

## Chapter 1

### The Insular Confines of New York

I'm Larry Cashman, an Italian-American who grew up on the mean streets of New York City in the 1950s and 60s. My neighborhood, though not as menacing as the one immortalized in Martin Scorsese's film of the same name, was a rough and tumble place just the same. For a candy-ass and coward like me, the cauldron of racial and ethnic conflict that was New York City was a tempestuous place to live. It seemed that trouble was always brewing. The Irish, Italian, Jewish, German and Polish communities – or the Micks, Wops, Kikes, Krauts, and Polacks, as they were derogatively labeled – were in constant conflict. Add to that the Black and Hispanic communities – or even more pejoratively the Spooks and Spics – and there were neighborhoods where members of certain ethnic or racial groups couldn't venture without inciting conflict. This was especially true for teenage males like me. I'm a lover, not a fighter. When trouble brewed, my first inclination was to cut and run.

My Italian-American family came to the America in the early 1900s. I was named after my grandfather, Lorenzo Cassamassimo, who came from a desolate, impoverished outback near Naples looking for an upgrade in the U.S. of A. When he presented his papers to the immigration official at Ellis Island in New York City, the official took one look at Lorenzo's Italian moniker and said, "OK Paisano. You are now Larry Cashman."



New Yorker's map of the world

Despite what you've heard about New Yorkers being cosmopolitan, they are actually quite provincial and self-absorbed. The New Yorker's map of the world, which became popular in the 1960s, epitomized the New Yorker's egocentric world view. Starting from the East River and looking west, the map showed Manhattan in great detail - the FDR Drive, 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue, Madison Avenue, Central Park, Broadway, the Henry Hudson Parkway, and the Hudson River – then the rest of the US, and finally the rest of the world. Manhattan constituted 70% of the world's land area, which is how New Yorkers viewed the rest of the world. For most New Yorkers, their world ended at the Hudson River. We knew New Jersey was on the other side, but why would anyone go to New Jersey? We stayed in the isolated confines of New York's five boroughs. Hell, most New Yorkers rarely left their own ethnic enclaves.

It seems like every New Yorker claims they were born in Brooklyn. In my case it was actually true, but my family moved to Queens when I was one year old. In the geographic pecking order of New York City, I became a "Queens Kid," which didn't quite have the prestige of being from Manhattan, Brooklyn, or the Bronx, but ranked slightly

above Staten Island. Queens was a bit more remote, perhaps a bit more rural than the other boroughs in those days. But it had the same racial and ethnic tensions, the same urban poverty and crime.

My family lived in Queens Village, an integrated neighborhood with Micks, Kikes, Wops, Polacks, Krauts, Spooks and Spics – I mean Irish, Jewish, Italian, Polish, African, and Hispanic-Americans. The Cashmans were the quintessential first and second generation Italian-American family. My father, Roy, was born and raised in Brooklyn, and worked as an accountant for the City of New York. My mother, Marina, stayed at home and ran the house. My older brother, Mitchell, was handsome, debonair, and an inveterate ladies' man. The women just loved this guy. My younger brother, Greg, was the brains of the family. In fact he had such a large skull to contain that brain that I nicknamed him "the Head." Our little sister, Brianna, was the Princess. She was seven years younger than Greg, the cutest and most lovable kid, and her older brothers doted on her.

I was the black sheep of the family, always fighting with my brothers, teasing my sister, getting picked up by the police, drinking, and smoking pot. I never met an antisocial behavior I disliked. I was one year behind Mitchell in school. When the teachers got me one year after him, they couldn't believe we came from the same family. "Why can't you be like your brother Mitchell? He was so smart and well behaved," they chided. "You're nothing but a troublemaker, Cashman." I was smoking cigarettes when I was 10, selling illegal fireworks obtained surreptitiously from a dealer in Chinatown when I was 12, vandalizing homes at Halloween at 14, and drinking Southern Comfort before dances in high school. I didn't look for trouble, but it sure found me.

My father was an accountant with an MBA from NYU. When it came to education, he demanded that his children be well educated. He enrolled us in a Catholic elementary school, Our Lady of Lourdes, where the discipline was strict and the academics were rigorous. I hated Our Lady of Lourdes, but its one saving grace was that it was a sports powerhouse. While I was pretty undisciplined and a mediocre student, the one thing I could do was play sports. If you could hit a baseball, dribble and shoot a basketball, catch a football, and run faster than everyone else, you were treated like a king at Our Lady of Lourdes, regardless of your academic failings or behavioral indiscretions. Baseball, football, basketball, and track came naturally to me, and got me out of some tight jams at Our Lady of Lourdes.



**Our Lady of Lourdes School**

I was definitely no all-star in the classroom, however. The teachers at Our Lady of Lourdes were Dominican nuns. They wore a black habit that concealed their faces save for their eyes, nose, and mouth. I thought they looked like aliens from space. They were also sadists. Physical discipline was not only tolerated, it was encouraged, especially for serial offenders like me. If I talked in class, I got slapped in the face. If I threw spitballs, I got slapped in the face. If I cursed at the nuns, I got slapped in the face. I got slapped in the face so often that I learned how to roll with the blow, moving my face in tandem with the impending blow to lessen its impact. I got so good at this that getting slapped in the face hardly fazed me.

That is, until I met Sister Theresa Marie in the seventh grade. This old battleaxe was a particularly odious and repugnant creature that had little time for my shenanigans and loved beating the shit out of me. On one occasion she was mumbling something in front of the class. I had brought a concealed water pistol to school and was blasting my buddies in the face for some sport in the back of the room. When she saw this scene unfolding from the corner of her eye, a livid Sister Theresa Marie, red faced and foaming at the mouth, rushed toward me. My first inclination was to blast her with the water pistol too, but she was on me in a flash. Expecting the predictable slap in the face, I prepared to roll with it. Critical to this maneuver was ascertaining the attacking hand. If she swung with the right, I rolled right. If she swung with the left, I rolled left. Either way, I was prepared.

You can imagine my horror when she drew both hands back to deliver the blow. Now I faced a conundrum. Do I roll left or do I roll right. The answer became moot as she swung both arms simultaneously and clocked me with both hands. This really rang my bell. I was dazed, stunned, and confused. I can still see the old crone gloating at me. "You think you're so clever, Cashman, but I'm onto your tricks. Rascals like you are going straight to hell. If you cross me in the future, expect more of the same." I ignored the old bat, of course, and she continued to beat the shit out of me. She could care less about my athletic acumen.

I cleaned up my act when I enrolled at Bishop Reilly High School. Having attended a Catholic elementary and high school, you might think that I was religious. Well, you would be thoroughly wrong. I didn't attend Catholic schools out of any religious fervor. I was there because my parents enrolled me. When I was young and first exposed to Catholicism, I didn't know any better. I became an altar boy because I heard you could occasionally make some money on weddings and funerals. My altar boy career came to an abrupt end, however, after I punched Father O'Malley in the face when I caught him with his hand on my knee.

Once I was old enough to know better, I couldn't believe the Catholic Church was peddling this hocus pocus about Jesus Christ rising from the dead, walking on water, multiplying loaves and fishes, restoring sight to the blind, and bringing dead people back to life. Then there was the guilt trip with sins. You're born with original sin, so you are

behind the eight ball from day one. There were mortal sins and venial sins and every kind of sin you can think of. Every time I turned around I was committing another sin. You had to be baptized, confirmed, confessed, and anointed to keep your slate clean. I didn't buy any of this nonsense. By the time I was 14, I had come to the conclusion that it was all rubbish.

\*\*\*

At about the same time, I started to think about how I could make money when I grew up. I had developed several criteria to guide my career search: I didn't want to work too hard, I wanted to be my own boss, and most importantly, I wanted to make a lot of money. My work experience up to that point held no prospects for the future. When not in school, I worked at the local butcher shop for Joe the Butcher, delivered tailored clothes for Cousin Ruthie the Tailor, and helped my Uncle Al sell fish door to door from his fish truck. These jobs had no career potential, and met none of my exacting criteria. I had to look beyond them.

My father always said, "If you don't know what to do, become an accountant." He seemed to do all right, and both of my brothers studied accounting. But I couldn't see myself sitting behind an adding machine with a green visor adding up columns of numbers for the rest of my life. Plus, I couldn't add very well. Accounting was not for me.

One day while reading Newsweek Magazine, I came across an article on the most lucrative jobs in the US. Right at the top was physicians and dentists. The figures for their annual incomes were most appealing to me. They also seemed to work for themselves. Both our family physician and dentist had their own private practices and set their own hours. But I couldn't really determine how hard they had to work. So I asked them.

Our family physician was a loathsome, offensive brute named Dr. Richman. This guy was overweight, wore baggy wrinkled clothes, had bad posture, rumped hair, bad breath, pimples, and spoke with a garbled Brooklyn accent. I found him repulsive. But he was the only physician I knew, so I went to speak with him. He regaled me with stories of the physical and emotional exhaustion he experienced during the 36 hour shifts he worked as a resident; the stress associated with being on call and ready to see critically ill patients at any time and at a moment's notice; the unpleasantness of dealing with death and dying. This litany repelled me even more than Richman. What I found especially distasteful was the concept of being "on call." This state of mind – being off work but eligible to be "called" at any time to handle an emergency - was inconceivable to me. I'd rather be dead than live like that.

On the other hand, our family dentist was a stately, refined individual named Dr. Urgo. He was tall, lean, handsome, and stood straight as a rail. He dressed impeccably,

was always neatly groomed, and wore fragrant colognes. He was a gentleman's gentleman. He played golf every Wednesday afternoon, never worked overtime, never worked 36 hour shifts, and was absolutely never on call. And I hadn't heard of too many people dying in a dental chair. Now I had a comparison. The physician and dentist both made a lot of money. They were both their own boss. But one was an overworked, frazzled, fat, stinky slob who was on call half the time. The other was a distinguished man with a dignified and polished demeanor who never worked overtime. I knew which way I was going.

My plan for the future was set. I would become a dentist, open a private practice in a posh neighborhood like Garden City on Long Island, make a lot of money, and only work four days a week. There was one problem, however. Competition for admission to dental school was keen, and only top notch students had a chance for acceptance. Seeing how I was lazy, inattentive and disinterested, I had never distinguished myself academically. If I wanted to get into dental school, I needed to get my act together in high school and college. This meant that I would have to change my evil ways. Perhaps the word "change" is too extreme. I would merely try to modify, where necessary, some of my bad habits and focus a bit more on academics.

And that is what I did. In high school, I went to class, did my homework, studied for exams, and had decent grades. I continued to run track and play baseball and basketball, which took me to some sketchy places all over New York City. Through sports I had competed against and befriended African-Americans, Irish-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Jewish-Americans, Polish-Americans and any other type of American you could think of, although I don't recall meeting any Albanians or Chechnyans in my youth. Regardless, everyone was the same to me.



O'Connor Park Queens

While I was in high school, I played schoolyard basketball with a black friend named Spoon. He took me and two of my white buddies into black neighborhoods to play basketball, at well-known courts like O'Connor Park in South Jamaica and Van Nostrand Park in Brooklyn. When we arrived, the full court game on the main court stopped at the sight of the white boys. Then Spoon introduced us to establish our bona fides. Then the game continued with us sitting on the sidelines, watching. After one or two visits, some of the black guys invited us to play half court games on the side courts, to assess the quality of our game. If they thought we were good enough, they would invite us into the full court game.

It was a thrill for a honky like me to play in the full court game at O'Connor Park. Some of the players had played college basketball, or were currently on college basketball teams. Sometimes even pros from the New York Knicks would stop by. Then

there were local legends whose drug habits or criminal records precluded their going to college, but they could sure play basketball. Herman the Helicopter could jump so high he could take coins off the top of the backboard. Sneaky Pete reputedly had the fastest hands in New York City. He could steal the ball before you could even bounce it on the ground. He also used those fast hands to swipe groceries from the supermarket, only this did not go undetected.

There was no way that a skinny white kid who was only six feet tall, couldn't dunk the basketball, and could neither dribble nor shoot very well, should be playing in the full court game at O'Connor Park. But once the black guys got to know us and trust us, it didn't matter that we were white. We were just three guys who wanted to play basketball. The black guys respected that and made sure we got to play, regardless of our skill set. After a while they invited us into their homes after the games to meet their families and have a meal. These were some of the best meals I ever had, though admittedly high in cholesterol. This experience demonstrated that, even when racial or ethnic tensions were high, human beings can always find common ground, especially when sports and a good meal were involved. This lesson served me well years later when I lived with foreign cultures in Asia.

\*\*\*

Between sports and academics, I had less time for drinking, carousing, and getting into trouble in high school, although I certainly didn't abandon my aberrant behavior entirely. In hindsight, this was a good thing because I was able to get into a decent college, St. Johns University, which was exactly one mile from my high school. In my insular world, that was about as far as I could stray from the hearth.

College was the real test. I needed grades that were good enough to gain admission to a dental school. My first strategic mistake occurred when I opted to become a chemistry major, because so many of the prerequisite courses for dental school were chemistry (in fact there were only two – general chemistry and organic chemistry), What a bloody mistake that turned out to be! I could have cruised by as a psychology or history major and simply taken the prerequisite courses for dental school. No, genius that I was I had to be a “chemistry major.”! In addition to the prerequisite courses, chemistry majors had to take inorganic chemistry, quantitative analysis, physical chemistry, quantum mechanics, and advanced organic chemistry. To this day I still can't figure out why I made this call. Having done pretty well



St. John's University

in high school, I was a bit cocky going into college. When you get cocky, you make bad decisions. This was a good lesson, but apparently it didn't sink in. This was not the last time I would make this mistake.

College was a grind for me. I was spending 10 hours per week fulfilling the laboratory requirements for my classes. The courses were difficult and intellectually taxing. And I was studying all the time. I was miserable. My misery was compounded by the weather in New York City. I hate cold weather, and New York City had plenty of it. My fantasy of living in Hawaii or some other place with a more amenable climate became more unrealistic every year. The best I could hope for was to get to Long Island or New Jersey. I resigned myself to living with my misery.

While in college, I met a guy called FUBAR, short for Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition, which was his usual state of mind. FUBAR was a marijuana dealer. I had been smoking pot since I was in high school. When I went to track meets, the guys were smoking in the locker rooms where we dressed for our races. Sometimes we would get high before our races, which didn't exactly enhance our performance on the track, but we couldn't care less when we lost. In college FUBAR was my main source for buying pot. FUBAR was in a fraternity, whose members he provided with pot. "Why don't you join the fraternity," he said. "Then you will always have weed."

I'm not one to join hokey organizations, and there's nothing hokier than fraternities. But FUBAR's reasoning made sense to me. I was miserable in college, working too hard, and depressed by New York City's shitty climate. The only time I found some solace was when I got high. Why not join an organization that would provide easy access to high quality weed? I decided to pledge the fraternity.

This was another example of bad judgment caused by hubris and too little information. I thought I would just sign on the dotted line, perhaps pay a small fee, and have weed for the remainder of my college years. It didn't exactly work like that. To join a fraternity, you have to "pledge" the fraternity. This entails going through an eight week "hazing" period where the pledges were subjected to all manner of indignities. There was verbal abuse, physical abuse, exhortation, intimidation, humiliation, and retribution. There were secret words, secret handshakes, secret texts, and secret traditions. It was all bullshit, as far as I was concerned, but I had already paid my money, so I decided to go through with it.

I hated pledging for that fraternity and its attendant rituals. Each year the fraternity held its Crystal Ball during the "pledging" period. This was basically a tacky formal event whose sole purpose was to raise money. The money came from selling overpriced tickets to fraternity alumni to attend the Crystal Ball, selling advertising in the tasteless magazine that was printed each year to accompany it, and sending out the pledges to prey upon unsuspecting students for small donations. Each pledge was given

a piece of paper with 100 spaces, and told to collect 25 cents for each name. In return the names would, purportedly, be printed in the Crystal Ball magazine as donors.

This was the biggest con imaginable. If 10% of those names got printed, that was a lot. I would hand a list of 100 names plus \$25 in cash to the fraternity Treasurer. The other pledges would do the same. In return he provided no acknowledgment, no gratitude, and most important, no receipt. The cash went straight into his pocket. Then he'd send us out to get more. I may be dumb, but I'm not stupid, and I know a scam when I see one. Plenty of money was going through the treasurer's hands, and some of it inevitably got stuck. Perhaps this fraternity thing provided greater advantages than just access to weed.

Pledging for that fraternity was eight weeks of hell. Physical abuse and intimidation didn't sit well with a candy ass like me. I feigned illness, made excuses, lied, blamed the other pledges for indiscretions – anything to minimize the hazing. In the end I endured the hazing, secret words, secret handshakes, and brotherly camaraderie to become a fraternity brother. The payoff began with good pot. After years of choking on weak Mexican weed, I was now smoking Thai Sticks, Colombian buds, and Wowie Maui.

But the real payoff came the next year when the new class of "pledges" came along. Now it was my turn to "haze" the pledges, a prospect that appealed to the bully in me. For the eight week hazing period half of the fraternity members were assigned as "bad cops," and half as "good cops." The bad cops would abuse, humiliate, and intimidate the pledges. The good cops would try to protect them. The standoff between the good and bad cops, all staged and planned in advance, would culminate in a pitched battle between the two groups over the pledges. It was supposed to teach them some cheesy lesson about the importance of brotherhood, unity and fraternity.

There was no question which group I would be in. After getting my ass kicked the previous year, I was ready to kick some ass. And what better way to kick ass than with some defenseless pledges that couldn't fight back. Courage is not a quality I ever exhibited, or for that matter, admired. My genome is devoid of it. At the first sign of trouble, I am the first to run and I don't look back. When I'm in a tight spot, my bowels rumble so violently it leaves brown stains on my underwear. Now I could be an unmitigated bully with no prospect of repercussions or retribution. I played this role to the max and enjoyed every minute. I made the pledges carry my books to and from class. I told them that, if I were subjected to the indignity of carrying books myself, there would be hell to pay. I would send them to get my lunch, to wash my car. I even had them shine my shoes. I would excoriate them with the most profane epithets imaginable. Once I was berating a pledge with some of my finest abuse when he had a look in his eyes as if he would come at me. "Are you eyeing me, boy? Damn your eyes, you scoundrel," I scolded. "Get down and give me 50." I loved to make them do pushups, especially the chubby ones. I was a natural at this.



The following year I wanted to be a bad cop again. But there was some inane rule that you couldn't play the same role two years in a row. I protested to no avail. Then I had an inspiration. "If I have to be one of the good guys, a role I find monumentally distasteful, why don't you make me the fraternity treasurer. It will take my mind off the missed opportunities." Fraternity members are not particularly good judges of character, so they acquiesced and made me the treasurer. The fox was now guarding the chicken coop.

I am not proud of many of the things I've done in my life, but this next episode was one of the lowest. Oodles of money was coming in for the Crystal Ball and, like other treasurers before me, I wanted to skim some off the top for my efforts. Unlike other treasurers, I didn't even attempt to reserve a venue, to find a printer, or to disguise my shenanigans. I was intoxicated by the euphoria of all the money. Unlike other treasurers before me, I was too stupid to embezzle the money. I just deposited it all in the fraternity bank account, assuming no one would know it was there, and I would somehow access it later. It was clear I had no future as a Wall Street Banker, who would perfect a system to rip off their customers and not only conceal it, but get paid handsome bonuses to boot.

When my malfeasance was finally detected, there was hell to pay. A committee of fraternity alumni was assembled to take over the bank accounts and rescue the Crystal Ball. Another committee investigated for financial irregularities. You can imagine their delight when they found all the money could be accounted for in the fraternity bank account. You can also imagine their incredulity at my stupidity. They summarized their investigation with the following remarks. "You are a reprehensible, malevolent brute, Cashman, of that there is no doubt. You are also an imbecile. You can't even embezzle money well." This was one case, however, where my stupidity saved my ass. Since all funds could be accounted for, my malfeasance was purely administrative. Since I didn't even know what administrative malfeasance meant, I couldn't care less. I was abruptly and unceremoniously ejected from the fraternity. Again, I couldn't care less.

In hindsight, this experience was a valuable lesson. If you're going to cheat, then make sure that you don't get caught. I would not be so stupid the next time. Years later, when I worked with corrupt governments and crooked dictators, I could see their cons coming a mile away. I had ripped off a fraternity. They ripped off governments. The methods were the same, but the amounts of money were orders of magnitude larger. And they didn't get caught.