

## THE CHERRY TREE

“There, turn left,” Howard, her grandfather, said, instructing his granddaughter, who was driving, where to make the left. He was obviously remembering the names of the Brownsville streets, where he had grown up, whispering them as he viewed the signs. Saratoga, Herzl, Amboy. “Comes back.”

Helen could tell that his mind was immersed in memory and she let it happen because it apparently meant so much to him to go back to the scenes of his youth. She was unmoved, but felt the obligation to be granddaughterly since she hardly ever saw him these days.

He had been an accountant, then retired and moved to Florida in the nineties with her grandmother, who had died a few years back. He had returned periodically to New York visiting his only son, her father, who lived now in Huntington, Long Island. In her mid-twenties, Helen was working on Wall Street for a hedge fund, living in Tribeca, considering herself part of the New York scene, pretty, hip, cool, and, for her age, rich.

“Must I?” she asked her father, who had called her to do him the favor. He had a golf date.

“Why not. Go early Saturday morning while the muggers are still in bed.”

“Brownsville? In Brooklyn. Supposed to be a sewer, full of gangs, drugs, and trouble. Shit.”

“Just don’t get out of the car.”

The fact was she hardly knew her grandfather. He was not in her radar range. Even when she was younger her grandparents, although pleasant enough and, in their way, loving and interested, were sort of in the outer circle of her life. There was, of course, an obligatory

affinity and respect and the necessity of exhibiting familial affection, but beyond that, there was a kind of generational distance, an unbridgeable gap.

Her grandfather, whom she called Grampa, was in his early seventies and looked a lot younger, one of those seventy types who looked fifty and acted maybe forty. He had told her father he had lots of ladies banging down his door in his widowhood. She could not imagine going to bed with someone that old.

In the car he asked her what she characterized as grandfatherly questions. "Do you like your job? Any serious boyfriends? You like your apartment?" And the usual compliments. "We are all very proud of your success. When will you come down to Florida to visit?" And the familiar reminiscences. "You were the cutest little baby girl I ever saw." And on and on in that vein. Then there was a long silence. She was his only grandchild.

He dozed and woke up only when he reached what she supposed were the outer limits of Brownsville. In fact, he became instantly alert. Up until then he had paid no attention to the female voice on the navigational system, but when the car hit familiar streets he contradicted all her directions and became a nonstop travel guide.

"On every corner there was a candy store where you could get a charlotte russe." He explained what that was. "A piece of cake, a glob of whipped cream topped by a cherry, all in a white cardboard container shaped like a crown. And a cigarette was a penny apiece and for three cents you could get an egg cream, which had in it neither egg nor cream." He laughed and shook his head. "There were delicatessens everywhere. You could get stuffed derma for a nickel." She didn't know what that was and didn't enquire.

"A shtikl for a nickel. And hot dogs you could die for and probably did." He laughed again. "The man behind the counter would say mustard, sauerkraut, and relish as if it was a knee-jerk reaction. Like you would say, 'How are you, Jake?' and he would say, 'Mustard, sauerkraut, and relish.'" He laughed again. The best she could muster was a thin smile.

Helen was being tolerant. The drive in from Manhattan, where she had met him at Penn Station, was long and difficult. Brooklyn

streets were impossible to navigate. There was no rhyme or reason to them.

“Make a right here on Saratoga, but go slow,” he said, and she obeyed while he pointed out the sights that were no longer his sights.

“I was bar mitzvahed somewhere around here. One of those little houses that was converted to a synagogue. It was a Monday, which was allowed. I did my haftorah in a place that was less than half filled with smelly old men who used snuff and spat into spittoons. Where the hell was it? Dammit, everything is changed, but then I’m going back sixty years.”

“A long time,” Helen said, half listening. It was too remote from her world. She was thinking about Jack, who was dating her that night. Jack worked for a mutual fund and was witty and really good looking. They’d go to one of the clubs and shake all night, then pop back to her place, hopefully still energized for sex. Getting up this early to take Grampa on his trip through memory lane would have its impact. On Saturdays she usually slept until noon.

She looked at her watch. It was barely eight, but at least it was a bright, early summer’s day and the streets were pretty empty. Everybody she saw was black. She checked the door locks to make sure the buttons were down.

This was no place for white people, especially a white person driving a new car. Thankfully it was a Toyota Corolla in need of a good washing. For the moment, she was happy it wasn’t a Jag, which she very nearly bought, but was talked out of by one of her boyfriends. Uncool, he had told her. Conspicuous-consumption cars are *déclassé*. Don’t look too polished. Make believe you were born with it and didn’t need to flaunt it, especially in Brownsville.

Not that she was prejudiced against black people. She had many black friends who wouldn’t be caught dead in Brownsville. She was surprised that it didn’t seem dangerous, not on this sun-dappled morning. What people she saw were going about their business quite peacefully. Perhaps the media had exaggerated.

“There was a little grocery store there,” Grampa was saying, pointing. Her own thoughts had disrupted her attention and she had missed some of his commentary. “My mother used to send me out

daily to get groceries. Usually bagels, cream cheese, butter, and lox. The bagels were real, not like the lousy imitations you get nowadays. There were two kinds, regular and egg bagels. They sliced the cream cheese with a wire cutter, which came out of a long wooden box, and the butter came in big tubs. The grocer totaled up the cost on the side of a brown bag with a much-used short pencil, which he wet with his tongue before making the additions. He was never wrong. In those days they taught people to add in their head." He looked at his granddaughter. "Can you add in your head?"

It was as if he was challenging her whole generation. She didn't bite.

"Suppose so," she said, although most of her additions were done by machine.

"Over there," he said, paying little attention to her answer, "were two movie houses: The Ambassador and the People's Cinema." He chuckled. "For ten cents on a Saturday you could see three movies, three comedies, a chapter, but then you don't know what a chapter is, and they would have drawings for prizes based on your ticket number. I once won a pair of roller skates."

"Did you?" she said. She didn't ask what he meant by chapter and didn't care.

Glancing at him sideways, his color had risen, and he was quite excited about what he was seeing and how it registered on his memory. Okay, she told herself, I am making my grandfather happy and that is a good thing worthy of toleration, although his nostalgic musings were far removed from her life. Like ancient history, she decided, as the car moved slowly down the street.

At the end of the street loomed the El, the subway extension that rolled out of the tunnel after Utica Avenue and followed the track outside all the way to East New York. He explained that he used to go to Rockaway, getting off at the last stop.

"Which was New Lots Avenue. Then we took the bus to Rockaway, where we went summers. My parents and I slept in one room and Mom cooked in a community kitchen. Better than being in the city, which was hot as blazes in those days."

Still hot, she wanted to say, but she left it alone. She was certain

he would tell her that winters were colder, food tasted better, movies and music were better, people were nicer. Ah the golden glow of yesteryear.

“When I lived with my Gramma and Grampa,” he said, “because my old man was always losing his job and we were dispossessed from our apartment and had to move into their little house in Brownsville, the trains would roar past on the El. Their house was a few houses down from El you see and the sound of the trains made it impossible to hear the radio every ten minutes or so. In those days we listened to radio, especially serials like Billy and Betty, Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy, Omar the Tentmaker and Little Orphan Annie, which was sponsored by Ovaltine.” There was no stopping him on the radio bit. “Sunday nights there was Edgar Beren and Charlie McCarthy, Fred Allen, Jack Benny, Fibber McGee and Molly. It was a ritual to listen Sunday nights.” He stopped after awhile and there was a sudden silence as if the memories had clogged in his brain.

As they got closer to the El, a subway train that had stopped at the Saratoga station roared forward.

“Listen. See what I mean. Anyway when I was a teenager I had odd jobs that took me into the city. We were packed in like sardines in those days.” He shook his head and his voice sounded funny as if he might be wrestling with tears of nostalgia. She did not look at him, even sideways, because he might be embarrassed if she saw tears moistening his eyes.

She sensed he was looking around, searching for something outside.

“There was a fish store around here. I’m sure of it. My Gramma used to take me shopping for fish, carp I think it was. A woman stood on a high platform on which was a pool for live fish. She wore an apron stained with fish blood. Gramma would point to a live fish. The woman would net it, then lay it on a board, chop off its head and split it open, taking out the bones. Gramma used the fish to make gefilte fish, which we ate every Friday night, along with...” He went on and on with the menu. She desperately needed to change the subject.

“So where was the house you lived in, Grampa?” she asked pleasantly, hoping they would finally get to the place where she knew he was determined to go, and this was the heart of the favor her father had asked her to perform.

“Make a left here on Livonia for one block then turn left again on Strauss Street where the old house was.”

As they made the turn, which was under the El, he pointed out some stores on the left, one selling secondhand clothes and the other a dry cleaner.

“See that corner store.” This was the one selling secondhand clothes. “You know who hung out there. Murder Incorporated. That was where Midnight Rose Gold held court. It was a candy store where they sold cigars and had one of those walk-in humidors. Phone call would come in. Kill Benny. Kill Mendy. That was murder incorporated. These guys would get paid to knock off people and bury them in Canarsie. Pittsburgh Phil, Bugsy Goldstein, Lepke Buchalter. They all got the chair in 1941, I think on the same day of Pearl Harbor. Poor bastards. Couldn’t even get their execution acknowledged because the Japs bombed Pearl. I remember that like yesterday.”

She listened, unengaged, as if she were hearing some CD with a bad track that played over and over again.

“Next to the candy store was a pickle store. A guy and his wife filled cardboard cartons with pickles and sauerkraut right from the barrels. Winter, the guy had snot running down his nose, which he wiped frequently with the back of his hand, but still stuck them into that pickle and sauerkraut barrel. Nobody cared. Funny.” He laughed again. She would care, she wanted to say, thinking of the pickle barrel and the snot on the man’s hands. Yuk.

“God, what ever happened to this place,” he said, as the car turned the corner on Strauss but then she discovered that it was a one way street, which required her to carefully back out and proceed down Livonia to the next street.

“Make a left on Hopkinson, then a left on Blake, then a left on Strauss,” he said. “Imagine Helen, I never forgot these street names and it’s been, how long, pushing sixty years. Over. See that.” He

own wine. I remember that they made stewed pears from the pears and did the same with the cherries. I used to eat those cherries straight from the trees. They were sour, but I can still taste them. Made your lips pucker. But they were good to eat right from the tree.”

He looked up and down the street. Most of the row houses were gone but there were a few still standing, unattached from their neighbors’ now, although they formed the skeleton of new, undistinguished, flat facades that he did not recognize at all.

“There,” he said suddenly, delighted by what appeared to be the discovery of his grandparents’ house, still standing but, as he acknowledged, totally different. The houses on each side of it were demolished and had become empty lots overgrown with weeds. He unlocked the door and got out of the car and for a while seemed to be still trying to orient himself. He moved closer to the house. There were numbers over the doorway, one of them lopsided.

“2108. That’s it.” He looked back at Helen and waved her forward. “This is it, Helen. This was my grandparents’ house. Come on.”

He moved forward and perhaps out of a desire to be protective, she unlocked the door on the driver’s side and got out. Remembering her father’s admonition, she could not completely chase away her fear, but since the street was mostly deserted, although she could see people walking in her direction, she felt reasonably safe, although they would certainly be the only white people in view.

The house that was 2108 did not have a porch, and was small, boxlike, and undistinguished. Her grandfather stood in front of it for a long moment, then moved to one of the empty lots next door.

“There,” he said. “The trees are still there. I remember them like yesterday.”

He moved further into the lot. She followed reluctantly.

“Do you think it’s wise, Grampa?” she said, but he paid no attention and kept on moving. At the rear of the house was a short fence badly in need of repair. There was no back porch now, but as he had exclaimed, there were three trees, one of them bearing cherries.

“Imagine that. Still bearing cherries after all those years. Do

cherry trees last that long?”

He stood by the side of the fence surveying the trees for a long time. His granddaughter stood beside him while he looked. Is he watching the tree grow or eating the cherries with his eyes? It was, after all, only a cherry tree.

Then suddenly he stepped over the fence that had fallen in one spot, and it was easy for him to pass over it.

“You shouldn’t, Grampa,” she said, feeling uncomfortable by his action. “This is private property.”

“They shouldn’t mind,” he said as he moved into the little yard and placed himself under one of the low branches of the cherry tree. Reaching up, he bent the branch, picked a couple cherries, and put one in his mouth.

“Sour as ever, but just as I remember,” he said, turning toward his granddaughter, who still stood behind the broken fence on the vacant lot. Then suddenly, a voice screeched with anger, and a large black woman in a housecoat rushed into the yard.

“Get the fuck out of here,” the woman screamed. It took Sara a second to discover that the woman held a pistol in her hand and was pointing it straight at her grandfather.

“I was just...” her grandfather began. “I used to live...” But he couldn’t go on. His complexion turned ashen.

“This is private property you sumbitch. Get your white ass out of here.”

“But I...”

She could see her grandfather was too stunned to reply. Quickly she hopped over the fence and stood between the outraged woman and her grandfather, looking down into the barrel of the pistol. She had never in her life been that close to a firearm.

“I got my rights. If I shot you both, I be within my rights. So get the fuck out of here before I blow both your heads off.”

“Take it easy,” Sara said, hands outstretched. “He meant no harm. You see, he lived here once.”

“I don’t give a shit. You have no business here. So git.”

“There’s no need for that gun,” Sara said. The barrel of the pistol was no more than a foot from her head. “He is my grandfather.”



“Who gives a fuck?”

“I do lady. I do,” she shot back. Oddly she felt no fear, only rage. “We’re not here to do you any harm. All he wanted was to pick a cherry. Don’t be a fool.”

“Who you callin’ a fool?” the woman replied, her anger unabated. “Just get the fuck off my property.”

“We’re going. We’re going,” Sara said, turning to her grandfather, who seemed on the verge of collapse, white as a sheet with fear and confusion. She put out her hand to her grandfather, who took it. It felt like grabbing the hand of a child. Then she led him to the edge of the property and across the fence to the vacant lot and led him to the car while the woman watched them depart, still holding the pistol, pointing it at them.

“She could have killed us,” her grandfather said.

“Well, we’re still here.”

Her reaction had surprised her.

“All I wanted was to taste one of those cherries,” her grandfather said, as she gunned the motor and headed under the El. As she drove, he opened his palm, which held a single cherry.

“I picked one for you,” he said.

“Thanks, Grampa,” she said, taking the cherry and popping it into her mouth.

“Really sour,” she said, knowing then that she would never forget the taste of it.