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Coming Home to Spider-Man, and my Mother

Samuel · Wednesday, July 26th, 2017

I caught *Spider-Man: Homecoming* on its opening week in Queens New York, where I grew up, left when I graduated high school, and returned that July 4th weekend to celebrate my mother's 70th birthday. So as Peter Parker (Tom Holland) navigated through the neighborhoods I grew up in, all sorts of harmonics of emotions resonated, among them empathy, anger and homesickness. I was rooting for Peter, and even for Vulture (Michael Keaton), because I was rooting for every scrabbling Queens citizen; because I was rooting for the blue collar worker who's just trying to keep his job before the ruthlessly outsourcing corporate world that doesn't care for the neighbors they vacate in their pursuit of profit and security (Avengers headquarters moving to an indistinct upstate location); because I was rooting for my mother who will have to move into a smaller one bedroom apartment after her birthday bash; because I was rooting for myself who never looked back to Queens after he left, yet driving down Roosevelt Avenue with the 7 Train rattling above him feels like a homecoming.

In this newest rendition of Spider-Man, Queens is not just the city he saves, he is the city's pluck incarnated. Queens is part of Spidey's power. In one laugh-out scene, Spider-Man has to dash through the Long Island suburbs to get to the place of crime because there are no tall buildings to catch his web with which to sling himself. Spider-Man is out of place, his powers useless. He's no longer your friendly vigilante but a masked thief, which he was to the two screaming little girls camping out on their backyard. This slapstick romp through swimmers and grillers nails the heart of Spider-Man. His motto, "Your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man," doesn't mean he is neighborly, but that he is through and through a Queens native.

A hero of a city might seem a common trope. Batman belongs to Gotham and Superman belongs to Metropolis. But both cities are make believe cities, a typology of New York (Metropolis is New York in daytime and Gotham is New York in nighttime when 42nd street was seedy). They are not real cities so the director can design the building sets. Spider-Man's neighborhood is real and not negotiable. The trains rattling on rusty red steel elevated tracks has been shuttling many Queens citizens back and forth for their work, schools, and trysts. Spider-Man hitches a ride on the same train, and the route is set. This is my Queens in which Spider-Man is trying to do some good.

When Spider-Man attempts to thwart a bank robbery by thieves masked as Avengers, he fails because he promptly forgets the thieves when he sees the corner deli blasted. He swings to save Mr. Delmar (Hemky Madera). Avengers care for innocent people, but the people they rescue remain generic and their death isn't guilt but an issue of principal and politics (the conflict that divides the Avengers in *Civil War*). Spider-Man isn't trying to reduce collateral damage when he

swings into the fiery deli, but saving Mr. Delmar. The people he saves are his neighbors. The conflict in this hero story is not whether the hero can change the city, but whether the hero can accept the city. In the last scene when Tony Stark (Robert Downey, Jr.) offers him a seat in the Avengers' table with the eager press gathered, Peter walks away to return to his home. This is his homecoming, and not the high school dance he jets out of to save Tony Stark's shipment.

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As I'm throwing away my mother's pots and pans — before she sees them and suddenly remembers that she needs what has been stacked and unused for decades — I'm trying to convince her to move down to Raleigh, North Carolina with me. She is wearing a cheap wig to cover her balding. She works 40 to 60 hours a week just so she can pay the rent. She deserves a better life. But she won't leave.

I understand, to an extent, the gravity of a place you've lived in for a long time. Familiarity is a comfort no larger house can give you. She has friends in Queens. She has memories of friends down Northern Blvd. and Collegepoint Blvd. She can run into friends going into SamwonGok, the best jajjangmyung (noodles in black bean paste) place, and they can catch up and not waste time on introductions. It takes lot of mental energy to create new friendships. A peace descends, a sense that the whole world is going to turn out just fine, when you are sitting with an old friend and sipping green tea without a need for a word.

Still, why doesn't she just leave? She did exactly that when I was seven. She left Korea imagining a better life for her three sons. She's got the courage for such a drastic and dramatic life change. Why doesn't she leave? "Every Queens citizen must ask that question," I was thinking one morning when I took the seven into the city and I was packed into a car like a sardine. Maybe every person in any place asks that question, "Why shouldn't I leave?". And there is no satisfactory answer to why one doesn't leave. But perhaps it takes more courage to stay than to just walk. Perhaps it's this courage and grittiness to stay which makes a place a home. You will never find a home when you go searching for it. You find it when you stay put.

When Peter walks away from Tony's latest tech-rich Spider suit to return to his Aunt May, Peter's smile is subtle but full. He won't revisit this decision that night. On the other hand, Tony Stark, who now has to come up with an excuse for calling the press, looks jittery; his rapid repartee which was once charming now looks fitful; his smile is difficult to figure out; he looks out of place even in the new Avenger's home he erected with his money and intellect.

Image courtesy Sony Pictures Entertainment.

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