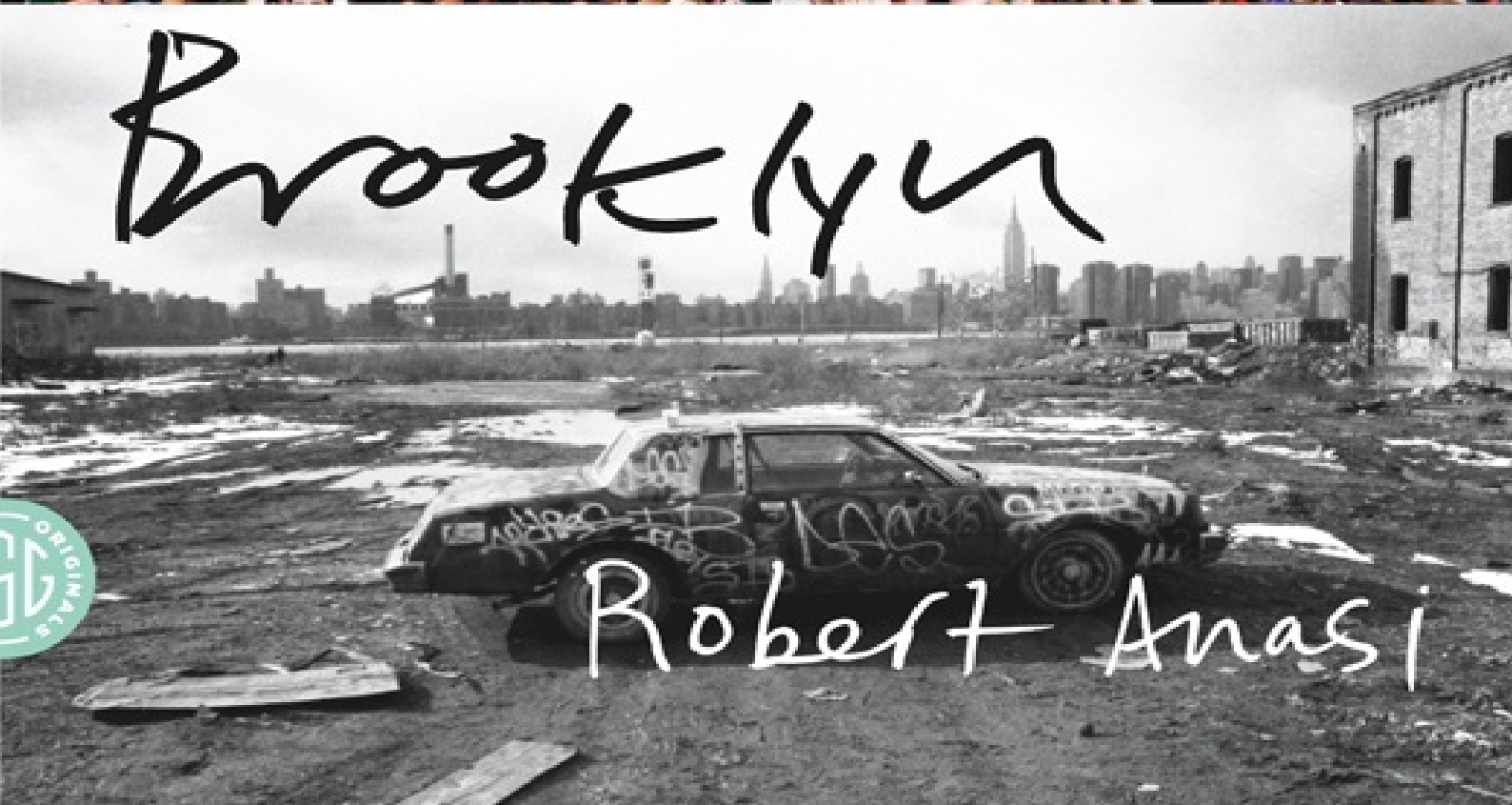


The Last Bohemia → Scenes
from the Life of
Williamsburg,



Brooklyn



Robert Anasi

The Last Bohemia

Scenes from the Life of
Williamsburg, Brooklyn

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For my mother and father

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Also by Robert Anasi

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Bohemias. Alternative subcultures. They were a crucial aspect of industrial civilization in the two previous centuries. They were where industrial civilization went to dream. A sort of unconscious R&D, exploring alternate societal strategies. Each one would have a dress code, characteristic forms of artistic expression, a substance or substances of choice, and a set of sexual values at odds with those of the culture at large. And they did, frequently, have locales with which they became associated. But they became extinct ... Authentic subcultures require backwaters, and time ...

—William Gibson, *All Tomorrow's Parties*

Prologue

Summer of 2011

Friday, August 12, 2011

Sonic Youth is headlining a show at East River State Park, a three-block span of waterfront on the Northside of Williamsburg, Brooklyn. It's the latest in a concert series that started back in June and stretched through a July heat wave that broke almost nine thousand temperature records across America, 'causing pavements to explode, railroad rails to buckle, and insects to invade homes in search of shelter and water.' So far, August has been blissfully temperate and a mellow breeze sidles in from the river. The gates opened at 5:30 and two and a half hours later the first distorted guitar riffs and drum thuds bring a delighted bellow from the crowd. Since I don't have a ticket, I'm stuck outside.

I've donned a hipster disguise for the occasion: black-and-white shell-toe Adidas, red Toughskins jeans, a black T-shirt from a strip club, large mirrored sunglasses and two death's-head earrings. The Adidas are replicas of shoes Run-DMC rapped about in 'My Adidas,' and part of a breakdancer uniform—the shell toes help with spins. The Toughskins date to the late 1970s and have a subtle light blue weave that gives them the afterimage shimmer of complementary colors. They're a sentimental choice: I wore Toughskins as a boy in the seventies. The T-shirt, from a strip club further east in Williamsburg, reads 'Pumps exotic dancing.' In a white circle above the lettering, the silhouettes of two naked women revolve around a stripper pole. Their figures are cartoon preposterous. The back of the T-shirt reads 'There goes the neighborhood, BROOKLYN, New York,' along with the address and phone number (718-599-2474, FYI). I've been to Pumps, but I'm wearing the T-shirt ironically because of course an English PhD couldn't wear it any other way. The sunglasses are Rocawear, Jay-Z's brand. The death's-head earrings are the kind of thing a seventeen-year-old metal head from Fontana would wear. So that's funny. It's an outfit designed to make me conspicuously inconspicuous in America's coolest zip code. Williamsburg was my home for fourteen years but I left in 2008 and everything I see reminds me that it's not home anymore.

Five minutes outside the concert are enough for me to realize that I picked the wrong disguise. Today it's an older crowd for, let's face it, an older band (like, AARP card old). The women wear various takes on sundresses or blouse-skirt ensembles. Most of the guys wear logo'd T-shirts, relaxed fit jeans and sneakers—American men dressing like American boys. Waistlines and hairlines show that they're closer to forty than thirty. Three decades have passed since Sonic Youth launched from the Lower East Side postpunk scene. I was seventeen when I first saw them in my hometown of Providence. They'd just started touring *Bad Moon Rising* and I'd fake ID'd my way in to join fifty other people in a concrete bunker called the Living Room. I spent the entire show leaning against a pillar as tuneful dissonance tore a hole in the space-time continuum, deafening and clear, the gateway to something new. Tonight in some small club out in Bushwick or Bed-Stuy a nervous teenager

getting his head blown apart by a sound that will alter American music. But that teenager is definitely not here.

Outside the fence the sound is mud, the vocals muffled. An aging fan rushes by me, dragging a woman and talking in a rush, trying to infect her with his passion. His free hand waves the air in time to the drum rumble. I recognize the intro to 'Death Valley '69' and catch the enthusiasm myself swept up in a thrill of music I love played live in a new location, the Manhattan skyline a perfect backdrop, sunset seething purple, orange and violet.

But it is not really a new location for me, and my ennui stems from its usual source—the gap between what was and what is. This is not the waterfront as I remember it, as I still want it to be. I take a walk around the park and run into barriers no matter where I go. Pine green plastic sheets hang from the fences. The sheeting has a .org address for an 'Open Space Alliance.' Semicircles have been cut out of the plastic at regular intervals to keep the sheets from flying loose in the wind. An ancillary effect is that you can see inside—see the crowd and the big sound stage, the concert speakers and construction trailers. Of course fans are taking advantage, knees bent, peering through. But it's still behind a fence and the price of a Sunday in the park is thirty-five dollars, if you bought a ticket before they sold out.

I wind up sitting on a crumbling wall next to the fence on the last block of North Seventh before it hits water. Pavement has replaced cobblestone there, cobblestones and trash. The L subway rumbles right under my feet and at the end of the block there's a ventilation unit for the subway tunnel. It looks like what it is—the world's biggest floor fan. Orange security barriers block the road a couple dozen yards up from the squat ventilation structure, the barriers manned by men wearing yellow polo shirts and black pants. Lettering on the shirts reads 'Event 565 Staff.' Opposite the park is the far end of the Edge, a complex of condo towers that went up over the last five years on the site of a 'waste transfer station.' Something approaching fifteen hundred units pack the insta-city of colored glass and steel. On a few of the blue-railed balconies, residents peer down at the ruckus.

I leave the wall and walk to Kent Street. Cop uniforms stand out in the swirl of bodies, walking talkies crackling. I almost get run over by a bicycle—'It's a two-way bike lane,' the cyclist sighs—as a watch touts trying to sell tickets even this late in the game. They don't seem very concerned about the cops and the sour honey of marijuana bastes the air. Toward the park entrance I pass the one building within the park boundaries—an old brick warehouse. Fifteen years ago the span between North Sixth and Ninth held seven warehouses and factories. All the buildings were occupied, but only the squatters in this one warehouse managed to navigate the labyrinth of New York City housing law and gain title. Most of the other squatters were vagrants, drug addicts and prostitutes in need of a place to hide their shame. From luxury boxes, the proud new homeowners watched the other buildings on the lot fire and demolished.

The ground floor of the warehouse semaphores a stint as a restaurant or café, furred black-and-yellow patio umbrellas with the Żyweic logo and heavy iron furniture lining one wall behind yet another fence. The cheap row of mailboxes in the lobby heartens me—at least some early neighborhood settlers managed to hold out. Security and more barriers block the park entrance.

Bags open, the guards say. Ladies have your bag open. No food and drink. Have your tickets out.

As per usual, security is mostly black and Latino, heavy men who pump a lot of iron and eat a lot of pizza. They can't be loving the uniforms—in black and yellow they look like bumblebees and even the XXL adheres to man-boobs like spray-paint. Across the river, window lights flash in the dark mass of the cityscape. I've had enough of the new Williamsburg and head off to meet a friend.

Beth and I get socially lubricated at an enoteca on the corner of North Seventh and Wythe. The

enoteca encapsulates the contradictions of Williamsburg: outside you have a flimsy three-story house with faux-wood shingles, inside, Sardinia. It's been at least six years since Beth and I have been on the Northside together. Back then she worked for a sports book, boxed competitively and was an occasional stripper. We drank at Black Betty. We drank at Rosemary's Greenpoint Tavern (which isn't actually in Greenpoint). Now she's a writer whose first book is about to be released as a Hollywood feature film. She's given up boxing for yoga but still looks great in her cutoffs.

Out on the street the show is over and we struggle upstream through a mob eager to keep the party going. A barricade at the bottom of North Eighth manned by cops turns us back and we head south down Wythe. A block away from the waterfront condos the housing stock speaks of a very different past, four-story rows sided in vinyl or tar paper. It could be a blue-collar enclave in any old industrial town except that the occupants of these railroad apartments are as likely to have graduated from Yale as the University of the Streets.

I'm trying to explain how things used to be on the Northside but it's not working. 'This used to be' is not the easiest game to play. That upscale seafood restaurant? It used to be a Jewish bakery with two-dollar loaves of heavy rye. The boutique window featuring a headless mannequin in funeral black? That was a friend's apartment, the windows painted over so that it was always midnight inside. By the time we make it back to the Edge, Beth is as tired of the game as I am. Broad walkways lead out to two new piers, metal clattering brightly to our footsteps. The disconnect from the old waterfront is overwhelming. A ferry service opened this summer on the East River and for the first time in over a century you can water-commute from Williamsburg to Midtown. Signs all down Kent Avenue announce the ferry arrival with one of the worst catchphrases I've ever read: 'Relax, we'll get you there,' straight verbal Valium. Four dollars takes you wherever the ferry goes—Long Island City, Wall Street, Governors Island. Stray concertgoers wander or sit on the patches of well-tended lawn. Dog walkers jabber into iPhones as their purebreds urinate on the well-tended lawns.

The Edge was built by the Stephen B. Jacobs Group, an architecture firm responsible for some of the most interesting Manhattan projects like the Hotels Giraffe and Gansevoort. In Manhattan, the Jacobs Group liked to supersize some classical form—Italianate, Federal, Georgian—and wrap it in a New Age glitter of mirrored glass and pulsing neon, mansard roofs mating with flying saucers. In Williamsburg, with no historical societies to placate, they could dispose of tributes to the olden days. Welcome to Abu Dhabi! (Or Key West, where Jacobs erected a white elephant of a hotel.) It was pointless to hate the large chunk of concrete and steel but I tried. Why? I mean, why build this thing? It didn't have anything to do with the place where it had been planted. You had the views, sure, but the East River isn't the the Gulf of Mexico—no sandy beaches and swimming only for iron men and suicides. When you walked out of the Edge you were still in the world of the Edge—street-level version—a dull chaos of franchise stores and overpriced restaurants. The blessing of New York congestion was that when you left your house you were tossed into all those other people. People in the streets and in the stores and walking their dogs and running errands. Life. But when you walked out of the Edge you walked into nothing. Cars and trucks running down Kent and a few pedestrians but no city life and blocks to go before you found any. Outside even the plushiest Upper West Side manor the city enveloped you. But at the Edge you had all the boredom of the suburbs without any of the trees. Only a methodical calculus could explain the choice to buy there—a certain kind of person with a certain income could afford to buy a certain number of square feet more at the Edge than he could on Water Street, and after subtracting for the longer commute, you still had a reasonable investment opportunity. The view and the cool zip code were just throw-ins.

In the wake of another couple, we pass the last Edge tower on a walkway that wraps a form

warehouse. Unlike the Edge, the warehouse wasn't designed by Jacobs, et al. The Austin, Nichols Company Warehouse building is a stolid white cube that was built in 1915. Austin, Nichols has been disemboweled since I left the neighborhood, a 'gut reno,' and now offers loft rentals. Five thousand month will get you eight hundred square feet.

This used to be all artists' lofts, I say. They had these amazing parties, over entire floors. There was a seawall here too with an iron gate. In the old days, boats could dock right at the building. We used to crawl underneath—it was just a huge open space—and then walk out to what was basically forest.

I wave out at the remodeled piers.

When the Edge started construction, I say, they fenced all this off but we kept cutting holes in the fences. I guess they won.

I trail off at the glaze that films Beth's eyes, cataracts of boredom. My lost world is far from the ineluctable now, which at the moment provides us a view into a 'fitness center' on the ground floor of the former warehouse—a half acre of the most advanced pound-shredding, bun-rounding device known to the twenty-first century in a space where railroad cars used to roll. Inside, fluorescent lights banish every shadow, but the room is empty, a display case.

'Where are you leading me?' slurs the man ahead of us. The couple is young and the man is handsome. His slur is half liquor, half Castile, a mellow blend. The girl giggles and I see they've hit another barrier, this one temporary, fresh plywood blocking the way to North Third. Over the plywood rises the round mass of a fuel storage tank. The couple turns back and we follow, all the way out of the Edge and out to Kent. Beth is ready to be somewhere else. She mentions the Greenpoint Tavern. I tell her it's still open. She asks if it's as tacky as it used to be. I assure her that it is, that you can still get a thirty-two-ounce Styrofoam cup of Bud for three dollars.

But there's one last place I want to show her. She humors me so we walk down Kent to North Third. I have it figured out: I'll point out the abandoned fuel tanks of New England Petroleum and then take her past Grand Ferry Park, where ferries stopped before the Williamsburg Bridge was built—a few more 'this used to be's' and then over and out. The tour will end with a whimper.

On North Third we face the usual obstacles. There's another fence, chain-link, and a string of lights dangling from a scaffold over the sidewalk. Underfoot, cobblestones, very different from the slick walkways on the Edge side of the plywood, Miami Beach to industrial ruin in a matter of inches. In an economic downturn that has people muttering 'Depression,' the Edge is only 40 percent sold, still a more robust figure than any of its rivals in the neighborhood can claim. Banners on Austin, Nichols offer rental lofts but most of the windows are dark. In recent years a security guard has barred the end of North Third but I don't see him tonight. This is our chance.

Come on, I say and hop over what my father told me was a 'Jersey barrier' when they first started appearing on the freeways in the seventies.

Where are you going? Beth says, but she follows. I expect shouts and men in uniforms, but we reach the end of the block without a sound. Just as I remember, the chain-link fence beside the fuel tanks is cut and sagging, and we duck through. A narrow walkway runs alongside the massive fuel tank and we reach another barrier, a solid metal panel, but ripped away from its top joint. We squeeze through and shuffle out along the walkway.

Still no shouts, no cops. After the second barrier I feel relief but we're still visible from the shore. The walkway is eighteen inches wide and algal pools of water make it slick. We turn a corner and continue our cautious shuffle, shoulders pressed against the cool white of the tank until we're past all shore sight lines. Safe at last. In front of us, wooden piers finger out to a series of docks.

Let's go up to the top, I say.

~~I lead Beth to a gate at the foot of a stairway that climbs the hundred-odd feet of the fuel tank. Wire—razor and barbed—crowns the high gate and fence. Beth is dubious.~~

I'll go first, I say, and clamber up the gate (if you have to climb a fence, take the gate—more footholds). Beth follows but freezes at the top. The cutoffs mean she has to swing her bare legs over the razor loops, one and then the other, fifteen feet over the ground.

I don't know if I can do this, she says.

Sure you can, I say. You already did the hard part.

That's easy for you to say, she says. You're not wearing Daisy Dukes.

She gears herself up and makes the move. No rusty slash, no tetanus scare. I've always loved exploring the waterfront but it's a hundred times better with a partner.

I'm not at all surprised that Beth hopped the fence; she did make it to the finals in the Golden Gloves. Eight years ago, Beth and I ate magic mushrooms before a night of dancing at Black Betty. On the way to the club, Beth thought it would be funny to hit me as hard as she could. We'd walk a few yards, then she'd spin around and drop a right in my stomach. I'd shout 'Are you crazy?' before hitting her back. After Black Betty, we ended up at my apartment. Her nice Jewish boyfriend—later husband, later ex-husband—watched in horror as we kept tagging each other on the couch. The next day the couple drove to see Beth's parents, and the boyfriend had to explain that he wasn't the person who'd painted her in bruises.

After the trek up the metal stairway we clamber through a maze of pipes and valves and hoses and walkways set in pebbled tar. I haven't been up here since I left Williamsburg and I notice changes. For one thing, lit bulbs drooping from extension cords like glass fruit make me think the late shift is about to clock in. There also seems to be more open space, as if they've been clearing the top of the tank. Here, too, demolition is under way.

The Williamsburg skyline has also changed, moving from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century in one five-year leap. From our perch we look across the entire three square miles or so neighborhood: the old domed banks, the churches with their small-town spires, the flat black warehouse roofs, the LEGO squares of one-family houses, the steel bridge and cemetery beyond. To the north, the Edge is the most stunning irruption of the new, the three towers and piers and plazas an alien graft, Williamsburg-cum-cyborg. Other developments have sprung up along the waterfront, a patchwork of glass and burnished steel rising over brick factories and row houses clad in vinyl.

Traditionally, Williamsburg has been divided into three sections: Northside, Southside and East Williamsburg. When outsiders, all those German, Spanish, Japanese tourists, all those travelers from anywhere America, when they say 'Williamsburg,' they mean the Northside. The Northside is where the L subway stops first and where most of the restaurants, clubs and boutiques have sprouted. The Northside also has the best stretch of East River waterfront and landmarks like the Domino Sugar factory and the McCarren Park Pool. The Northside is where I lived for fourteen years and where the biggest changes have come.

My personal Northside runs from the river on the west to the great wall of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway to the east. We can see the BQE from where we stand, a twisting line of headlights suspended in midair, glow-in-the-dark dragon several miles long. North, my neighborhood ends at McCarren Park, in the night a thirty-five-acre black moat below the lights of Greenpoint. The southern boundary of the Northside is said to be Grand Street, where the street prefixes change from north to south. My personal neighborhood goes further south than that, past an industrial zone of tenements and towering warehouses, all the way down to the elevated subway lines over Broadway and the

Williamsburg Bridge. For fourteen years that was home but it never will be again.

~~From the bridge, we turn back toward the warehouse across North Third. The scenic view from the~~ Austin, Nichols balconies takes in the fuel tanks, immense ghost of Williamsburg past. At eye level some thirty-five feet away is what looks like a dinner party—five people at a butcher-block table with bottles and candles. On top of the tank, Beth and I are exposed but since they don't expect us to be there, we're invisible. At my feet a slate block imperfectly covers a hole with a ladder leading down into the tank. A faint smell of petroleum and chemicals rises from the hole, the ladder a pathway to the underworld.

I want to take Beth to the fuel tank on the other side of the compound. We approach a catwalk that crosses the yard to the opposite tank. A few echoing steps onto the catwalk grate and I freeze: two security guards are talking below in the light of their checkpoint booth. Beth and I have been loudly and practically shouting, and I'm sure we'll be spotted. I wonder if we can run back to North Third before a squad car arrives. As I have a couple of outstanding warrants, I'm not in any position to be arrested. The guards don't look up, though, and we creep out over the checkpoint. Across Kent a party has spilled out of another warehouse. The Monster Island Arts Center hasn't been absorbed by new Williamsburg yet, graffiti a splotched second skin over old brick. None of the partyers notice us and we're free to explore the other tank—more pipes and valves and giant faucet wheels that you'd need Hercules to turn.

Curiosity satisfied, we cross the catwalk again, tromp back down the stairs and climb the gate—no problem for Beth this time. I'm no longer disappointed with the night.

We run out on piers to the docks, massive cylinders plunging into the river muck. The docks hold storage sheds and rubber-wheeled carts and concrete mooring pegs as thick around as sumo wrestlers. I try to imagine the thick cables that wrapped the pegs and the big freighters rising behind them.

Beth points to one of the sheds.

You could live out here, she says. No one would know.

It's probably the only place in Williamsburg I can still afford, I say.

We sit on the dock edge, feet hanging over the water. Tour boats slide by, festooned with lights. It's so quiet we can hear conversations on the boats, people at the railing taking it all in. A breeze stirs Beth's hair, the tips of her curls gilded by summer.

It's so quiet here, she says.

That's what I love about it, I say.

Across the river the skyline, bright Manhattan dream. Beth stares at the city and gently kicks the air.

It's crazy that you can be so close to all that and have it be so quiet, she says.

I don't feel melancholy at all. Breaking and entering doesn't give you time to cry over the past. Now my Williamsburg belongs to Beth too.

Dark City

1988–1994

The explosion cracked the summer evening. Light flash and then smoke rising. Another crack and flash, and another, four in a shredding air and reverberating in the basin of the empty pool. The two camera people watched, transfixed as the sound faded and smoke billowed around them. From somewhere in the cloud, a voice emerged.

You guys shot all that? Great. Let's get out of here.

The artist stepped out of the cloud.

Pack up your cameras, he said. Come on! We've got to move!

In 1990, a young filmmaker named Esther Bell made her first trip to Williamsburg. She'd been hired for a shoot by an artist named Stephen Bennett. All Bennett told her was that he had an art installation in the neighborhood, that it was at a local pool and that they'd need to be careful there. He also paid her cash, half in advance. This was more than enough for Esther—for a twenty-year-old scraping by in New York City on odd (sometimes very odd) jobs, any chance to make money with her Super 8 was progress.

Esther had come to New York for the same reason we all did—to get away from somewhere else. For Esther those somewheres were Columbia and Charleston, South Carolina. Even though she'd spent most of her life in South Carolina, she never thought of herself as a Southerner. Her mother, Sharon, was an army brat who grew up at Mark Twain Village in Germany. Sharon was twenty-two and working as a window dresser in Heidelberg when she got pregnant on a romantic Paris trip that didn't include prophylactics (her eighteen-year-old boyfriend was another window dresser). In a pre-sexual-revolution romantic saga, Sharon's high school sweetheart, Randy Bell, who'd also grown up on the military base, found out that Sharon was pregnant. Randy returned to Germany from Harvard Law School and the three young people decided that Sharon should marry Randy and go to America. When Esther was born, Randy put his name on the birth certificate. Nineteen years would pass before she met her biological father, when he visited her in New York with his boyfriend.

Randy Bell's career took him to South Carolina, where he became legal counsel for the governor and then, at age forty, a justice on the state supreme court. He also suffered from Fabry disease, which killed him at forty-nine. His social standing and his illness, along with his brimstone Southern Baptist heritage, made the household a stifling place. When Esther was fourteen her parents divorced and Sharon moved to Charleston. Esther lived a divided life over the next few years—sharing a rowdy adolescence with her mother in a condemned house in Folly Beach, Charleston, while in Columbia her Anglophile, seersucker-wearing Randy and his new wife tried to mold Esther into a belle.

Esther picked rebellion. Putting out a zine brought her into the indie rock world, and she got to know the bands that passed through Charleston (and managed to keep her cool when Mike Ness from

Social Distortion started sucking his own dick during an interview). Music led her to feminism and style of her own. In her senior year of high school, Judge Bell agreed to pay her college tuition, but there were caveats—it had to be a religious institution, less than \$2,000 a year, not in a city, and he would select all her classes. Being a lawyer, he drew up a contract and Esther spent her freshman year at Iona College, a small Catholic school in the Westchester town of New Rochelle. ('Idiots on North Avenue,' Esther says. 'They really were.') When Randy didn't hold up his side of the contract and pay the tuition, Esther was set free. She dropped out of Iona and enrolled in City College, smack in the middle of Harlem.

Williamsburg didn't look anything like New York to Esther, as Bennett led her and a second photographer—this one shooting video—down Bedford Avenue, past a shabby park to a brick castle surrounded by razor wire. Brush brambled the fences and graffiti covered every span of brick. Bennett had carved a way through the obstacles. 'What he'd done,' Esther says, 'was he'd taken a torch and made a hole in the fence.'

They crawled through and Bennett sealed the breach, then hurried them away from the eyes of the street. Inside the walls was a pool like no other Esther had ever seen before. Three regulation Olympic pools laid side by side would have sunk into the McCarren basin, which had a capacity for sixty-eight hundred dripping souls. Neglect had drained the pale blue interior. Debris and filth littered the cracked concrete and a copse grew out of the diving pool.

Six years earlier the Northside fathers had solved their integration woes by breaking the toy rather than sharing it. In Williamsburg, Poles and the Irish, Jews and Italians, could swim together, but when brown people wanted in, the water was drained and the pool closed for good.

This was pre-cell phones, Esther says. And I started thinking about how nobody in the world knew I was there with this strange artist guy.

As she waited near the deep end, she didn't see anything that looked like an art installation. You couldn't spook Esther easily—she was fit and brave and German solid, with a defiant mane of bright red hair. Still, she wondered what she would do if something went wrong.

Her anxieties didn't ease when two disheveled men approached her and the video guy (Bennett had disappeared). They all started talking. The men told Esther that they were Vietnam vets and on their way home from work. Home? Home was under the pool, in a subterranean maze of corridors and pipes. And they weren't the only people who found the catacombs useful. 'Sure,' the vets told Esther. 'The Mafia dumps bodies down there.' They claimed to have seen the corpses.

As the sun set the vets moved on and Bennett was still missing. Esther wondered if she would have enough light to shoot the art, whatever it was. She didn't plan to stick around after dark.

Just then Bennett came running toward them, shouting, 'Turn your cameras on! Turn your cameras on!'

Before he reached them, there was an explosion. And then another one. Four powerful blasts from the top of the keep that guarded the entrance, brilliant flashes and the smell of powder and gray smoke flowing over them.

Thankfully I had kept my finger on the trigger, Esther says, because it was a huge explosion and scared the shit out of us. The other guy didn't keep his finger on the trigger, so I was the only one who actually documented it. These weren't M-80s or firecrackers—the explosions were huge.

When the smoke cleared, Bennett pushed them toward the street. 'Let's go! Let's go! Let's go!' They ran to the fence and Bennett closed the gap behind them. As they walked away, angling for invisibility, Esther expected sirens, police cars, fire engines to confront the swimming-pool Armageddon. Instead, there was silence.

It was as if four explosions going off was normal, Esther says. Just another day in Williamsburg.

~~Bennett would use Esther's footage in a performance piece at ABC No Rio, a Lower East Side~~ space. On the train ride back to Manhattan, Esther worried about the effect of the explosions on the vets making dinner in the catacombs.

How decadent, Esther says. That was what I was thinking. How decadent. Here are these guys who need a real home and they're probably having flashbacks while this guy is making his art show.

* * *

Getting off the L at the Bedford stop put you on guard. From First Avenue the train took forever to pass under the tidal strait, too much time to worry about the tons of seawater and mud waiting overhead to crush you. The Bedford station was a bleak hole. The shit-brown paint was cracked and peeling. Rats scurried between the rails and dashed across the platform. Foul water dripped. Upstairs Bedford Avenue wasn't any better. At seven p.m. you felt fear in the gloom and rightly so. Old New York hands donned their city armor. The street was quiet but not with the sprinkler hiss of summer lawns: no, Williamsburg was a ghost town. The other folks who got off the subway with you, most of them blue-collar men, hurried down the street, slipped around corners, disappeared. If you were curious, though, if you couldn't help yourself, you slowed down. You liked the jolt, the city edge; you wanted to see the ruins. Except for the flashing Christmas lights of the Greenpoint Tavern, Bedford Avenue was dark. Shutters masked the storefronts. Some had folding lattice gates instead of metal shutters so you could look inside. Behind the shutters, dust coagulated on display platforms. Merchants had locked their shop doors one day and never come back.

Three guys I knew moved to a Williamsburg loft in the summer of 1988: Stephan Schwinges, Kai Mitchell and Andrew Lichtenstein. They were perfect fodder for a rough neighborhood—young and cocky and willing to live on scraps. Drew and Kai had graduated that spring from Sarah Lawrence College just outside the city, and Stephan was a louche German expat who'd left his homeland under a cloud and bounced from Berlin to London and then to the East Village.

A Mexican American illustrator told Stephan that he was giving up the loft he shared with his wife in Williamsburg, a big space, two thousand-plus square feet for a thousand bucks a month, if Stephan was interested.

Stephan's response: 'Where the fuck is Williamsburg?'

But he went out and looked at the loft: two floors on the west side of a warehouse at the corner of Metropolitan and Driggs, right on the border between Northside and South. The back windows looked out onto an even bigger warehouse and a weed-strangled lot. Catty-corner on Driggs was a stoneyard with winches and cables to hoist blocks of marble and granite. An Italian mason occupied the first floor of the warehouse on the other side of Metropolitan. Along the broad avenue warehouses overshadowed a few old tenements. No restaurants, no bodegas, no bars, no trees, nowhere to shelter from winter chill or summer blaze.

Stephan liked it just fine. 'It was good for me,' Stephan says, 'because I was a broke, broke artist type.' The loft gave him more for his money than the straitened dump he was paying fourteen hundred for on Ninth and B across from Tompkins Square Park. Anyway, things weren't working out too well with his girlfriend there. Stephan knew that Drew was looking for a place, and Drew brought in Kai.

None of them fit the neighborhood profile. As Drew says: 'If I walked out the back door I was in the Dominican Republic and if I walked out the front door I was in Poland.'

The Mexican American artist had a good reason to leave: his wife had been raped a few blocks away, near P.S. 17 on North Fifth and Berry. He wanted out, back home to the palm trees and sunshine.

of San Diego. Stephan wasn't put off by the horror story, though, or by the desolate streets. Nor were his future roommates. They were young and they were men: they felt inviolable.

Besides, in 1988 New York, few places outside of Gracie Mansion were safe. Danger was a price you paid to live there. A crack house near Stephan's apartment held open and thriving commerce. Stephan being Stephan, he walked into the crack house one drunken night and handed out bottles of Guinness to the dealers. After a 'What the fuck?' moment, the crack dealers drank Stephan's beer and they all became friends.

Things Fell Apart

'I want to get to Bellona and—'

—Samuel R. Delany, *Dhalgren*

Samuel Delany's 1975 novel *Dhalgren* is set in an American city disordered in time and space. An event horizon keeps phone calls and television broadcasts from entering or leaving 'Bellona,' which is covered in perpetual cloud. One night the clouds part to reveal two moons. The next day, a giant red sun rises, terrifying people until the cloud cover returns. Street signs and landmarks shift constantly and nobody remembers the last time he slept. Buildings burn for weeks without collapsing and gangs roam the nighttime streets, the gang members hidden within holographic projections of insects and monsters. Residents rely on stores of canned food and bartered goods to survive. Newcomers to dying Bellona are young drifters and loners; Delany's amnesiac protagonist is called Kid. One of his only memories is of having spent time in a mental hospital.

Delany puts Bellona in the Midwest but to me it feels like his hometown of New York City. It's not just anywhere in New York, though—not the mansions of Riverside Drive or the glass mountains of Wall Street, not the fetid blocks around Times Square. Delany writes about the margins—empty streets, abandoned buildings, feral teenagers and ordinary civilians trying to negotiate the collapse. Images of Bellona rippled across the country, thrilling us in movie theaters and living rooms. It was the city of *Taxi Driver*, where Travis Bickle watched a liquor store owner shoot a robber and then helped him dump the body into the street. That was the city I came to, except a decade had passed, the fires had burned out, and the nation had elected a professional actor to the White House.

As a teenager, I lived with Reagan Junior—my brother watched *Rambo: First Blood* a thousand times and hung the Stars and Stripes, and a Catholic cross, over his bed. Reagan's world seemed upside down to me, but to my brother, I was the freak walking on the ceiling. In my world *Born in the U.S.A.* was about the suffering of a Vietnam vet; for my brother it was the anthem of American triumph. In *Rambo* a Vietnam veteran's abuse at the hands of small-town cops causes him to have flashbacks to a Vietnamese prison camp; for my brother, John Rambo celebrated the red, white and blue. My brother was an Eagle Scout; I got kicked out of the same Boy Scout troop. We couldn't both be right, and who was I? A punk who landed in detention every day. Reagan never got into trouble (although my brother did); in fact, Reagan's polytetrafluoroethylene carapace earned him the nickname 'the Teflon president.'

All I had to fight Reagan were facts—in 'Born in the U.S.A.' Bruce Springsteen sings:

*Out by the gas fires of the refinery
I'm ten years burning down the road*

The story of a man haunted by prison and with ‘nowhere to go’ didn’t sound like victory to me but if everyone thinks you’re wrong, does it really matter if you’re right?

The kids in my high school AP classes pledged allegiance to *The Official Preppy Handbook*: pin-striped oxfords, deck shoes, khakis and Ivy League idolatry. The handbook was a bestseller, the prep look adopted by kids who lived far from Newport yachts. The middle classes had imitated the rich for centuries but at some point they turned toward the masses—blue jeans and T-shirts, bike jackets and sneakers. *The Preppy Handbook* represented a paradigm shift but it made perfect sense in a country where, once again, greed was good.

Punk rock had a different take on fashion. Some of my friends donned safety pin earrings and purple Mohawks but to me, the clothes mattered less than the music. American A&R men had expected punk to be the next big thing. Boy were they wrong, but that was just fine with us. Postpunk politics included all kinds of tribes—old-school feminists and fuck-me feminists, vegetarians, anti-nuke folk and plenty of flat-out kooks. A Trotskyist friend of mine ran the music collective at Barnard College and I trundled up there to hear the Minutemen one month and Doc Watson the next. Punk rock saved my life.

Reagan hated and feared and neglected the cities, so the city became the perfect place to get away from him.

* * *

Drew had been to Brooklyn exactly once before he moved there. This was not unusual for immigrants who’d come to New York for Manhattan. When the L crossed the river the color-coded subway maps read like Sanskrit: Montrose, Morgan and Aberdeen stations were Atlantis, Ys and Shangri-La. Brooklyn was terra incognita with Mike Tyson replacing the sea monsters on the margins of ancient maps. Only a mistake would send you to East New York or Brownsville, where little kids wielded Glockes. Much better to shiver and watch the horror show on TV.

But if you were twenty-three and looking to get started in the big city without a trust-fund teat? If you were a daredevil who could walk into a crack house with a sack full of Guinness and figure out how to turn out okay? Then maybe Brooklyn was the place for you. In 1988, \$333.33 a month was a small nut for a freelance kid but Stephan, Drew and Kai didn’t have any better offers. They took the loft.

Stephan appointed himself master builder and director of operations.

I had all these great ideas, he says. I told them, ‘We’re going to redo the walls. We’re going to redo the floors.’

At first, renovation seems easy. You tool up. You read books, you look at diagrams, you talk to your carpenter friends. Maybe one summer you apprenticed as a helper on a construction crew. So the circular saw whines, the sledgehammer cracks and walls of plaster and lath go down. Sheetrock spans the rubble rooms.

Then reality hits: you have to live in a ruin. Gypsum dust spreads everywhere, boot prints tracking across the floors. The dust follows you to bed and turns your hair into steel wool. One day you’re poking at wires in an electrical panel when sparks shoot up your arm and the building goes dark for twelve hours. You fumble plumb bob and chalk line and finally put up framing of stud and track but there are gaps, gaps you try to mud with heavy applications of joint compound (‘We kind of fucked up the walls,’ Stephan says). Crude portals gape between rooms.

To pay for the renovations you have to make money, so the work drags on for months. Pipes jangle from the odd clots that find their way into the sink. Lukewarm water trickles out of a spout in

shower grimed with plaster and paint. After two minutes lukewarm becomes ice cold. Paint smeared you, turns gray and ruins clothes, and the nearest Laundromat is ten blocks away. Renovation costs much more than you thought it would. There is yelling. There is a nascent class struggle: 'Who made you the fucking boss of the world?' the workers grumble. Stephan is unapologetic: 'I took the biggest room. It was kind of the VIP lounge with the corner view. I found the place, so...'

Stephan wanted a spiral staircase up to his suite. Out came the circ saw. The hole carved through the ceiling dropped dead rats onto the kitchen floor. In photos, the boys look at you from behind goggles and masks, wary of asbestos and gypsum dust, of silicosis and cancer (Kai fends off the ceiling with an umbrella). The thin cotton masks were a poor defense, but twenty-four is about risk, especially for the testosterone-addled, the future a million miles away.

Trouble from Kreuzberg to Avenue B had prepared Stephan for life in Williamsburg. He'd left Düsseldorf for high school in Berlin and joined a radical student group. They protested against nuclear power. They protested against McDonald's 'restaurants' in Germany. 'We got into a lot of shit,' Stephan says. He caught beatings—beatings at demonstrations, beatings from skinheads, beatings from cops, beatings from model citizens who didn't appreciate his grubby band of radicals. When he found himself under police surveillance he decided it was time for a Wanderjahr.

London's East End brought more of the same: 'You would get robbed by Jamaicans and beat up by skinheads. I was kind of used to it by then.' A chance meeting with an American actor in a pub sent him to New York City. The actor had gone to college with Drew and they all met up on the Lower East Side. 'Drew's a cool guy,' the actor said. 'A photographer and an activist and troublemaker like you. You'll get along.' The actor was right.

Their landlord came from the old Italian neighborhood that centered around the St. Vincent de Paul Roman Catholic Church on North Seventh and Driggs. Jean Paul, Sr., imported De Cecco pasta from his hometown in Italy.

In order to get into his office downstairs, Stephan says, you had to go through a dubious hallway then climb through a giant hole. It was like something you'd see in war footage from Stalingrad. John Paul, Sr., would sit there at this old-fashioned shellacked wooden desk that probably weighed half a ton. He had all these cheesy sculptures of spaghetti, of forks holding spaghetti, all over the place, and these dubious awards for his spaghetti sauce and his olive oil. His sons were total characters. The younger one dressed like a thug, and the older one, Jean Paul, Jr., was always wearing some fancy Italian suit. I'd ask him, 'Why are you wearing this suit when you're working at the warehouse?' He'd tell me, 'I need to look good, alla the time.'

Despite the banging and crashing from the loft the landlord-tenant relationship ran smooth. The boys showed up at the office on the first of the month and paid their thousand dollars in cash (no lease of course). Everybody was happy. Then Stephan got a new girlfriend. Suddenly the landlord was greatly interested in his tenants, and by the way, who was this black girl coming in and out of his building? They worked it out Old World-style, Stephan going downstairs with his girlfriend and introducing her to the John Pauls. Handshakes followed, and kisses on the cheek; harmony was restored.

As racist as the local Italians could be, their suspicion had helped to protect the Northside from the drugs that had devastated the Southside for decades. From his window, Drew looked down at the prostitutes who patrolled the Driggs-Metropolitan corner in miniskirts and stilettos no matter the weather. At night they huddled over crack pipes in his doorway and got annoyed when he tried to slice through. A Dominican pot dealer who grew up on the Southside told me the corner was so exposed and dangerous that he would go blocks out of his way to avoid it. But angel wings of ignorance protected

the boys. Most of the time, anyway.

~~The only take-out Chinese for miles was on the Southside: South Second and Bedford—fried chicken and blackened eggrolls at ghetto prices. One night in 1990, Stephan called in his order, walked to the spot and was surrounded by three lowlifes as he left. Stephan didn't know about the heroin wars that roiled the Southside, but he knew he was in trouble.~~

They were totally fucked up on PCP or who knows what, he says. I only had five bucks left so I would defend my Chinese food. I said, 'Fuck you, you ain't getting my Chinese food.' So these guys pulled knives and chased me down the block. I ran back to the house and Drew said, 'Should we call the cops?' 'Call the cops!' I said. 'What are the cops gonna do?' I was a little bit shell-shocked. But we had a beer and everything was fine.

The loft was home but Williamsburg wasn't—it didn't offer enough. Drew fell in love with the Ship's Mast, a bar on the corner of North Fifth and Berry where artists and locals shared lasagna off a hot plate in the back. There was the Chinese place and a Dominican restaurant where Drew would get rice and beans. It also served as a fence. ('Every time I went there,' Drew says, 'guys would come trying to sell car stereos or bicycles or random appliances. Three bucks for a brand-new Sunbeam toaster.') On Bedford between North Sixth and Seventh a Polish diner became notorious among the boys for the parsimony of its cream cheese schmear.

There'd been Poles in Greenpoint for a century, but perestroika brought a new influx and they were pushed down into the Northside tenements and storefronts one step ahead of Stephan and the boys. The Italians preferred this group of fellow Catholics to the Puerto Ricans and let them buy in. On the morning trips to the bagel shop the boys ran up against the Eastern European adaptation to perpetual scarcity.

The girls there were coming straight from the airport, Stephan says, and they'd give us the thinnest layer of cream cheese. And we were like this: 'Ladies, first of all, this is America. We have mountains of motherfucking cream cheese. Do me a favor, because I am from West Germany, not EAST Germany like your Communist comrades. Can you put some freaking cream cheese on that?'

That was Williamsburg for the émigré artist. To get to an ATM, a café or a bookstore you took the L to First Avenue and headed south. The Lower East Side was the place to hit a club, to grab a falafel to stare at pretty girls who might appreciate your mix tapes (like all frontiers, the Northside suffered from a dearth of beddable women). Manhattan was also the place you got paid: Stephan did commercial photography and worked as a studio manager and assistant for some big-name photographers. Drew's photojournalism skills scored him freelance gigs for *The Village Voice* and *The City Sun*, a Brooklyn-based African American paper that covered the real life of the city. Most days they shuttled out of the loft early in the morning and only came back after drinks somewhere downtown. Kai, alas, was generally depressed. He painted his room psych-ward green and rarely left it.

Both the *Voice* and the *Sun* had Monday deadlines so Drew would spend Sunday processing film in the bathroom, which he converted into a darkroom. 'I just put a wooden board over the bathtub and laid the chemicals out on that,' Drew says. The darkroom was compensation. 'Drew's bedroom was the size of a place where you put a broom,' Stephan says. 'I was surprised he was able to lay down. He had the shittiest back window with an awful view of a big gray wall. But hey, he was happy. He was a simple man.' Drew worked late into Sunday night and then ran out on Monday morning to deliver his photos.

Drew covered the aftermath of the Yusuf Hawkins murder for the *Voice* and photographed the Bensonhurst demonstration where the white locals proudly presented watermelons to his camera. He

covered the Sharpton marches for the *Sun* and got a photo of the reverend being stabbed in the chest. Later he shot the reaction to Gavin Cato's death and the Crown Heights riots that followed.

There was a lot of anger and a lot of raw energy in city neighborhoods then, Drew says. But at the same time, New Yorkers didn't always act like you might expect. They were almost more thoughtful than people in the rest of the country. I remember being on the subway after the Rodney King verdict came down in Los Angeles, watching us all watch each other with an uneasy awareness. The merchants pulled down their shop grates in the morning in anticipation, and yet the peace held.

Williamsburg didn't share the anger or the energy and stayed quiet. For Drew it was a place to recover before he rushed out again.

* * *

Walk quickly from the subway to the loft. Don't look at anyone. Don't come alone.

Kai and Drew and Stephan were having a housewarming party, and the caveat came with the invitation.

Before the party, Kai told me he'd gotten jumped one night as he got off the L. He threw the attacker to the ground and ran. He didn't report it to the cops. They would have said: 'What do you expect us to do? This is New York. Do you know how many times this happens every day? Just feel lucky that you got away.' Kai's story didn't surprise me: every time I went to the city it seemed like someone tried to rob or hustle me.

My new girlfriend and I got a ride to the party with an acquaintance from college. At eighteen I arrived at Sarah Lawrence, a thirty-minute train ride away from Grand Central Station. College was better than Catholic high school but I often felt as different from the art-school kids as I had from guidos and suburban jocks. My art-school peers had gone to performing arts schools and private academies. Their parents were professors, or painters, or gazillionaires. They summered in Europe while I mowed lawns in Rhode Island. Where I lacked train fare, they went to the Russian Tea Room, gambled in illegal casinos and scored heroin in Alphabet City. Most of the time, I had to settle for secondhand stories: 'It was a ballroom in the thirties ... The bartender has a black eye patch ... The room is full of antiques and has mahogany wainscoting ... There was this transvestite wearing a tartan kilt and carrying a lunchbox with peanut-butter-and-honey sandwiches...' The city became a backdrop in my dreams—looming towers, orange shimmer on the horizon, the oily black river—but it was out of reach. I wanted to get all the way in; I wanted my own room in the maze.

I dropped out of college after my sophomore year because I was screwing up—partying too much, skipping classes, even getting banned from school concerts for bad behavior. A year of failure in Southern California, including being fired from six jobs, sent me back to school. It was different the second time around: I wrote the papers, I spoke up in class and the professors noticed. For the first time in my life, adults approved of me. All the lights had turned on and everything made sense—*The Interpretation of Dreams*, *Madame Bovary*, accounts of the Chumash genocide in Santa Barbara. Books and smarts gave me something; next to Shakespeare and Hegel, freebasing in Daddy's brownstone was less alluring. It didn't seem so important that I'd never been to Paris or that my dad wasn't a Hollywood mogul.

Confidence brought me a different city. A friend had a seven-hundred-dollar apartment on the corner of Thirteenth and B at the end of a block of squats. I'd crash on his couch and we'd shoot pool in Puerto Rican bars and hang out in Tompkins Square Park. He showed me a city you didn't have to be rich to live in.

I don't remember much about Drew's housewarming party, probably because Sarah and I were

drinking in the car. I do remember the ride down the Major Deegan into the gravity well of the city across the titanic bridges and roadways, the buildings packed together, the orange sky without a single star. But instead of taking the Third Avenue Bridge and dropping into the video game of the FD Drive we turned east and passed over low rows of houses. Some of the tiny backyards had aboveground pools like ships in a bottle.

* * *

Are you sure this is the right address? Aliya said. She was a gorgeous Egyptian whose family owned half the Nile or the pyramids or a couple of deserts. Her English had the clear tone of Swiss boarding schools.

Silence met us when we opened the car doors on Metropolitan. This wasn't a city I knew. Buildings loomed, the windows dark. Every other streetlamp was out. I saw someone leaning against a wall, a woman, cigarette ember in her shadow face.

I'm worried about my car, Aliya said. That made sense: there weren't any other cars on the street.

We rang the buzzer. Nothing. We rang again. Upstairs a cube of light beckoned. The woman detached herself from the wall and sauntered up to a streetlamp. She had dark skin, golden bangles and a very short dress. Aliya reached into her purse and dragged out an object that I only realized was a phone when she started talking into it. (It was 1989 and I'd never seen a cell phone before.)

Yes, she said. We're right outside.

The door opened and there was Kai, smiling. We went inside as fast as we could, up a broken staircase into warmth and music.

On the ride home, Sarah took my hand and said, 'I think we're going to make it.' She was right but only for a while. We got a sublet that summer in Brooklyn Heights and I found a job working for an aspiring slumlord in Red Hook, a neighborhood so desolate it made Williamsburg seem like *Mist Rogers' Neighborhood*. I started to feel at home in the other city. But my first visit to Williamsburg was the last I'd make for years.

Chris Miskiewicz

After his shift at Trunz Meat Market on Metropolitan Avenue, Chris walked to the waterfront. It was pouring rain, all the streetlamps were broken and he was miserable. At the deli, an older coworker had bullied him in the basement, the way he did on every shift. Rob tripped Chris, knocked supplies out of his arms and sucker punched him in the kidneys. Once Rob shoved Chris into the trash compactor and turned it on. It was the resentment a man going nowhere felt for a kid who still had a chance.

Chris stepped out on the India Street pier toward the Manhattan lights, his trench coat and combat boots providing some insulation from the weather. His hair—long in the front, short in the back—flopped into his eyes. There weren't many kids in the neighborhood who dressed like Chris. Guido ruled the Northside—Guido with his open white shirts and gold chains, Guido with his cuginettes and Camaros. Neighborhood girls forged skyscraper bangs in clouds of Aqua Net and Chris eyed them with hopeless lust.

Half Italian, half Polish, Chris couldn't have been more of a local. His mother had been born in Williamsburg, as had her mother, on North Eighth Street. At thirteen his grandmother had started working a foot press, a job she kept even as turning out clips for handbags became turning out clips for guns in World War II—same machine, same clip. Chris's Italian grandfather found a post as

runner on Wall Street during the Depression, for the dazzling wage of forty-four dollars a week, until spinal meningitis felled him on the trading floor. He woke up deaf in the hospital and went back to work at the Silvercup Bakery, an enormous bread factory in Long Island City.

After Chris's parents divorced, his mother raised him in various apartments across the Northside and Greenpoint—Sutton Street, Richardson, Henry, North Tenth for a while. Moving was easy in New York those days—people swapped apartments like baseball cards.

Despite his Northside bona fides, Chris never fit in, not from his days at St. Cecilia's on a block-long Catholic compound hard by the BQE (Polish kids went to St. Stanislaus, but the divorce put Chris in the Italian camp) to Monsignor McClancy Memorial High School in Jackson Heights. Chris's social handicaps? He read books and lacked a Brooklyn accent. Chris credited his grandfather's deafness for his diction: 'I remember this conversation,' Chris says, 'where my mom was like, 'Ya gotta look in Grandpa's eyes and enunciate everything when ya talk ta him so he can understand cuz he's a lip reader and he can't hear your fuckin' words.' I was like, 'All right. I got it.' A few months before his pier walk, an acquaintance had taken exception to Chris's version of English:

I remember Pete Seppi coming up to me and saying, 'Why you talk so weird?' 'I don't know,' I said. 'What do you mean?' 'Ya accent, where are ya from, California?' 'No. And I actually speak correctly where you sound like a fool.'

Like a lot of disagreements in Williamsburg, this one ended with violence. 'So he just started throwing punches at my face,' Chris says.

On the pier end, Chris squatted and lit a joint. He knew the pier well—one of his mother's boyfriends, a fuckup named Kevin McCarthy, had bragged to an eight-year-old Chris about stealing cars. According to Lynch, they would get a car on Friday night and drive it around all weekend. Then on Sunday they'd brick the gas pedal and launch the car off the pier. 'There were a lot of guys in the neighborhood like that,' Chris says. 'Guys who'd been to Vietnam and basically lived in the local bars and the OTB.'

Chris huddled over the joint. As the resonating warmth of marijuana lifted him, the rain slackened. He looked across the river. Manhattan there, indecipherable script in the lit windows of the Midtown towers and in the sentry blocks of public housing, all under an orange sky raggedly dominated by storm clouds. With the flashing insight of the stoned, Chris realized that every one of the lights in all those buildings meant people—one or five or ten people to a light, an entire embodied universe and he would never be a part of it. They were over there and he was stuck in a dead, empty town that seemed to have nothing at all to do with New York City.

I was just floored by the numbers, Chris says. All those people. And I was hit with this feeling that I'm late all the time.

Chris had good reason to believe that he'd been left behind—that was all the neighborhood talk about.

'Greenpoint sucks. Yeah, fucking Williamsburg sucks. It sucks heah.' You'd hear this from your parents. You'd hear it from your friends. You'd just heard it through family: 'It fucking sucks heah. Fuckin' oil.' Everyone hated living here. We all knew we were going to die of cancer. 'This fucking shit sucks. It sucks, it sucks, it sucks.' That's all you'd hear. You know: the bars suck, your neighborhood sucks, everything's dirty, everything is full of garbage, the waterfront's destroyed. And it stunk. The shit factory STUNK.

* * *

The 'shit factory' was the Newton Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant. The plant, the largest of

fourteen in New York City, has the capacity to treat over 300 million gallons of wastewater a day. The glass domes of the treatment plant loom over Greenpoint, science fiction mosques casting a soft blue light. On warm days when the wind blows south the smell of decomposing shit wafts over Greenpoint and the Northside.

It stunk, man! Chris says. You would go through the historic area like Milton Street, all the way around St. Anthony's, and it smelled like every toilet was on fire.

His grandmother always talked about the day in 1950 when a reinforced concrete sewer exploded in the heart of Greenpoint, blowing manhole covers three stories high, shattering shop windows and blasting open ten feet of pavement at the intersection of Manhattan Avenue and Huron Street. It would be another twenty-eight years before anyone realized that the explosion had been caused by a massive oil spill. 'Massive' only begins to describe the thirty million gallons of the Newton Creek Spill. A toxic stratum of oil and sewage that one expert described as 'black mayonnaise' oozes under the entire neighborhood. The product of 140 years of industrial effluvia, the spill continues to vent benzene and methane gas into basements, streets and backyards.

We were in this dying industrial town, Chris says. Right across from the fucking UN. And nobody even realized we there.

* * *

Stephan was the first one to leave the loft. Girlfriends tire of sharing three-man bathrooms and a few weeks after Stephan got married he moved out. He stayed in Williamsburg, though, settling with his wife, Cherryl, in a run-down brownstone on South Sixth and Berry in the shadow of the Williamsburg Bridge.

The surrounding blocks highlighted Williamsburg's lost glory and its dismal present. City Hall on Broadway former banks with marble pillars and great domes rotted away like the temples of Angkor Wat. Yet limousines pulled up in front of the Peter Luger Steak House as if nothing had changed since the Roaring Twenties. Rising beside the bridge, the Domino Sugar plant operated under its forty-foot sign with a skeleton crew at a fraction of capacity. Decaying brownstones like Stephan's were shoehorned between enormous warehouses and rows of tenements. The bridge itself was falling apart and decades of deferred maintenance had led to a temporary closure in 1988. Stephan and Cherryl were hardy, though, and on warm days they would bike to work over the bridge. Big gaps in the metal plates on the bike path showed the black slick river hundreds of feet below.

One night not long after they moved into the brownstone, Stephan came home to find two men in his apartment. One of the men ran and Stephan wrestled with the other before he escaped. On the way out, the men shouted that they'd be back. They said they were going to fuck Stephan up. They said they were going to kill him. However, Stephan's marriage had given him more than a wife. It had given him protection.

My father-in-law is a decorated New York cop, Stephan says. He has a moustache and wears a long leather coat. Just like Shaft. And he's a little bit crazy. My brother-in-law is also crazy.

A phone call brought the in-laws to Williamsburg. They arrived heavily armed.

I had my .38, Stephan says. My father-in-law had his two service revolvers. My brother-in-law had a Glock.

Stephan's foes were not hard to find.

So we rolled up, right to these guys at their hangout around the corner from Peter Luger. And we basically told them, 'Fuck with me, please. You'll see what happens.'

The show of force had positive results.

After that those guys were really sweet to me. One guy came by and gave me a present. He told me that his cousin was an idiot and promised he would never be any trouble. I was like, ‘Cool. You’re cool, I’m cool. Let’s smoke some green. Let’s shut the fuck up.’ After that I never had any problems in the neighborhood.

* * *

In June of the year Francis Fukuyama declared the end of history, *New York* magazine ran a feature ‘The New Bohemia over the Bridge to Williamsburg.’ It wasn’t the first piece that mentioned artists in Williamsburg, but it was the first one *about* artists in Williamsburg. The piece talked about Teddy’s, the hundred-year-old bar on North Eighth and Berry, it mentioned ‘a cross-dressing artist named Medea de Vyse’ and all the crazy parties the crazy artists had—parties with infrared sensors and ‘plastic fog,’ parties in abandoned meat lockers with scrap metal streamers hung from ceilings. It offered lavish descriptions of swashbuckling bohemian fashion. A couple wearing ‘*Road Warrior*’ jackboots and earrings in every pierceable orifice’ are carrying a bicycle wheel, ‘no doubt ... so they can weld it into a sculpture’ (cuz those crazy artists wouldn’t ride bikes). De Vyse posed in a red sheath dress at Teddy’s, working-class regulars behind her indifferent as they nursed boilermakers. It included a photo of the wrecked waterfront, a shirtless young artist smears paint on a giant canvas, Manhattan skyline in the distance. ‘In the 70s, it was SoHo,’ de Vyse said. ‘In the 80s, the East Village. In the 90s, it will be Williamsburg.’

Through the haze of two decades, the article seems ancient, like something out of *Mad Men*. We’re told that the waterfront determines artists’ style, ‘a sort of *Blade Runner* Industrial Gothic.’ I heard they rent back rooms in working factory buildings, and that their beds are just a few feet away from these big booming machines,’ a woman informs the writer at a ‘SoHo cocktail party.’ It all reminds me of my dad’s World War II stories about the cardboard he put in his shoes to cover the punctured soles. What dates the *New York* article most of all is the fact that it’s so goddamn long. Five thousand words, maybe more, and it’s not even a cover story!

Daniel Wurtzel, a sculptor friend of Drew’s, moved to Williamsburg in 1989 for the obvious reason: cheap rent on a big space. As his tool kit included a quarter-tipped chain saw, he needed more space than most. In fact, he did his carving outdoors in a lot at Hope and Havemeyer. Although he tried not to pull the starter before eight a.m., he didn’t worry about noise complaints—the artist studios in the warehouse next door were all illegal.

After the *New York* article ran, people began to stop at the fence as he carved. When he dropped the dead man’s switch and lifted his goggles, they’d wave him over. The visitors looked like they had fallen asleep on the L and gone one station too far.

Sorry to bother you, they’d say. I was just wondering if maybe you knew about spaces for rent around here.

Not really, Daniel would say, then slide down his safety goggles and get back to work.

* * *

Sarah and I went to San Francisco after her senior year. That was as far as we made it. Off a college campus, a boyfriend who writes incisive papers on Proust impresses exactly no one; Sarah left me so she could explore the options that come with being young, beautiful, charming and rich. Yet the boot camp from my professors propelled me through my twenties. College didn’t teach me how to earn a living but it did give me confidence; I was going to be a writer, no matter what.

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