

## Revenir

“You walk left, you walk right. You zigzag from the sidewalk to the curb. And you cut in front of me like you’re the freshly crowned prince of Harlem,” exclaimed a portly gentleman as I accidentally brushed past him while sprinting to the 125<sup>th</sup> Street Metro North station. “Who do you think you are? Can’t you see that I just shined my shoes?”

With the pandemic wreaking havoc on NYC’s economy, I had been engaged in an alarming number of transgressions throughout Manhattan. A ghostly vibe pervading across the city made it appear as if every sane individual had fled, only to be replaced by newly discharged psychiatric patients. In fact, only a week before, I had been pursued down the subway stairs by a deranged woman wielding a hypodermic needle, moaning for Jesus, and sporting footed pajamas underneath a hospital gown. Along with a multitude of COVID-19 related restrictions, the city’s appeal had rapidly been waning. I had speculated whether New York had transformed, or if my tolerance threshold for quality of life infractions had deteriorated after turning 50 earlier in the year. Either way, I was at the end of my rope.

After slowing my gait, I glanced back to answer as my N-95 mask slid down my nose. “Piss off, douchebag. Go find yourself an open bed at Bellevue,” I imparted with an upward flick of my middle finger.

It was balmy out too, especially for October, and I was perturbed by my impending trek up to Westchester by train. Yet, I was bound and determined to sojourn onward towards Eastchester, my hometown.

Natalie Cooper, my childhood friend and next door neighbor, met me at the Crestwood train station in Eastchester. Always frail, today she looked even more depleted which was understandable considering everything she had endured over the past couple of years, most recently her mother’s death. Natalie had remained my suburban touchstone for years.

“Welcome home, darling Danny,” Natalie exclaimed with a smirk as I stepped into her car. “The prodigal son returns! Well, you’ve made it back to the ‘burbs in one piece. Still as thrilling here as always!”

I winced animatedly as she continued. “Dear god, it has been a rough few weeks”, she stated while crisscrossing through a stop sign up Fisher Avenue. “I’m a wreck, and I feel as if I’ve aged a decade in the past two months. Plus, I am passing a kidney stone, and my hair is falling out in clumps!” She paused to pivot her head while awaiting a response. “Do I look older to you? I mean, can you even believe how old we are? What am I going to do?”

Natalie meandered towards White Plains Road nearly clipping a parked van. “You know, this is the first time in my life that I am without any mothering. How on earth did you deal with this? I miss my mommy so very much,” Natalie disclosed as she swerved upwards towards Huntley, our old neighborhood.

“Well, I miss the old coot,” I professed in earnest. “Aunt Rossana was quite the spitfire to say the least.” Her mom had been christened Aunt Rossana by all of the local kids, and it stuck for 50 years. “Do you remember that time in fourth grade when I pranked her over the phone? I believe I had greeted her with ‘Well, hello there, Toots’ in a faux cockney accent. My god, what was I thinking?”

“Actually I think the precise phrase was ‘Uh. What’s cookin’, Toots?’ And the accent was more East Indian than British. Needless to say, she was not amused,” Natalie grinned.

Sailing through downtown Eastchester, I felt the anticipatory knot in my shoulders suddenly release. It became evident to me that my apprehension towards my hometown had shifted somehow. As I exhaled audibly, I determined that there was a resolution of my past that I couldn’t quite pinpoint. Perhaps, I mused to myself, the thirty years or so of therapy had actually paid off. I was fairly certain that I had fully funded my therapist’s beach house in Wellfleet, if not her daughter’s college tuition.

As we ventured closer to Knox Road, long-forgotten memories effervesced. I smiled in recollection of my mother embracing me at the bottom of the staircase as I had tumbled down headfirst in a petrifying feat as I clumsily lost my footing. I considered my scheme to provoke a couple of scrappy bullies as they pursued me around the block while ferociously peddling my bicycle toward my awaiting father. I cringed recalling the anguish that I had endured from an endless barrage of homophobic slurs in high school while withdrawing into seclusion through most of my sophomore year. My jaw clenched and my heart raced as I reflected upon the gay porn magazine that my mother had absconded from beneath my bed, and my desperate attempt to explain it away. "I bought it as a joke for Leslie", I had asserted in reference to an ex-girlfriend. My mother had hungrily consumed my lie as a tidal wave of denial splashed across her ashen complexion.

"Did you hear that Katrina Lubrino is attempting to get pregnant again? At age 49? What the hell is she thinking? And get this. From what I heard from Jessica Schwartz, Debbie Weissman and her husband are in deeply entrenched in marriage counseling and contemplating a divorce. Why I never thought they were a well-suited couple! I mean, what can you really expect from your high school sweetheart? Maybe five good years at best, perhaps?" Natalie regaled me with some trivial chin wag which I hardly even heard. I was myopically focused on the dichotomy and synergy that I was experiencing between the past and the present.

Although noticeably more upscale, Eastchester still offered the impression of a provincial suburban town; the overabundance of gas stations and supermarkets was readily apparent. It was difficult to even consider that I had ever lived in such a place. Alternatively, it was as if not a moment had elapsed since I had bopped around town, licking peppermint stick ice cream from the local creamery -- or purchasing Smurf figurines at the village stationary. And when Natalie and I had sprawled ourselves on a rock façade near Town Hall, gazing up at cumulus clouds while contemplating our futures.

As we crossed White Plains Road, I realized that I was retreating into the realm that had housed so many dreams of mine, and nightmares too. I was buffeted by emotion reminiscing about the winning goal I had scored in a soccer league championship as my father had cheered me on from the sidelines. Or the despair I had experienced the following season as my mother had endeavored to be his surrogate after he had been instantly killed in an automobile wreck. Somehow, I had weathered them all.

“Oy vey, I may be on the verge of a panic attack,” I quipped as Natalie’s car nicked the curb heading into her driveway. “Nothing has changed in this jerkwater town, and yet, everything has changed,” I grinned while shaking my head.

“Seriously. It’s shocking to say the least. But you know, Eastchester has become quite the popular destination for the upwardly mobile professional,” Natalie offered with a grimace and a hand wave. “Those little houses we grew up in are commanding quite a pretty penny!”

Natalie Cooper was as vulnerable and kindhearted as she was in second grade. In recent years, however, her childlike fragility veered into a pattern of adult victimhood. Unlike her dysfunctional next-door neighbors, Natalie’s life had progressed in typical phases. No real tragedies had occurred in her life until her 30s, when her father suddenly had a massive coronary and expired on the living room floor. Well, there was also September 11th, when she raced down 25 flights of stairs in Lower Manhattan, fled uptown on the subway, and arrived on the very last train out of Grand Central Station before the towers fell. Maybe she was more of a survivor than I gave her credit for. Sometimes, I think it is impossible to see your childhood friends completely objectively. To me, they are always the sweet girls and sensitive boys who I grew up with. No matter how much time had passed or how they had turned out, really.

I had read an article the other day detailing how to support someone grieving – not to “sing” but to listen. It was the very least that I could do for the Coopers, especially given my own expertise with loss. Aunt Rossana had died, and I would help Natalie bag up her clothes and simply just be present.

“Whoa mama! It’s like a mausoleum in here,” I exclaimed while stepping into the Cooper house again after twenty years. “Like a museum, too. A veritable homage to the 1970s,” I exclaimed, inhaling deeply with elation. I blinked several times as a blurred familiarity shifted back into focus while I wandered through the main floor. “How is it possible that the floral wallpaper in the downstairs bathroom has remained absolutely unscathed? That wood paneling in the den is entirely preserved, too!” And that familiar aroma, I thought to myself – of Campbell’s chicken noodle soup and butter. When I was a kid I thought it was how Catholic people smelled.

“My mother was caught in a time warp here, circa 1979,” Natalie said while dusting off the lava lamp next to the terrarium. “It was like she was trapped in the past - especially since my father

died. Oh, that reminds me – I need to confirm that Goodwill can take the Atari 2600 in the den and all of those plastic cartridges she held on to all these years. I think I’m still navigating through a Space Invaders haze!”

I couldn’t help strolling down Knox Road as Natalie hopped onto a phone call. My innate sense of serenity was coupled with upsurges of melancholy and angst. This was the neighborhood where I came of age, and directly next door was my childhood home. Everything appeared miniature to me now as if transformed to a dollhouse scale. I felt much like Gulliver returning to the land of Lilliput. Remarkably, the edifices themselves had held up well in their boxy style of cookie-cutter homes. Yet somehow, it all had remained intact – the DiCicco’s basketball hoop, the utility pole where we assigned first base, and the fire hydrant planted on my old front lawn. The Giannones still resided down the block, and I would visit them – but not on that day. I was a bit too overwrought.

Meryl Bernstein, my therapist, would convey that there was a certain amount of forgiveness in this visit – as if finally, in my middle age, I would find peace in the past. Perhaps by absolving my parents for dying so young and for the subsequent mess to follow. Perhaps even liberating myself entirely from the judgement and guilt that I had grappled with for decades.

Glancing across the street and over at Elena Flynn’s old yard, I reflected - with a chuckle – on the time I hounded her down the block while wielding my brother’s dirty diaper. She had squealed both in dismay and delight before subtly informing my parents that “Danny rubbed shit on my back.” Upon closer inspection, a flock of sparrows buzzed around a familiar evergreen tree. I considered the kickball which wedged high up in that tree around 1980 and rapidly deflated. It had seemed a rather symbolic metaphor of my life, too. But on this particular day, those birds appeared to be chirping melodiously. And they seemingly addressed their song singularly to me, appreciating with utmost specificity who I was.

I couldn’t help but reflect upon those other birds from so many years before. On the morning after my father had passed, I had been jolted awake perplexed by the incongruity of my surroundings while the reality of the past few hours had regained focus. I had crumpled on the living room couch, lying head to toe with my grandmother that night while the rest of my family was also displaced throughout the house.

It could not have been any later than 5 a.m. as I recall, still very much the beginning of the dawn on the day after my father died. The birds I had heeded that morning were wild geese flying south for the winter. They seemed to be calling to me too that day, as if to say goodbye.

“Yoo-hoo, Danny doo-doo,” Natalie hollered from the front bedroom window nudging me back to the present. “There is recycling to dump and closets full of clothes to bag. You should see some of the polyester pantsuits I’ve been fishing through. Finish soaking up some local color, and let’s get cracking!”

“Natty-watty ding-dong, I am pretty saturated to say the least. Time to return to 2020. Let’s do it!” I tossed my hands up in the air, and shifted back towards my house one last time. “Let go, Dan. You belong with the living,” I thought to myself as I altered my step and leaned back in.