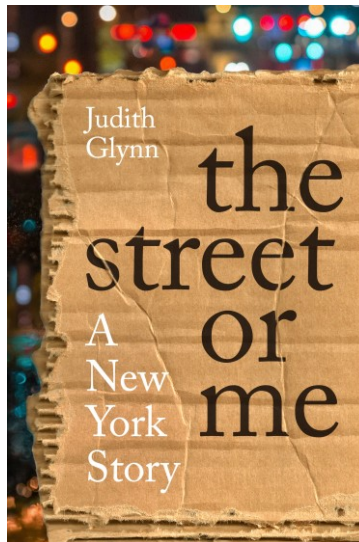


Sample Chapter

The Street or Me:

A New York Story

By Judith Glynn



Chapter 3 – Destined to Meet

Shortly after I learned about Steve's death, I was on my couch watching TV, snug under a fluffy blanket. Since it was winter, I envisioned Michelle huddled under a cardboard box on the street. She told me she'd awake covered with a blanket of snow. The alcohol in her body kept her warm. I'd known Michelle for two years so it was normal for thoughts about her to float in my mind. This night, I wondered if her mother was coming. If yes, I had to keep my dinner invite.

Around 10:00 p.m., Michelle's whereabouts consumed me until I left the couch, opened a desk drawer and pulled out Eddie Benson's address. Maybe she was there. If not, I'd buy soup and go to the bank lobby or nearby subway station, hoping to find her. Without any thought for my well-being, I dressed warmly and went out into the freezing night.

As I walked alongside Roosevelt Hospital to Eddie's place, squatters sat near hot-air exhaust vents and under scaffolding. Recliner chairs and sleeping cots were shoved against a hospital wall. Blaring TV sets were plugged into pirated electrical outlets.

"Steve and I lived beside the hospital," Michelle once told me. "But we left when the

crackheads moved in."

The opposite side of the street had brownstones with sagging front doors. At Eddie's address, a single lightbulb hung in the lobby hallway. I questioned my sanity when I climbed his apartment house steps and entered the vestibule. There was a slight odor of urine in the enclosed area. Names were penned on the wall beside apartment numbers listed on the intercom. I rang Eddie's bell.

"Yeah?" said a man's voice.

"Hi, I'm looking for Michelle Browning."

"Wait a minute," the voice responded.

Fear shot through my veins like hot scalding water. As I waited, I noticed a hunched woman climbing the outside stairs. She wore a black knitted hat that touched her eyeglasses. Her coat, once beige, was filthy and fastened with a large safety pin. When she entered the vestibule, I recognized Michelle.

"Oh my God, Michelle, it's you."

"Hey, what you doing here?"

"I've come to find you. How are you?"

She lowered her head. "I've been drinking. I miss Steve."

The inside door behind me opened. I jumped. Michelle looked at the small, white, frail man dressed in black who was looking suspiciously at me.

"Everything's OK, Eddie. Judith's a friend of mine," Michelle said.

"I know her from the neighborhood. I'm trying to help," I said.

And I knew him as the man I'd seen in the bank lobby one night with Steve, Michelle, Eugene and Philip. He was dressed in black, holding a portable cassette player, which he swung wildly and everyone danced.

"I'm trying to help, too," he said to me. One lone tooth jutted up from behind his pencil-thin bottom lip. It resembled a kernel of yellow corn. "Marie stays with me sometimes. I've known her and Steve, God rest his soul, for five years. You OK, baby? Looks like you've been drinking. You know, honey, you shouldn't do that."

"Go fuck yourself," she scowled.

"She doesn't mean that, Judith. Would you like to come up?" he asked softly. "What do you think, Marie?"

With her nodded approval, I followed them up five flights of stairs regardless of my lingering fear. Their trailing body odor was enough to make me cover my nose. Oddly, each flight took me back to when I was the only child of my divorced mother who moved constantly.

Climbing apartment house stairs was embedded in my DNA.

My mother, Angela Glynn, stood five-feet, two-inches tall. She was gutsy, smart, good-looking and quick-witted. Soon into her marriage to my father, he drank heavily, going from job to job and stumbling up a tenement's back stairs while I grew in her womb. Mother divorced him when I was five. Without child support, she worked full time, moving from tenement to tenement on Providence's East Side.

~m~

"Excuse the mess," Eddie said, motioning for me to sit down at the kitchen table when we entered his apartment. I was horrified at its derelict condition.

He talked incessantly but the kitchen was so incredibly filthy I didn't comprehend his words. The walls were grease-yellow. The stove's once-white surface had long, finger-like streaks of blackened grease covering its sides. The aluminum pots were black. The blue squares on the linoleum's pattern were only visible at the outer edges. Years of grime had built up over the rest of the floor. A dirt-covered, worn-out path led to a closed and crackled door. I assumed that led to the rest of the floor-through apartment, which ran front to back in a straight line.

In one corner was a large plastic dishpan with hundreds of cat droppings piled ski-slope-style in the kitty litter. No cat could have piled its feces that way, I thought. Eddie did it. Beside the cat's dishpan toilet were a dozen tin cans filled with minute scraps of paper. Michelle later told me Eddie sat for hours cutting newspapers and trash into tiny pieces.

Michelle took a swig from a pint she had in her coat pocket and sat across from me. "You're bringing whores to this hellhole and stealing my money," she accused Eddie.

He gave me a sheepish look, arched his eyebrows and laughed, saying that was not true. He revealed he first befriended Michelle and Steve after seeing them around Columbus Circle. Steve was the rich boy who never worked hard for his money. Marie came from a well-to-do Italian family. She couldn't care for herself. He never saw two people more devoted to each other. He prayed for years God would help them get better.

Michelle, looking forlorn, shook her head in agreement.

Despite rosary beads hanging from a bare nail over the kitchen table filled with comic books, I didn't trust Eddie. "How long have you lived in this apartment?" I asked.

"Forty-nine years."

"Tell her how much rent you pay," Michelle chimed in.

"You're going to be jealous, Judith. I'm a rent-controlled tenant and pay \$74 a month."

That was around my monthly telephone bill. "What do you do for a living?" I asked, assuming he was on welfare.

"I'm trying to get work in the theatre. Do you like Elvis Presley?" he asked and switched on

a tape recorder. "You Ain't Nothin' But A Hound Dog" blared from a scratchy cassette. Eddie frantically strummed a phantom guitar. His eyes closed, his head tipped backward and his legs flapped, resembling a puppet on a string. I expected him to howl.

I guessed his age at early-sixties. He was slight in stature, a withered man with a large head and sunken cheeks. He resembled Edvard Munch's "The Scream." Eddie's long hair was dyed jet-black and tucked behind each ear, which accented his ghoulish-white complexion. He wore a stained, black wool shirt over a white turtleneck. His black wool pants ballooned at the hips. A black belt was fastened at its last hole to accentuate his narrow waist. The pants were mottled with white stains.

Michelle clapped her hands while seated on her rickety chair before jumping up to join Eddie's dance. She grabbed my hands and jerked me upright. "Come on, Judith," she slurred. "Let's jitterbug."

I was appalled. When she lifted her arm for me to pass under, her stench traveled to my stomach. I wanted to be a teenager again, sitting out the high-school dance, always the wallflower in the room. I was the pretty girl many parents told their children to avoid because my parents had divorced. I preferred that shame to the disgust of dancing missteps with Michelle.

Several times she'd sway and stop to accuse Eddie of stealing from her. He finally gave up the Elvis impersonation and sat down. Michelle stopped dancing, too. She then pushed her soiled jeans down her slender legs and pulled out a wad of money from her knee sock.

"Here," she said and counted out six one-hundred-dollar bills that she stuffed into my hand. "You keep these. I trust you. This motherfucker steals from me when I pass out. I pay him \$250 a month to stay in this shit-hole and buy his food."

The unfolding event terrified me. Would Eddie attack me to get the money? Maybe there was someone dangerous behind that crackled kitchen door. Eddie looked at my eyes, at the cash in my hand, and back to Michelle, who was pulling up her soiled jeans.

"Marie, baby. There are places here to hide your money. Why would I take it?"

She couldn't focus and sat down. Her empty pint of peppermint schnapps had taken control. As I put on my coat, she asked me to wait. She got up quickly and disappeared behind the closed kitchen door. I sat alone with Eddie who looked at my hand holding Michelle's money.

"She says the strangest things, Judith. I don't steal from Marie. I love her. She's like a child to me."

"Don't worry, Eddie, I'll leave the money here. I want her to calm down."

The crackled door flung open. Michelle rushed into the kitchen clutching a tattered manila envelope. With one swift movement of her arm, she cleared the clutter from the table. It fluttered to the floor. "This is my family in Italy," she said and dumped a heap of photos on the table.

Images of her three sisters, two brothers, a robust Italian mother and a subdued father spread

before me. There was a large photo of Michelle in her First Communion dress. Rosary beads draped her folded hands.



Mireille Turoldo, age 12, in Italy wearing her First Communion dress

In another photo, she sat seductively in tall grass, a ravishingly beautiful young woman with flowing blond hair.

"That's me before I came to America. I won the Miss San Daniele contest," she said. Michelle's persona changed as she viewed the photos. She was gentle. Her family made her beam. "I told you about my beautiful family. You didn't believe me."

"I believed you."

"I wrote to her mother when Steve died, asking for someone to take Marie home. She's very sick and wants to die," Eddie said, interrupting Michelle's gaiety.

①

DEAR MAMA TUROLODO,

~ THIS IS MARIE + STEAVE'S FRIEND, _____ WRITING TO YOU FOR THE FIRST TIME; AND FOR A VERY IMPORTANT REASON!!! ~

~ AS YOU KNOW, STEAVE WOULD NOT GO HOME TO HIS FAMILY, BECAUSE HE DID NOT WANT TO LEAVE MARIE!!! ...AND MARIE WOULD NOT COME HOME TO HER FAMILY BECAUSE SHE WOULD NOT LEAVE STEVE!!! ~

~ NOW, SHE WANTS TO COME HOME TO HER MAMA, BROTHER'S AND SISTER'S; BECAUSE SHE HAS NOTHING ~~TO~~ TO HOLD HER HERE ANY MORE YOU SEE, ON NOV. 10TH, 1990, ... HER HUSBAND, STEVE, DIED IN THE HOSPITAL OF A STROKE!!! HE WAS ONLY 35 YEAR'S OLD!!! ~

~ OVER: ↗

(2)

~ MARIE IS HEART-BROKEN AND WANTS TO DIE, ALSO! BUT, SHE STILL LOVES HER BEAUTIFUL FAMILY; AND SHE WANTS TO BE WITH YOU, AGAIN!!! ~

~ SHE IS VERY SICK, JUST LIKE STEVE AND SHE NEEDS YOU AND YOUR LOVE AND UNDERSTANDING! PLEASE, I BEG YOU, IF YOU STILL LOVE LITTLE MARIE, ... PLEASE, PLEASE SEND SOMEONE TO GET HER AND TAKE HER HOME TO HER FAMILY AND LOVED-ONE'S ... WHILE THERE'S STILL A CHANCE!!! ~ I WILL WATCH OVER HER AND PROTECT HER UNTIL YOU CAN COME FOR HER!!! ~ I DO THIS IN JESUS NAME!!! ~

~ BUON NATALI*,

So Michelle was right when she said her mother was coming to New York. I learned that night Michelle also used Eddie's address to receive mail from her family. He didn't have a telephone. However, most of her mail was a stack of unpaid hospital bills on top of his refrigerator.

"When was the last time you were home?" I asked Michelle.

"Four years ago. My father died a year ago."

"Do you call your Mom regularly?"

"I call collect from a payphone. I tell her everything is fine. I'm ashamed of my true life. In Italy, they'd never understand the homeless problem. All my sisters live in beautiful homes. We had a great childhood full of life's finer things."

As her photos shuffled through our hands, I knew her mother should know about Michelle's dire straits. I was a mother, too, and would want to know. I asked for her mother's address. Maybe Michelle would let me write or call her. And when was she coming to New York to take her daughter home?

They both ignored that question about Michelle going home, but Eddie did give me soiled paper and a grimy pencil to write her mother's address. Michelle didn't comment. The \$600 that was balled in my hand was now on the table. He glanced at it often.

"Michelle, it's too cold outside. Sleep here tonight," I said, as I prepared to leave.

"I will if he doesn't bring whores in."

"Judith, wait," Eddie said, ignoring her. "I want to show you something." He disappeared behind the crackled door.

Michelle and I were alone for the first time in his apartment. We spoke softly, like confidants and schoolgirls.

"He's really the Devil, you know," she whispered loudly. "He's fucking crazy, too."

"Do you pay him to stay here?"

"Yes."

"And the whores?"

She said Eddie used her money and that of another homeless woman to bring whores to his apartment. He wouldn't let men in, although Steve could stay on occasion since he and the other homeless men pooled their money so Michelle could stay overnight. I couldn't fault Eddie completely. He gave her a bed. She ate a hot meal. She washed in his filthy bathroom. I couldn't take her home. I was terrified of body lice and the unpredictable behavior of alcoholics, so I left her on the street.

The paint-chipped door opened swiftly. Eddie leapt into the kitchen. "Ta dah," he sang and landed on one foot.

"Jesus Christ," I blurted out.

A grotesque, full-size, rubber Batman mask covered his head. One arm swung in an arched motion carrying with it one side of a full-length, black, velvet cape. He wrapped it across his chest and paraded around the kitchen. The cape swirled from side to side.

"I told you he's nuts," Michelle said, doubling in laughter.

"How do you like this, Judith?" Eddie's voice was muffled behind the mask. His piercing black eyes had a wild, glazed look coming from the slits.

"You're quite a guy. You can go from Elvis to Batman in one night."

Michelle giggled. "He wears that costume on the street. He even wore it to visit Steve in the hospital."

"I've got to go home," I said. I was numb. But Michelle's \$600 was still on the table. I looked at it, as did Eddie through his Batman mask. Michelle reached for it.

"Here, take it, take it," she insisted and put the wad in my hand.

"Marie, we have places here to put it," Eddie said.

I left the money on the table and approached the apartment door as a knee-bending relief engulfed me. A few hours earlier, I'd been curled under my mohair blanket, staring at TV, and now I was in this bizarre hellhole of a walk-up with a drunken homeless woman pulling \$600 from her sock and a toothless Elvis-Batman freak.

Michelle got up from her chair but fell to the floor. I rushed to her side. Her arms wrapped around me as I picked her up.

"I love you, Judith," she whispered and placed her head in my neck. "It's not a coincidence we met. There's a reason."

And like the protector I'd unwittingly become from the moment I first saw Michelle, I held her close, no longer fearful, at least not that night, of the diseases or body lice she might carry.

"I love you, too, hon. Get a good night's sleep. We'll talk soon."

I ran down the five flights and out into the darkness. Within ten minutes, I was on my living-room couch staring out the window at luminous skyscrapers, reeling from what had happened in Eddie's apartment. It overwhelmed me to think Michelle tried for years to recreate a taste of home in that incredible filth.

For the two years I'd known her, my life was normal except for financial issues. I'd moved to a slightly larger apartment. Between freelance projects, travel articles, steady temp secretary jobs and terrific women friends, my life in New York was happy. But Michelle was still the drunken

homeless woman in my neighborhood. People asked if I bothered with her because my father was an alcoholic whom I'd seen lying in the streets of downtown Providence. Was I righting his wrong? Did I want to write an article about the homeless? Michelle was perfect fodder.

I couldn't answer since I'd asked myself the same questions when I'd walk away from Michelle, season after season. Caring deeply made no sense. Now, this night I'd put myself in danger by entering into an apartment occupied by a crazy man. But with Michelle's hug and whispered *it's not a coincidence we met*, my days of walking away from her were over. But did I have the right to control her life? And how would I do it? What could I do beyond what I'd already done?

As I lay in my warm and comfortable bed and Michelle was in Eddie's hellish apartment, I vowed to increase my impact on her life. I'd up the value of my gifts and street friendship. I'd instill her with unconditional hope. Hers was gone. But she'd find it again when I got under her skin as deeply as she was under mine. Somehow, I'd get her to choose me over her street life.

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