long ten minutes and then, to my surprise, John and Dan triumphantly strolled into the apartment. Dan had John’s jacket in his hand.

My mother gathered us all together and told us we had to stick together. That we couldn’t let people think we were afraid. That what she had done in making Dan go out and get the jacket was to let us know that she would not tolerate our becoming victims. I listened unconvinced. But I knew that in not going with Dan and John I’d missed something important. Dan was scared when he left the house. We were all scared. I knew I could have never faced up to that boy. How did Dan do it? I wanted to know everything.

“What happened? How did you do it? Did you have to fight? Did you beat him up?” I asked. Dan explained that when he went back to the playground the boy was still there, wearing John’s jacket. He went up to him and demanded the jacket. The boy said no. Dan grabbed the jacket and began to take it off the boy. Dan was still crying, but the boy knew it was not from fear of him. A moment of resistance, but Dan’s determination prevailed. The boy grew scared and Dan wrestled the jacket free. He even managed a threatening “You better never bother my brother again” as the boy fled.

Dan’s description of the confrontation left me with more questions. I was trying to understand why Dan was able to get the jacket. If he could get it later, why didn’t he take it back the first time? How come the boy didn’t fight? What scared him off? Even at four years old I knew I needed to know these things. I needed some clues on which I could build a theory of how to act. Dan’s story couldn’t help me much. It took many years of playing and hanging on the streets of the South Bronx before I began to put together the pieces of the theory. The only real lesson I learned from the jacket episode was if someone takes something from you, tell your mother you lost it, otherwise you might be in danger of getting your face punched in by some boy on the streets of New York City. This was a valuable bit of understanding for a four-year-old in the Bronx.