

In time back when she lived. When she smelled up the car, when her fingers drummed and fingered the fluted-like-pie-crust Buick steering wheel. When she reached her arm instinctively, braced me in the bench seat beside her every time she hit the brakes in rainy streets. Her presence pulsing, fragrancng the space. Breath-warm car, car where we faced the same way: street signs, lights, suburban streets, Jersey sights like malls, highways, bargain basements. Car she'd furtively park at the side, dig up wild tiger lilies in Wayne and replant in her garden beside the azaleas. Tiger-lily thief. Car where, when smaller, I backseat slept, cheek mashed in the leatherette wetted with my deep-sleep spit. Then we ended up in Atlantic City and Aunt Wally. Aunt Wally the funnest, heartfeltest in the family. Instant happiness seeing her smiling at me in her bullet-bra swimsuit, hearing her Philadelphia accent. Sea-swimming with Aunt Wally the everyday swimmer she was. Then the car warm, sandy. Aunt Wally's clam-pie dinners. Uncle Seán grumpy in the recliner, face like meat, whiskey at his side and Winnie clucking, serving, wiping. Uncle Seán with the insurance firm: Burns & Sparks.

The car was an us-place – she and me, else Dad and she and me travelling, visiting relatives less rich than us in Fair Lawn and Midland Park, relatives that were teachers and clerks and insurance agents and candy sellers, still immigrant-tinged and living with recent immigrants. Dad an executive, which barricaded us away in the white places, tenement- and hue-free we were. The

car – the vehicle that bridged us and the relatives severed by the cash difference. The car carried us the distance the cash didn't span. We swam in the relatives' inflatable baths, ate their grilled meats, adults drank their martinis and manhattans in their less leafy tracts with less acreage. They never said there was a cash gulf but there was. It was felt. We visited them; they never visited us. Stranded in the affluent suburbs that were indigent-free. Every minimum-single-acre resident in that suburb-present grew up in a crammed-sibling-bed past, knew hunger, knew handball in the streets, were tainted sepia-tinted, grannies and granddads in dirty rags and need, gruelling sea travels that were unspeakable. Laundry hanging between buildings, ladies peeking behind starched lace curtains. Time passed, wars. The 1950s arrived and wham! in came shiny appliances, marble baths, laundry chutes, minibars, multiple car garages, car-key swinging parties that freaked them, in their disremembering track with its single future-based, cash-accumulating, hue-free path.

Severance. Strandedness. It was felt.

I felt it as a chill in my centre, a slashed umbilicus when we left the relatives' parties in the denser areas and headed back up 208 past the trees. Urban Farms was the suburb name. Passed the club and the lake where the suntan cream slicked the surface in summer. It was like being cut but it was said we were lucky, privileged. It was a time-slice in the American myth-dream and it was pervading. It paved life's vagaries, varieties, uncertainties, eschewals with urgency. That life was a bright, flat, white space that lacked penumbral shades and skins. Darkness in its rich varieties and death as a simple fact didn't figure. It was a klieg-light, leisurely life with big cars, fake ski areas and subterranean IBM missile bases where Indian land had been. Sun-drenched and untrue, it was a ruin in the making.

Art class was where the life was. It was her gift. Every birthday. Mine. Late in the day I entered the piney, sharp turpentine tang that tickled the sinuses. Easels and palette tables – the metal tables printed with rural English hunting scenes that adults ate at while watching TV. A sink where I cleaned my hands in dumped turps. Alban Albert, New Jersey artist, was the teacher. He made landscapes, green-and-white-dappled that sat well in heavy frames, graced the bank managers' and lawyers' chambers in New Jersey. Mr Albert was gentle, instructive, discreet. His craft was in charge. I'd find a painting I liked in a magazine and Alban taught the making craft. I did Dürer's hare. Andrew Wyeth's lightning finial. Cassatt's girl in a chair. Edgar Degas's self-likeness. An Edward Curtis black-and-white Native American with a blanket in ricrac patterns I did in grey pastels.

Time was different in Alban Albert's space, a squarish building in a car park near Franklin Avenue. In my father's discarded grey-white shirt, I carried my paints and brushes in and entered the slipstream. A silent speech began rivering in me. Subject – palette – canvas – subject – palette – canvas. Started with a light pencil sketch. Light because heavy graphite blackened the paint applied after. Then the pigment-feel – gritty Raw Umber, Cadmium Red like warm butter, vibrant, blaring. The pigment-feel at the brush tip, the hue at its height.

There was little talking. Mr Albert circulated. Whatever he said was hushed. He mixed a new hue silently, swished pigments with a palette knife, brushed it up there subtly, a new view. We'd stand back, have a think. Try it again. Little by little the painting built up. He brushed brief liquid lines in fluid pigment, weaving the hare's fur a brush-line at a time. Lamp Black, Burnt Umber, Raw Sienna, Zinc White, thatched lines built up, became hare-like.

I had an innate fluency. I'd sense the hue, what pigments amassed in the nameless shades. I'd test a hue mix and usually arrived at it in the first try. I matched hard and blurry edges with the edges in the picture I was imitating, knew that a bunched-up rag was as much a painting implement as fine-haired Russian sable. I'd brush a tint up there, step back, think. It was a space I sank in like a sea. I relished being in that place with painters beside me but I didn't much set my abilities against theirs. I appreciated what they made, but I existed in myself, didn't have much uncertainty that I can recall. After her death this characteristic vanished. I became a vacillating entity.

Raw canvas was like a light table shining beneath pure pigments – hues blazed unabashedly lit. If I put Burnt Sienna after a dried bluish layer, then Burnt Sienna had its legs cut beneath it. Bleakened. The grey spectrum, all the tints and shades were my native habitat. Then there was the entire predicament deciding what is put beside what. Will it have what it takes? Vying with all that is up there? Will it play its part? Is it yelling, is it underbeing? If it's imprecise, scrape it with a pyjama scrap, chuck it in the metal pedal bin. Maybe just let it sit there and see.

Painting was an undivided self-speech. Language flimmering in my veins. It was talking with my hands, wrists, fingers, eyes, gut, even smell. Ink-derived pigments didn't smell as nice. The turp smell, the linseed, the brush-eye-subject-palette-canvas ballet was inbuilt. She didn't give this as she'd given me talk language, but she enabled it in the art-class gift every birthday. She didn't speak it herself but she saw I had that speech. Maybe it was the way I'd lingered in museums the few trips we'd taken. The Met. The Frick. Whatever. Fact is that she saw it. Saw I. Maybe saw her seed-me unplanted. She didn't fear it, she didn't push it away. Rather, she cherished it. This was a gift.

Mike. Tall, silent, cute in a 70s suburban, middle-class, white-guy way. Aquiline face, lips a little pursed. Played basketball. Had a red car. Might have shared a few sentences with him at the bus shelter at Lenni Lenape Ave and Windmill Drive. Tall, skinny, pimped. Mike, the guy I liked.

Days spent kneeling squeezed between the armchair and the marble plant stand, my right cheek mashed against the glass at an angle. Single sightline in winter between thin beeches, behind the Katchadarians, where Mike Zwick's garage was. Mike's purpley red Mustang might appear then disappear deep in the garage. I needed a glimpse.

The time my cheek was pressed against that pane while my father was at the plant. The time my cheek was pressed against that pane while my father was watching TV in the den. The time my cheek was pressed against that pane while my father was depressed, staring at his knees. The time my cheek was pressed against that pane while my father was gambling in Atlantic City. The time my cheek was pressed against that pane while my father was with the Italian Mafia-lite guys at an establishment in NYC. Time time time time with cheek mashed against chilly glass and a slit eye staring.

My chest didn't flutter, my neck didn't flush when I'd first see Mike Zwick. But his flushed cheeks and bleached hair exerted a zing. Let's call it suitability. Wasn't sex in this extended, awkward teenage fad. I hadn't any fantasies with Mike Zwick's skin, enzymes didn't surge when I was within sniffing distance.

I did imagine being in Mike Zwick's arms, being in Mike Zwick's desires, sitting beside Mike Zwick as he cruised Urban Farms in his red car. I wanted Mike Zwick's eye, being a girl a guy like Mike Zwick liked. A demure girl, whatever, but a girl with fewer issues than I. A girl that liked reading less and used make-up frequently. Actually, a girl in far less pain than I was is what I imagined Mike Zwick liked and that is what I wanted. As well.

When I left my self, at what precise time, I can't recall, but by the Mike Zwick time I can say that I was living at the farthest self-margins and remained rather intact. I pressed against the panes with the same zeal as my spirit pressed against my physical edges. Seeking elsewhere.

My Mike Zwick phase was like smut: ritualistic, secret, slippery, shameful – a fantasy that wasn't engaged with real sex much, if at all. It was self-escape via peering and peeping.

Guys became cars. The pursuit then was: seek the right kind. Dependable, well-designed, suitable. What I really wanted was a guy, a car, us driving far.

The suburb started in an ice sheet that was 2500–3000 feet deep, near Mahwah, New Jersey. The ice began melting and the melt filled cavities in the earth that had been caused by the glacier's great weight. These became the lakes. Gradually plants grew, then animals. Then came human beings. The Lenni Lenape, the Delaware, the Munsee. They called the lands they inhabited Scheyechbi. The big lake we swam in every summer starting in mid-June is cited in the annals:

'Ye pond called by ye Indians Michanagrape' which hereafter is to be called and known at all times by the name of Christian Pool.'

Early Dutch and English migrants arrived. The natives were killed and displaced in skirmishes, battles and wars until the British ultimately claimed the land and distributed it. In 1948 Newark's chief priest purchased the land as the Church's. In 1958 a Patersin man, Pip Prendergast, acquired the lake and adjacent land. The Prendergasts were a big Patersin family, Irish migrants. They'd made it big selling appliances after the war. Prendergast divvied up the land in single-acre sites. The Patersin successes – the white families that made killings in building, in textile industries, in finance in the city – inhabited Urban Farms in their numbers. Built big places facing the lake. Far away (it was just five miles) were the dirty immigrants, the slave-descendants – all the castes we dumped and said we weren't.

They named the place Urban Farms. Urban because they were Patersin street kids and urban was safe, familiar. Farms in the un-distant past had failed. Farms had meant peasants, mud, penury, burden beasts, sepia grannies and granddads in smudged rags, hunched, battered in huts, famine, disease. Farms were unsuccessful. Farms were unclean. Urban Farms was a new clean thing. Urban Farms residents didn't till the land. They plunked residences. Landscaped the landscape. They hired newly arrived Italians and Hispanics as lawn guys. They didn't get their hands in that dirt. What, are u kidding? They had azaleas in it. Nice trees: silver birches, larches, Canadian and Japanese maples, pines. Kids kicked balls and played tag in that landscape. The lake was a nice blue surface in the view. It was a pretty picture. A leisure land.

The streets that meandered Urban Farms were named after the extirpated tribes that lived in the land in preceding millennia: Pawnee Lane, Apache Street, Blackfeet Avenue. The far-flung plains, western and desert tribes were featured: they had cachet, a 'bit different' was the way it was put. Lenni Lenape, Munsee, Delaware – the actual tribes that had lived in what was current New Jersey – I didn't see any streets named after them. That was realer than was wanted. The land had been actually their place and they had descendants still existing nearby in the Mahwah hills. But they were shunned and it was whispered that they were Civil War-era runaway slaves 'mixed' with natives. They were given the slur-name the 'Jacksin Whites'. Better keep things mythic with faraway tribe names as this created the dreamscape that was wanted. Actual living native beings weren't desired. What was desired were extinct names, the idea that there wasn't a native living in the present. The present was Us (white) and Cadillacs, cul-de-sacs, Little League, swim meets, Sunday mass, barbecues, tennis matches, pancake breakfasts, drunk priests, cutting-edge

appliances, mean & frustrated nuns, basketball games, seven sacraments, pets, illicit affairs, Hawaiian Punch. We were a Replacement Narrative<sup>2</sup>. The Natives were the past.

Where Apache Street ended there was a dirt track in the trees. It was the edge. Pete Panzer and the druggies might venture in there. We never went that way. We did veer west, where the tarmac ended, went in by the trees and up a steep hill. There was a nice play place just inside the trees where high flint walls made deep fissures and a fresh stream fell: Buttermilk Falls.

We played and dug up triangular, lithic darts by the handful. We knew that the 'Indians' had made them and attached them by winding sinew in figure eights at shaft ends. They whizzed them at animals and their enemies. Hunting and war. We played hunting and war games. We were in this landscape that plainly said it had been inhabited, in a recent past, by humans wearing animal pelts, tracking and hunting deer, birds and bear. Surveys say there were a few ancient paths that merged in that place. Here we were bumming at the beach till dinner time, swimming in the lake while parents played tennis at the Indian Trail Club, which was a cute name. Parents travelled half a mile in big cars hunting dinner in the fancy Acme at Urban Farms Centre. Fathers earned in the industrial estates near Patersin, else travelled by the PATH train, under the river then arriving deep in the city.

We played in the cigar-scented basement lair that held Dad's bar and the taxidermied sailfish with the wall eye he caught in the Caribbean. Lisa with her wavy tresses fastened with a fastener like twin shiny gumballs. We giggled at rhyming ditties, Dr Seuss and stuff we made up. A few lines caused laughter spasms every time we read them, a cause-and-effect experiment that never failed us:

A very fresh green-headed Quilligan Quail  
Sneaked up from *in back* and went after my tail!<sup>3</sup>

We created sexual escapades with Barbie, Francie and Ken but we called him Big Daddy Williams. His arrival was always heralded by a jingle, sung with a flabby-lipped and puffy-cheeked Bing mimicry. The pitch went up at the last syllable: *It's Big Daddy Will-YUMS!*

When he arrived in Barbie's and her flat-chested friend Francie's space, the dynamics changed and shit hit the fan. Tempers flared and nude plastic slapped in pretend verbal abuse and sexual experiment.

We giggled.

Upstairs, language was being disremembered. Grannies and Granddads might emit strange guttural speech that was crazy and embarrassing. Get them away! Get them in that graveyard quick! We wanted a new speech. A tasteful talk, beige as the carpets in the hallways and the granite kitchen surfaces emerged in Urban Farms. Sentences were clipped. Chats ended quickly as if every remark was a serve the player failed returning; the 'ball' disappeared in an invisible swale. Bland terms – *great, nice, neat* – bleached speech. Ask and get a quick answer. It was helpful, but pretty dismal as well. An emptiness invaded the very thing that linked us. As language disintegrated, we did as well.

Didn't we all miss the sweetness in speech?

*CEASE THAT INFERNAL GIGGLING!*

Upstairs she yelled at us.

We, giggling in the basement.

The writing turns up the  
leaf litter.

Trick is: find the lies.

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