

### *Snakes at a Mahjong Game*

Our adventures in The Lots on each side of the Projects continued. Joel and I persisted in collecting snakes. We looked in rock piles. We looked in the tall grass growing near the swamp. The two of us were successful locating snakes, then grabbing them up. We transported our quarry back to our building alive in the brown paper bags our mothers ordinarily stuffed with sandwiches.

In the aftermath of the episode in which I terrorized the girls playing potsy, my parents' attitude toward my bringing serpents home changed. George and Ruth became unbending in their opposition to *my* keeping the snakes I caught. According to my parents, frogs, tadpoles, and turtles were still okay to keep as pets. But *not* snakes. Snakes were too scary.

Joel's parents were also opposed to keeping the snakes he caught. But somehow Joel, using big science words like *herpetology*, prevailed upon his parents to let him make a home—I think he used the word *habitat*—for the snakes he caught. The snakes would live in an empty fish tank. Since my parents no longer allowed me to have pet snakes, I gave the snakes I caught to Joel, who placed them in the tank along with his. That tank lay on the lower platform of a double-decker aquarium stand located against a wall in the Friedmans' dinette. Twenty serpents slithered about the lower tank. Joel dedicated the aquarium resting on the upper portion of the stand to tropical fish.

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Jewish women of a certain generation adopted the game of mahjong. As far as I could tell, Jewish women *all over* Brooklyn played this game imported from China. Five mothers from my building and from the building across the court played mahjong at least one and often two evenings a week. The ladies played on the dinette table in the hostess's apartment. Each woman

played four rounds, each round a different player took a turn sitting out. They played a generous game, too. The most a woman was could lose was a dollar. The game itself rotated from apartment to apartment. On any evening, the hostess prepared food to serve all the players. I was happy when the game arrived at my apartment because my mother baked a delicious rice pudding. With so much to go around, my mom always gave me a sizable portion.

Lillian, Joel's mother, hosted a noteworthy game. She had the wisdom to place a tablecloth over the fish tank on the lower platform of the aquarium stand. That tablecloth rested there *every* time the mahjong game rotated into the Friedmans' apartment. All the mahjong ladies—in fact everyone who visited the Friedmans' apartment—found the tank that Joel arranged on the upper portion of the stand lovely. There were angelfish, neon tetras, zebra fish, gouramis, and, even, kissing gouramis. That upper tank was never covered. It was *always* there for all to see and enjoy.

In the midst of this Monday-night game in the Friedmans' dinette, Sylvia Wexler asked, "Lillian, what's in the lower fish tank?"

"Oh, nothing. Nothing of interest."

"Lillian, show us what's under the tablecloth."

"Like I said, there is nothing of interest."

Sylvia rose from her chair.

"Come on. What's in the tank, Lillian?"

Sylvia slowly walked around the table.

"Please, Sylvia. Sit down. There's nothing that would interest you."

Sylvia approached the tank.

"The upper tank is so nice, Lillian. What's in the tank you have covered?"

Sylvia was now next to the aquarium stand. She reached down. Her fingers touched the tablecloth covering the lower tank.

“Don’t do it!”

Sylvia peeled the tablecloth away from the lower tank, unveiling the tank’s contents.

“AAAAHHHH!”

There were screams. There were shrieks. The ladies—all except Lillian—hurriedly jumped out of their chairs. In the mayhem, mahjong tiles tumbled to the linoleum. A three crack. A two bam. A north. Someone’s tile rack lay precipitously half on, half off the dinette table. The ladies hightailed it out the door. Still seated, Lillian watched the stampede.

Sylvia stuck her head in the doorway. Standing at the threshold, wagging her index finger, she told Lillian, “If you ever want us to play mahjong in your apartment again, you’ve got to get rid of those snakes.”

The next day, Lillian told Joel that he must get the snakes out of the house. It was a sad day. Joel and I extracted the snakes one by one from the lower aquarium. We reluctantly placed them again in brown paper sandwich bags and returned them to several rock piles in The Lots across Farragut Road. I turned my thoughts to the snakes already living in the rock pile when we arrived with their pals. I imagined those snakes in the rockpile saying in a kind of Fess Parker-Davy Crocket Tennessee twang, “Welcome home fellers.”