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DIG WE MUST

Rachel Cline

1

WHEN THE WORLD TRADE TOWERS WERE BEING BUILT, I lived in an apartment that looked across the East River at lower Manhattan. This was in Brooklyn Heights. We watched the buildings rise for what seemed like years. While first one tower, and then the second, grew floor by floor, I had many questions: How did the cranes get up there? Were they really going to be the tallest buildings in the world? When could we go inside them? The construction of those buildings was the one thing making apparent, steady progress at a time in my life when everything else seemed to be heading the other way: at home there was divorce; in New York City, strikes, violence, financial default; in our country, assassinations, protests, disrespected leaders; and in the "outside world"—on the front page of the newspaper—children ran naked from bombs our country had thrown on them. I preferred to track the progress of the twin towers. I don't think it was any accident that when I moved back to New York, thirty years later, I chose to live across the river from those sentinels. They were my friends.

Since the two buildings disappeared, I have walked restlessly around my neighborhood, circling, making sure it's all still here, I guess. I feel like a cat that wants to sit on your lap, but hesitates before deciding exactly where she will nestle. I walk and walk.

First, I pay my respects to Engine Company 205, the firehouse on the block where my grade school used to be and is still. I walked by the place twice a day as a child and it is what I have always seen in my mind's eye when the word "firehouse" is uttered. In the doorway, I always saw the smiling firemen, brass pole, spotted dog, and bright red truck shown in my *Dick and Jane* readers; now if you say, "firehouse," I picture the dark arch of the doorway, open and empty and draped in crepe. Engine 205 was among the first to arrive at the scene on September 11th.

The day after the attack, I notice a few flags in front of the same brownstones that had flown them on Memorial Day and July 4th. Maybe these are the houses

of World War II veterans, I think; I doubt anyone I know even owns an American flag. The next day, more flags appear. The night manager of our local grocery, a tall black-skinned man with a knack for fashion, has wrapped one, kerchief-like, around his head. I think he comes from North Africa somewhere; he speaks French. At the corner of my own building, a large flag flies halfway up a fine brass flagpole, never before seen. Small flags bud from car antennas and baby strollers. By the weekend, you couldn't swing a cat around here without hitting Old Glory.

Walking among flags, I remember the Pledge of Allegiance, and the word that was so difficult for me when I first pronounced it, "indithvithable." I struggled so much with the sound that I never thought about what it meant. I ask a friend's kindergartner if she also has trouble with that word but she looks blank. Her father reminds me that the New York schools eliminated the pledge in part because of protests by kids like us. "I pledge allegiance to the racist flag," we used to sneer, "with liberty and justice for some." It seemed simple then. If you weren't part of the solution, you were part of the problem.

A few nights later, for the first time in my life, I see cops in windbreakers that say 'NYPD Hate Crime Prevention Unit.' The cops are monitoring a large group of people singing "We Shall Overcome," by candlelight, on the Promenade. "We'll walk hand in hand, some day, ay-ay-ay-aye. Oh, oh oh—" An officer tells me he and his fellows are only there to make the residents feel safe. Middle Easterners have been in this neighborhood for as long as I can remember, but I have never known if the pet store guy is a former Saudi or a Palestinian, whether the guy who sells me meat and spinach pies is a Muslim, a Hindu, or possibly a Levantine Jew. It feels like "Where did you come from?" will never be a friendly question again.

2

When I was a kid at P.S. 8, then just merged with the predominantly black and Puerto Rican P.S. 7, Brooklyn Heights was quiet and faintly scruffy on its margins. On the margins, there were vacant lots, piles of rubble, abandoned churches, and housing projects. In the center there were beautiful old trees, even older brownstones; and a butcher (Sal's), a baker (Éclair), a dry cleaner (Coleman), a grocery (Peter Reeves), a hardware ("Arthur's Father's Store"), a grand hotel with an Olympic-size, salt water pool (The St. George!), a florist prone to posting long

diatribes in his front window (Greek name, started with A), a beauty parlor (Inga was the name of the hairdresser who cut my mother's hair, and later mine), a toy store (Silver's), and a one-room "department" store where shelves overhead held boxes of underwear, sleepwear, jeans, striped tee-shirts, and other apparel more or less immune to style. I was not allowed to cross Atlantic Avenue unescorted but I could buy apricot shoe leather, or pistachio and rosewater candy on the Heights side. Cobble Hill and Carroll Gardens, now hipster meccas (can we still use "Mecca" ironically?), were then beyond the pale. The garbage trucks hadn't yet been painted white and renamed (lower case Helvetica) "sanitation," the Lower East Side was just a place the subway didn't really go, and some of the subway cars still had wicker seats.

At the NYC Transit Museum, just over on Schermerhorn Street, I am overtaken by my own version of Proustian reverie. I walk through the collection of old subway cars—the turquoise Flushing line with orange accents, for the World's Fair; the first air-conditioned trains—riveted like submarines; and that wicker-seated one, with the sanitary-looking white enamel poles and handles. That one clobbers me. I don't know if it is the smell—now just old transformers and dank masonry—or the sheer tenderness of the thing, so handmade and earnest in its intentions.

3

When I moved back to Brooklyn Heights, there were no more excavations, and little construction. The remaining family-owned businesses are now cheek by jowl with the Gap, Waldenbooks, and Rite Aid. It's still a great relief to return here after a day in midtown: there are trees and most of the streets are on a scale that invites walkers—no wind canyons, or block-long walls of granite. Sometimes, in my current walking mania, I see something through my childhood eyes. The hexagonal paving stones on the Promenade were where I first walked any distance unsupported. Their pattern is so regular and their shape so specific, they are like some language I can no longer read. As a small child in the city you become a connoisseur of pavement. I remember the slate best of all. It seemed to absorb the noise of your roller skates as you cruised onto it, off of the cement. Another pavement is mica flecked; it glitters in the oblique light at the end of the day, as I walk toward the Promenade.

Since September 11th, the Promenade has become one of the city's many spindrift shrines, bedraggled with broken glass candle-jars, dead flowers, and the cellophane and produce bags with which these offerings were affixed to the fence. The Promenade is where most of my walks end.

4

NEAR THE NORTH END OF THE PROMENADE, I stop at a playground dedicated to Harry Chapin. There is also a small brass plaque that honors the woman who was my pediatrician. There is even a portrait of her, in bas-relief: Virginia T. Weeks. Her office was in the basement of a three or four-story house in the creaky North Heights. Perhaps the house was even wooden. The idea of a wooden house in Brooklyn seems impossibly antiquated, now, as if I grew up in the time of the Civil War or something. Dr. Weeks grew up in a time (well after Reconstruction) when it was unusual for a woman to attend college, let alone medical school. Her little blue house was just a block or two from P.S. 8, so it was convenient for parents and part of the surround for kids—not a subway or cab ride into unknown territory but a normal stop along the way.

As soon as you were halfway down the outdoor stairs, you could whiff the etherish disinfectant smell. Then you rang the bell and were admitted by Evelyn, the black woman who worked with Dr. Weeks. Evelyn was probably thirty, a mother herself, and she didn't dress in a nurse's uniform but in street clothes. A well-worn oriental rug covered a basin-like depression near the doorway—big enough to swim in, as I remember it. I think it was a stone floor but this also seems unlikely. Dr. Weeks lived upstairs. Did Evelyn live there, too? Whatever their living arrangements, the two women's intimacy was palpable and tonic. Evelyn knew every child's medical history and frequently remembered phone numbers and addresses without having to look them up. One or two other kid-and-parent couples were usually in the waiting room and there were blocks and picture books and other toys spread out on the floor. Dr. Weeks was already elderly the first time I saw her. She had fallen jowls and white hair held back by mysterious white-coated bobby pins. She was just as she appears on the plaque, and today the plaque makes me weep.

In spite of that, I'm not really sure Evelyn's name was that. She runs together with the black woman who cleaned my grandmother's house (and kept her

company), and a spate of babysitters who took care of my brother and me during the day—all well-cushioned, sweet-smelling, forthright dames. One, Mrs. B. we called her, introduced me to shopping on Fulton Street (not yet a mall) in downtown Brooklyn. I went with her to the wig store, she showed me the two-for-a-dollar rack of pierced earrings at Woolworth, and together we scrutinized Albert's Hosiery. Across the street, where the wraith of Macy's now sputters, was Abraham & Straus, a real department store, with a unique smell, like nuts and mint and leather. After A&S we would go around the corner to Schrafft's. I would gladly tolerate car traffic on Fulton Street, if we could just have Schrafft's back again. There was nothing better than an ice-cream soda consumed on a marble counter, in the dappled light of stained glass.

Or am I thinking of Chartres?

5

THE NEIGHBORHOOD IS quiet, but still smells nastily of smoke. Everywhere I walk, I see families looking spruce but solemn. An old Italian man tells his friend, "Seems like I haven't been to church since I was baptized. Must be about time." I remember how odd I felt, as a child, when everyone else went to worship. At the start of first grade I knew my alphabet, my numbers, my colors, and even a few Greek Gods, but I had never been inside a church or spoken a prayer. During a game of tag, everyone else cut through the Catholic Church (Our Lady of Lebanon), genuflecting instinctively at the Holy Water font, and leaving me at the threshold. I was afraid to cross because I didn't know the secret hand signals. Later, after carefully explaining to me that there were only two religions, Protestant and Catholic, my next-door neighbor told me that, since unbaptized, I would certainly go to hell. In other words, she called me an infidel.

I watched the first tower burn from the Promenade; my impulse was to get close enough to gauge the extent of the building's injury. I peered through the smoke to find the cut, or gash, that we would soon have to repair. I saw only black plumes of smoke. I went back to my apartment, reassuring myself that the scar would be there to look at for a long time, like the fuselage embedded in the Empire State Building, which I had learned about at P.S. 8. Soon after the second plane hit, what sounded like fighter jets flew low and loud overhead. I fell to the floor, facedown, as we had been taught—in kindergarten, I think. I barely remember this training, but apparently it was effective. When the tower collapsed, it was

only the turn of the key in the New Yorker's inevitable second lock, the guarantee that I was alone and far from anyone I loved across the river and that my only company was now the babbling TV.

Later, outdoors again, I watched endless columns of people come pacing off the Brooklyn Bridge in a kind of trance. They were powdered with grayish dust. No one was crying or screaming or even talking, really. When, in unison, they all stepped aside to let an ambulance pass, it was like a Zombie parade. At Tillary Street, dazed police officers and a few orange cones re-routed the entire column Eastward. I found myself walking behind a young woman in high heels. She had apparently wet her trousers in a moment of terror.

As a child I had a nightmare: I am alone in the post-nuclear desert. All around me the poisoned fallout looks like snow.

6

WHEN I WAS a kid in Brooklyn, the city was in a chaotic state of reinvention. Robert Moses had marked whole neighborhoods for demolition and Con Edison, when forced to excavate, would post a small sign that said "Dig we must." So much is expressed in those three words, with their slightly Yiddish inversion: the imperative, the ambition, the great project of urban renewal that made an "us" of immigrants and artists, impresarios and pedestrians.

Since September 11th, I sometimes gaze at the boats and barges braving the choppy harbor at night, and I pretend they carry cargoes of solid, tangible things—coal or candy or newspapers or oil—I pretend that they're ferrying them here to Brooklyn, slowly, but in good time. The vessels are manned by the sort of people Whitman used to drink beer with, only more diverse, of course. I picture them swaggering in their tackle and toughness—maybe they are rambling towards the waterfront bars near the Ferry landing down the hill. But I know what the barges are really bearing is rubble; rubble salad, in fact: a wretched mix of decaying life and meaningless ash. I also know that sad cargo will travel to its destination over the other great engineering project of my childhood, the Verrazano Narrows Bridge. It will be buried again in the borough of Richmond, far away across the harbor; in a place where someone else grew up.

When I travel, it's almost always to visit places where they have dug up the past. I like to know that there were people there so long before me that it's beyond my ability to imagine, that six degrees of separation can never even get me close. I no longer have to get on a plane to see a great excavation—more spectacular than Pompeii, bigger even than the tomb of Tut. Standing at the edge of Brooklyn, my eyes search for the missing towers the way your tongue searches for a missing tooth. It's clear what we must do, and unbearable. We must dig, dig we must.