

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Stenographer

Richard Klin · Wednesday, March 17th, 2021

At a certain unsettled point in his life he found himself a denizen of the Midwood section of Brooklyn. He had never in a million years imagined ever setting foot in the Midwood section of Brooklyn, much less becoming a denizen. Right away, he began planning his escape, casting longing, envious glances at Park Slope, Carroll Gardens, places where a man might enjoy a cappuccino and the leisurely perusal of the *Village Voice* in the company of his peers.

The company of his peers did not seem to exist in Midwood, the land of chopped meat and honking horns. Partly out of necessity, partly out of genuine curiosity, he took to walking all over: A flaneur of the outer boroughs. Midwood was not, as he'd first assumed, completely devoid of interest: the huge avenues, twisty streets; myriad of eateries and cut-rate stores. The surprising beauty of Ocean Parkway. A small dry-cleaners proudly offered reduced rates on tallis cleaning, the requisite ritual garb for Jewish prayer. A knife-sharpening truck could be observed at semi-regular intervals, slowly cruising through the streets, offering on-the-spot assistance wherever dull cutlery was a problem.

Huge, formidable apartment houses lined the avenues, sooty and dingy, yet not nearly akin to the legendary fetid tenements of the Lower East Side. In the hot weather, clumps of residents could be observed entering and exiting, exiting and entering, most of them clutching shopping bags or laundry. Gaggles of kids utilized the entryways, the sidewalks, as their playgrounds. On one of his strolls he watched as a man grappled with a huge fan, carrying it down the block to the interest of passers-by, some of whom called out offers of purchase.

He had gradually grown more acclimated to the area, striking up an acquaintance of sorts with the Indian proprietor of his regular newsstand. The proprietor, in fact, had taken notice of when he'd shaved off his beard, like they were two old friends, him and this newsstand owner.

The newsstand did not simply sell newspapers and magazines. Its wares included gum, candy, cigarettes, condoms. To his amused surprise, it also featured that bizarre, smokable herbal hodgepodge, with its inflated claims of vast—albeit nebulous—aphrodisiacal powers. That was something he hadn't seen in a good decade, not since his younger years as a habitué of head shops. The packaging looked old and musty; any alleged erotic effects surely had long expired. There had been a photo, he remembered now, of a faux-groovy couple engaged in sensuous rapture. That photo had been dropped from the packaging, along with the distinctive, flowing typeface. It was exactly the same product, though. Of that there was no doubt, complete with the cautionary at the bottom of the package warning imbibers not to operate any heavy machinery. He'd always gotten a real kick out of that, as if after you had set the stage for a night of carnal pleasure there'd be a strong urge to operate, say, a drill press.

A family of bona fide gypsies frequented his Laundromat, loud and argumentative. The dryers were of an old-fashioned, completely unsafe, variety, with coin slots so deep and jerry-rigged that you could see flames dancing in the dryer's interior. The two young gypsy boys took to hurling pennies through the opening and into the fire, to no noticeable effect.

An older Chinese woman seemed to be the Laundromat's entire staff. She was always there, always on duty, and spoke no English whatsoever. On the occasion when his coin didn't go through he had to make himself understood via hand motions, imaginative pantomime.

Midwood was dotted with Israelis. In its domain was a Hebrew-speaking gas station and Israeli video store, which boasted kung fu movies and saucy Israeli comedies. There was an admirable lack of imagination in the naming of some of their businesses. There was the Simlat dress shop, which was the Hebrew word for dress. Kosher cheese could be procured at G'vinah, the word for cheese. His own stretch of time in Jerusalem had yielded at least a passing familiarity with the language. None of that seemed applicable in the least now.

The dingy little restaurant near Coney Island Avenue, with its cheap Formica tables and loud, all-Israeli clientele, was the closest to the real thing that he'd ever encountered. Little bowls of pickles, baba ganoush, and humus were placed before him; a stack of pita. Jangly Middle Eastern music played in the background. A quarrel broke out between two of the patrons. One of them, a redhead—gingi in Hebrew—was verbally slapped down when the other referred to him as "Ginger Rogers" in a heavily accented tone of pure contempt.

That was the only time he'd ever conversed with any of the other customers, engaging in a brief discussion with a hearty sort with a thick moustache and gold chain, an enthusiastic booster of his hometown, Tel Aviv. "Action all the time," this man said. "Action just like New York." And who was he to disagree with this?

A good percentage of his meals were taken at the large Poseidon Diner, the occasional home to a contingent of rough-looking Vietnamese guys of around his own age, all of them commandeering a corner and ordering endless desserts. There had been an older British waitress who left after a while, her distinctive accent trying to make sense out of orders for challah, bialys, and coffee regular.

Joe was the perennial cashier, a friendly, funny sort who took it upon himself to offer instructions on the nuances of Spanish curse words, most of which were quite specific.

The Brooklyn-bound D trains were always a continuous reminder of his personal failure, his exile. Every remotely-looking interesting person departed the train en route to Midwood. Seventh Avenue, the Park Slope stop, was usually the most egregious, with half the car making their exodus. He could even pick them out, knowing with near-exactitude who would exit along the way. Any woman reading the New Yorker, for example, was almost guaranteed to get off at Seventh Avenue. After Seventh Avenue, the departures continued on a smaller level. The last remnants of hipdom occasionally scurried off a few stops later, at Church Avenue.

After Church Avenue, there were no illusions whatsoever of anyone possibly reading the New Yorker. The D train, at this stage, would be far less crowded. He and his fellow castoffs were left to themselves. For this, the final leg of his route, the D assumed the role as one the most uninteresting trains in all of New York City. Bound for nowhere.

Sundays was his surrender to living in Midwood. On Sundays there was no pretense that he lived anywhere else: no subways to the Village, no longing treks to Park Slope. With a combination of ennui and resignation, he acquiesced, utterly and completely, to Midwood, settling in for an early dinner at the Poseidon, gorging himself on roast beef au jus with overflowing French fries, or spaghetti with thick meat sauce, lettuce buried under a mountain of bleu cheese dressing.

An older man was sitting at the counter, engaged in a loud monologue that was directed at another man a few seats down. “So what if Frank Sinatra’s a gambler?” this man asked rhetorically. “He’s a great singer. I gamble too sometimes. So what? It doesn’t take away from the fact that he’s a great singer.” The other customer, a man a few seats down, sat with a look of pained resignation.

The Sunday after that impassioned defense of Frank Sinatra’s gambling, Joe had taken the unusual step of coming out from behind the counter, joining him at his little booth, and uncomfortably taking a seat across. His usual jovial demeanor was replaced by a look of awkwardness. He’d wanted to speak, Joe said now, man-to-man. The truth of the matter was that Joe owed a good chunk of money to this very disreputable sort. And he was now in danger of falling behind on those payments. That could have some extremely unpleasant consequences.

The upshot was that he gave Joe thirty dollars, which he could ill afford. It was money he really didn’t expect to ever recover. And that was exactly the case. Joe vanished from the diner a short time later, never to return.

The area’s dullness obscured the fact that it was not entirely devoid of strife and crime. He’d once observed a man, glasses shattered and blood streaming down his face, scurrying across the street. There were certainly pockets where it felt unwise to venture after dark. Kings Highway had been the scene of an authentic gunfight, in which armed robbers had attempted to hold up a business and had been successfully repelled. All of this had transpired in broad daylight, like in a Western.

A pleasant-looking, middle-aged woman was standing near the entrance of the little doughnut shop where he sometimes went for coffee. She smiled at him, greeting him as Ira. This seemed perfectly plausible, him being mistaken for an Ira. “Ira...” she continued. “From the building.” Before he could even get the words out that he was not, in fact, Ira from the building, this woman invited him to her apartment.

Her tone hadn’t altered in the least; quiet, placid. And then, demeanor unchanging, she repeated herself, buttressing the audacity, the brazenness.

She was tilting her head to the left, a gesture so extreme and so obvious that only one meaning could be derived. This, she was letting him know, was the way to her apartment. And for reasons that made no sense to him whatsoever, he numbly acquiesced.

The two of them proceeded down the sidewalk, more or less in tandem. There was no possible reason why he was doing this; none whatsoever. A few moments later he found himself at the entrance to a small apartment building, one he certainly must have passed at some point. This woman, whoever she was, procured a key. And then they were both standing in a cramped, darkened vestibule.

And he followed this woman, almost not of his own volition, up the stairs to the second floor. He strained to recall if he had ever chanced upon her before, ever seen her during his walks, his time living here. He had not.

There was no sound whatsoever in this strange little building; no noise emanating from behind the closed doors of the few apartments, no scents of cooking. Silence, utter and complete, reigned.

This woman's apartment was threadbare, although not oppressively so; orderly and surprisingly spacious, with a large living area that seemed to take up the majority of the space. In the back, an open door leading to a bedroom could be easily ascertained. It was not what he was expecting, but then again, what had he been expecting?

All of this was transpiring at a speeded-up pace. Moments before he had been on the street. And now he was here. The woman's placid, almost vacant demeanor remained unchanged. Did she ply her trade in front of the doughnut shop? Or somewhere else? Perhaps this was an occasional thing on her part.

"Do you live here?" he asked uneasily, reassured by the sound of his own voice amid the unsettling, unnatural silence. And he was aware, as he was uttering these words, of the inherent absurdity of this query, like it was some sort of party chitchat.

"Yes," the woman answered simply. And then her gaze was directed elsewhere, at some far-off point. She had come here, she said now, to tend to her ill mother. She worked as a stenographer. All of this was delivered as if by rote, in a flat, expressionless tone. And it made no sense; none of it. Who worked as a stenographer? As if reading his thoughts and determined to prove her professional credentials, she fumbled around for a moment, procuring a well-worn business card. Stenographer, this card said, next to an image of a sturdy, out-of-date typewriter.

No payment, no exchange of money, had been discussed. The stenographer mechanically moved toward him and, without preamble, put her hand on his crotch, less a seductive opening than a crude grasping. It did not feel pleasurable. And yet it did not feel totally and completely unpleasurable. She was again looking off in the distance, her hand remaining affixed. Why not go through with it? he thought. Who would know? Who would ever know in a million years?

Now she was talking again, this stenographer, in a tone so low it was difficult, at first, to fully comprehend her words. "Go the bedroom," she now instructed mechanically. "Take off all your clothes. And lie on the bed."

Feelings of repulsion and not a little fear floated through him. It seemed, as he cast a glance at the front door, that it had remained unlocked. Whatever her plans had been, they were to proceed with the front door unlocked. He fumbled around in his wallet, found a twenty-dollar bill, and thrust it into her hand more aggressively than he'd intended.

She had quickly pocketed this twenty and now had reattached her hand back to where it had been before, this time slightly more aggressively, fingering his zipper. Her gaze settled in to some far part of the apartment.

And there they stood, neither of them breaking off contact, nor accelerating the action. And he was locked in this unsettling, strange juxtaposition, which was taking place in a stenographer's barren apartment in the Midwood section of Brooklyn.

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