



## Catholic School Kindergarten Sweethearts Turned Queer

Annie Rachele Lanzillotto (May 28, 2012)



He was always better at jump rope and hopscotch than me, and I was better at basketball and stickball, but I didn't know this was a sign that would both break and heal my heart. Excerpt from Annie Lanzillotto's upcoming book: "L Is For Lion: An Italian Bronx Butch Freedom Memoir" SUNY Albany Press, Feb 2013.



Whenever I needed anything, I walked the streets of New York until I found what I was looking for. I turned thirty, shaved my head, got a leather jacket and walked downtown with my resume in my red knapsack. I needed a job, an apartment, a lover, and a shrink. The leather jacket I literally walked into, a guy held it up in the crosswalk of Saint Mark's Place and Third Avenue. He stood like a toreador and I stepped off the curb like a bull and slid my arms right into the jacket. Boom. I walked into CBGB's and met a woman who recruited for Housing Works. I gave her my resume. Got a job. Boom. I kept walking. I walked down 8th Avenue past 15th Street with a friend of mine. Two guys walked by us. Something in me turned around to look at them. One of the guys yelled, "Annie?" in a Bronx accent, with thick nn's and a long eee almost like aaay. I remember thinking, no one says my name like that anymore. This voice called me from my deep past. This voice tugged my soul. In this man's face, his boyhood features were instantly updated. It was Johnny Denaro, my Kindergarten sweetheart.

"Johnny!" I yelled. We jumped into each other's arms and spun around. It had been a dozen years since I had seen him, when I was eighteen and in Sloan-Kettering with Hodgkin's Disease and he appeared, giving me a blow-up rainbow on which he wrote in blue marker: "Kindergarten Sweethearts Forever."

"My father died," he said and we held each other as 8th Avenue pedestrians streamed around us. Now that we were in each others' arms again, we would never let go. The blessed streets of Manhattan brought us together again. God Bless New York. Johnny Denaro was my heart's destiny, the Italian boy around the corner I was fated to marry and have kids with. Our childhood houses were two backyards and one fence away from one another. All my siblings married Bronx Italians, and it was clear from the first day of Kindergarten that Denaro was mine.

We'd gone to grade school at Santa Maria School on Zerega Avenue in The Bronx. Our Kindergarten teacher, Sister Rosaria, seemed as tall as Meadowlark Lemon, my favorite Harlem Globetrotter. Sister Rosaria had a vast forehead, silver topped eyeglasses, and a soft hairline tucked inside her black and white habit. She held a brass bell in her hand and shook it by its wooden stem; the bell rang out over all of us. Come, children! She corralled us into a line in a fenced-in yard attached to the back of the school building. Fencing around cement; the world of schedules and work and rules and order. Sister Rosaria marched us silent and contained through a red door held open by a tiny wooden triangle shaped like a ramp for my Matchbox cars. I counted twenty-six of us. Twenty-six felt like a good number. Maybe my father would play it. I was worried to leave my mother alone in the house with my father, only the dog was there to guard her, but with my father, the dog wouldn't intervene. One boy immediately stood out to me, his black hair was slicked back, and he wore a red bowtie over his white shirt. Enter Johnny Denaro. The desks were pushed together into group tables. Johnny asked, "Can I sit next to you?" I nodded, "MmmnHmmm." His hair had a crisp white side-part. The first time I heard him laugh all my nervousness flew away. Johnny Denaro laughed louder than anyone in the room. Sister Rosaria asked the class, "Who knows how to count?" My arm shot straight up. My father taught me to count at the maple table with a deck of cards, so the words shot out of my mouth, "Ace deuce tree fo' fi' six seven eight nine ten jack queen king." Johnny Denaro burst out laughing. Sister Rosaria's eyebrows flattened. I added, "The ace can come in high or low."

In second grade, I stayed home from school a hundred and eight days with mononucleosis. Johnny brought my schoolbooks over. I was quarantined. He stood at the doorway of my room and talked to me, and then he'd go home and call me on the phone and go over the math. The sicker I was, the more peaceful the house became. My father left my mother alone. Go take care of your daughter, was all he said to her. In third grade, I brought Johnny down the basement to play



hitchhiker. He pedaled the exercise bike and I stood to the side with my thumb up. He said –Hey Where you goin? And I said, --Gimme a ride, I'm heading West. I got on the back of the bike and held him tight. He stood up as he pedaled and I sat on the seat, holding his waist as his hips moved from side to side. I marveled at how his hips moved. Our hearts beat fast and we got sweaty. Then we'd switch and I'd be the biker and Johnny the hitchhiker. I'd try to move my hips like he did could but I couldn't really do it. We sat on the floor with my victrola and played the forty-five of The Partridge Family's "I Think I Love You." We were seven and we already had our song.

On his way out, we lingered at the top of my stoop. Johnny asked, "What boy do you like in class?"

"Guess," I said. Toying with him was fun.

He went through all the boys' names one by one, to which I replied, 'no, no, no, no,' until it was down to only two names, including, his. We were born in 1963, the other boy was aptly named John Fitzgerald.

"Keep guessing."

"There isn't any body else," he said. He had a big smile on as he backed down the stoop.

"Yes there is. You're leaving someone out. Think."

"Who?"

"Think."

He backed away, down the stoop, smiling. We both knew we loved each other; no feeling was ever as good in the world.

In fifth grade, my mother set up snack tables for me and Johnny to eat in the living room. She served us bowls of hot lentils, glasses of Hawaiian Punch and thick Italian bread. Then she went back to my father's yelling in the kitchen. Later, she stomped back into the living room and announced: "I just want you to know we're leaving. Me and you. We're moving out." I gagged. The lentils and the red Hawaiian Punch shot out my nose. Johnny and I laughed. I spit all over the snack tables and carpet. I couldn't catch my breath.

A few weeks later, Sister Lorraine confirmed it was true. "Class, I have announcement to make. Today we have to say goodbye to a very special student in our class. We all will miss her. She is moving away and she will attend another Catholic school. That student is, Annie Lanzillotto." Sister Lorraine's index finger was crooked. Was she really pointing at me? I felt hot inside. My body stood up while my soul stayed seated. My soul stayed in the Bronx. I kept my Bronx accent. Johnny Denaro whisper shouted, No! and stretched his arm over his desk as if he could grab me from the back of the room and hold my hand down the long classroom aisle, keeping us put, for the rest of our lives.

There on 8th Avenue, I held his warm hands and looked into his deep brown eyes. We parted, and walked in opposite directions with the friends we spent the day with. We promised to talk at once. As I walked, it struck me, Johnny Denaro is gay. The jump rope, the hopscotch, the ebullient laugh. I looked at my friend. "Of course he's gay." All the princes in all the storybooks were gay. We're both gay. He's gay. His friend is gay. My friend is gay. I'm gay. We're in Chelsea. We're all



gay. Our destiny was even stronger now, but in an opposite way than I had imagined as a young girl. The magnetic fields were both flipped, Johnny and I had a double repellent field. Our bodies could never push together. We would never make love and procreate, and yet, I would never love anybody as much as I loved him. I felt doomed. I knew I was meant to be with him in that Catholic idea of "forever." He was the only soul on earth I would ever consent to walking down an aisle with. I had to bend my mind around all this. One part of me was relieved. It would have been horrible if one of us was gay and the other, God forbid, homophobic. Another part of me was gravely disappointed. Could our childhood love simply resume? Was the stationary bike all we would ever have, a stationary love that would never go anywhere? I felt a deep loss, and it felt impossible to explain it to myself or anyone. I still wanted Johnny to 'call for me' in that longing way he did as a child on my front stoop. I was haunted by "I Think I Love You" lyrics. I sat down and wrote him a postcard saying, "Shall we march together at gay pride? Hold a sign: "Catholic School Kindergarten Sweethearts Turned Queer."

He telephoned me, "Are you coming out for me, or for you?"

"For both of us."

He laughed, his louder than anyone in the room, Johnny Denaro laugh. And we marched on Washington, me carrying him on my shoulders.

We've stayed close friends the past twenty years, since 8th Avenue threw us back together. Now Johnny is the Priest-in-Charge at St. Ann and The Holy Trinity Church in Brooklyn Heights. And I am a writer, writing about our unique forever love. I visit him in church. We never walked down the aisle, but there we are together forever.

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