

What We Deserved

Stories from a New York Life

STEVEN SCHRADER

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Just a Kid

I was just a kid. Everything was the way it was supposed to be. I just wanted to fit in. That was my job. Go to the movies on Saturday afternoon, get a frozen custard afterward, play ball in the schoolyard, do my reports in school, color in maps of the Caribbean.

I remember the Chinese laundry and the drugstore at 187th Street and Fort Washington Avenue when I was growing up and Kurtzman's Candy Store at the top of the stairs on the opposite corner. Everything seemed so permanent then.

Who knew Rite Aid would knock all the small stores out of business? Somewhere there are men with vision who see ahead and predict trends, like Alvin Toffler, whose *Future Shock* we all read in the Sixties. But I was like the druggist at the corner with his lunch counter and soda fountain, thinking this was the way things would always be.

The Late Pepper

When I was a boy, my experience with pets never turned out well. The kitten I brought home

from the grocery store had to be returned, and my turtle with the painted red shell died after a week. Pepper, the beagle I chose at the pet store for my bar mitzvah present, started coughing her first night with us, and by the following afternoon had to be taken to an animal clinic in Inwood, where she was diagnosed with distemper. I visited her there several times, but a week later she died. I learned of Pepper's death at the clinic when the vet looked at me in surprise and asked, "Didn't your parents tell you? We had to put her away last night."

I sat near the window on the subway ride home and tried to hide my tears from the other passengers. I kept crying at dinner, until finally my brother ordered me to stop. "It was just a dog, for Christ's sake. No one cries that much over a dog."

So I stopped crying, not wanting to appear abnormal. A few days later I wrote a composition in school entitled "The Late Pepper," describing how sad I was about my dog. Mr. Hall, our English teacher and the co-owner of the Franklin School, was an old-fashioned gentleman who always wore a three-piece suit, with the vest buttoned and a gold watch chain hanging from it. I received a 90, by far the highest mark Mr. Hall had ever given me. It would have been even higher if I hadn't misspelled the possessive "its" with an apostrophe before the "s" and hadn't written "everyday" as two words instead of one when I used it as an adjective.

This was the first time I had the sense that I could turn life into art, give suffering meaning, receive recognition, and console myself at the same time. My brother was wrong; grieving for a dog wasn't such a bad thing. ☹

Steven Schrader is the author of three books of stories: Crime of Passion (Inwood Press); On Sundays We Visit The In-Laws (Release Press); and Arriving at Work (Hanging Loose Press). He was the director of Teachers & Writers Collaborative for ten years and still serves as co-chair of its board of directors. Schrader was the publisher of Cane Hill Press, which specialized in fiction. He lives in New York with his wife, Lucy Kostelanetz, a documentary filmmaker.