

Within Walking Distance

Recreation Park, Binghamton, June 3, 2017

Having just arrived at the park, I stood outside the carousel as its organ played for the whirling riders—attempting to indulge in that tricky state of being both observer and participant. My dog was with me, so I had to forgo any ride on the merry-go-round, but it was a beautiful Saturday afternoon, and the park hummed with baseball games, picnics, strollers, and shrieks of joy coming from the community pool. Outside the fence behind home plate, a table of older folks, many disabled, enjoyed good food and a day out in the sun—the two chaperones doting on them with obvious affection. I looked toward the bandstand and noticed two teens making out, and then a little boy stepped away from his family and asked, “Can I pet your dog, mister?”

“Sure,” I said, “but he can be jumpy.” Normally hyper, Buster acted rude—straining toward some people, perhaps smelling their food. He mostly ignored the boy, although this can be a blessing compared to his usual bronco busting moves. The boy, who looked to be about eleven, stroked Buster’s back and finally got his

attention. He told me he had a dog too—a pit-bull back home, and that his mom and aunt were taking him to Wendy’s in a few minutes. He was definitely ordering the Baconator, a very large, man-sized hamburger. I asked him if he was sure he could handle it, and he said, “Oh yeah, I’ve had ’em before.”

His mother called, he said “bye,” and then dashed off to rejoin her. Rising from my crouch next to Buster, I smiled at the spontaneity and unencumbered joys of children—unaware that decades ago Rod Serling wrote a popular tv episode in his *Twilight Zone* series on this very theme—a bittersweet tale of a man returning to his childhood home. It took place in a fictionalized version of Recreation Park and Binghamton—Serling’s hometown. The episode *Walking Distance* featured the carousel, the bandstand, and a little boy.

Returning to Connecticut from my own hometown of Elba, New York, I stopped in Binghamton to do research for my next novel—*A disgraced school teacher seeks the father who abandoned her—desperate to find the missing pieces of her heart, and a Vietnam vet returns home—searching for serenity, redemption, and the half-sister he’s never met.* After reciting this pitch to my wife, I was crushed when she said. “Oh, the half-brother/sister thing is a classic storyline in soap operas.” Shit, I thought, I can never win. But I

reminded myself that every possible scenario in life has already appeared in a novel, movie, tv show, or newspaper, and it's how it's written that makes it unique. My story will not be any soap opera. Anyway, this latest project is off the ground, but not quite running. I had to break away from it to begin self-publishing my first novel, *The Sins of Maggie Black*. After investing a lot of time seeking a literary agent, and—much like Maggie's experience as a street saleswoman—getting doors slammed in my face, I realized this path was not meant to be.

But back to Binghamton. Situated at the confluence of two rivers in the hills of south-central New York, this city is large enough to have an impressive history of industrial enterprise—including IBM, GE, Whirlpool, and Endicott-Johnson Shoes—but small enough to have a hometown feel. Like other cities across the country, socio-economic trends have diminished its prosperity, but many of the original factories and stores still stand—some abandoned, but many thriving with new businesses. Rod Serling lived here with his family from the age of two until he graduated from high school in 1943, when he enlisted in the military. His childhood experiences, and later the horrors he witnessed in World War Two, both profoundly affected him, as did the bigotry and ignorance he observed in society—and formed the raw material for his subsequent creative endeavors in radio, television, and literature.

My only experience in Binghamton before this three hour, Saturday afternoon tour was several years ago, when I dropped someone off at a half-way house in the city. I don't recall much from that occasion, probably because I didn't particularly want to be there. This time was different—not just because I was doing research for a novel, but because I realized every city offers an opportunity to learn. I chose Binghamton for its location, its military-industrial legacy, and the many parks which feature turn-of-the-century carousels. Gifts from C. F. Johnson, the shoe industrialist, these gems all operate and are free to the public—a stipulation still enforced by the city. Mr. Johnson apparently didn't forget his boyhood, when he was too poor to ride.

From the limited research I did before my visit, I learned some of this history, including the fact that it was Serling's hometown. But I didn't know what house or street he lived on, nor that he had written the episode *Walking Distance*—considered by many to be his most personal and biographical. Serling revered his boyhood and his hometown, and the theme explored in this touching story—the inevitable loss of the magic and simplicity of youth—is universal. We can try to go back, but it will never be the same. The harried marketing executive Martin Sloan walks into his old hometown on a whim, hoping to relax, only to discover he's walked back in time. He finds himself as a boy carving his name

into the bandstand, then later riding the carousel, where he pleads with the boy to listen to him—to slow down and enjoy every day, because there’s no going back. But he only ends up scaring him. Later he speaks with his father, who now realizes Martin is his son from another time, and tells him he cannot stay here any longer, that this is the boy’s time, and he should heed his own adult life.

Only later, after returning home to Connecticut, did I understand the significance of meeting the little boy. The parallels between my decision to use Binghamton, Serling’s story, and my experiences at the park were uncanny. If there’s anything I’ve learned in all my years, it’s that we can learn something valuable from everyone we meet. The boy revealed in his innocence the gifts we often overlook, the memories we long to relive—the simple magic of a lazy summer day, petting a dog, or anticipating a juicy hamburger offered by someone who loves us. After I got in my car and left the park, I drove down a side street picked at random, desiring another look at the houses in the neighborhood. I turned around and headed back just shy of Bennet Avenue—the street Serling lived on, five blocks from the park.

For pictures, see the image gallery.