



The World of Darkness

by Jill Dearman

Heath Avenue. I recognized the building right away. Public housing always stands out from all other domiciles. It looms, and, like a tall man, commands your attention. But when you look up, expecting to see his face, you see a blank outline, no distinguishing features. No nose. No mouth. No eyes.

We parked on the side street around the corner. It was a steep hill, so steep Hilary had to cock the wheels of the car, in addition to pulling the emergency brake up, just to make sure it didn't roll downhill and crash onto the Deegan Expressway.

A sign out front greeted tenants and visitors alike: Welcome to Bailey Houses. The letters on the board were a graying white, leftovers from the marquee of an abandoned movie house. The glass encasement was cracked, and probably had been for sometime. We didn't feel so welcome, in our cashmere sweaters and good shoes. We didn't look like we belonged up here. But I had a purpose, and Hilly was my back-up, in case I lost my way. Besides, it was her car that had brought us here. I was a cab driver's daughter but I didn't have wheels of my own, not yet at least. I did do the driving, from Manhattan to the Bronx. Like my father, I found it soothing to weave through the boroughs, radio playing. We walked through the courtyard, drawing inward in the bitter January wind, so cold that the sun could light the air, but not warm it. I remembered coming up here twice in my life. Once when my father was alive; it must have been shortly after he moved here in the early '70s. I recalled his dorm-like apartment, where he proudly told me that he cooked broiled chicken, the one meal he learned how to make, after the divorce. The second time I visited was with my sister Penny just after his death.

Ahead of us, a young Chinese man was entering the building. He reached his hand through the empty frame of the doorway--where once there had to have been protective glass--and pressed a button on the inside to unlock the door.

We walked inside and I felt as if I was simultaneously back in the past, shortly after Dad's death, when his spirit must have hovered over us, and at the same time I felt propelled into the future, to the time of my death, when his hand would reach out to welcome me to the other side.

Inside the building, a couple of small, Hispanic boys raced around on razor scooters, already long out of fashion in Manhattan, but still a novel toy in the Bronx. They saw us peering through a window of the office, where whomever managed the building could be contacted.

"They're not there," one of the boys said.

"Thanks."

I wrote down the information from a bulletin board, to call later. We got in the elevator and a young woman with grocery bags followed. Every time she pressed the "close" button the door would begin to shut, then open again. A lady in the lobby who must have been waiting for the "down" elevator kept pressing it and messing with our flight plan. She apologized, and after a few more false starts up we went.

I remembered being a kid in Queens, pressing all the buttons on the service elevator one day. I nearly had a panic attack when I got off on my floor and our next door neighbor Mrs. Rollnick got in. An old school teacher, she was an intimidating figure by anyone's standards. I knew what an obnoxious ride down she would have. This is what kids do, growing up in apartments in the boroughs. They ride their little bikes and scooters in the halls (I remember practicing with my first ten speed bike inside our tiny living room); and they press all the buttons in the elevator.

These kids would have annoyed my father if he still lived here. He lost all patience and tolerance in his later years. And he was always just one loose comment away from total, unmitigated racism. In my mind, I had already judged the boys in the building as pre-thugs. My father would have muttered "spics" the moment they were out of earshot. Would I grow as bitter and intolerant in my later years? If I was struck with a debilitating illness would I stop caring about the rest of the world and would the world stop caring about me? Inside this asbestos-filled building, in this dying borough, it was easy to see my ultimate future as almost inevitably bleak. My father's blood was in me after all.

The young woman on the elevator exchanged pleasantries with us, and then got off. Hilly and I stepped out on 18. We walked, like characters in my dream, to "18A." I remembered what was on the other side, back in 1982, when we came to this place after his body had been removed. I didn't realize what it was till I got to college, later in the '80s: a dorm room, full of generic furniture and no memories.

Hilly looked at me kindly and waited for me to knock. My hand felt like it was weighted down by a heavy book, a book of names that some kind of graphic novel grim reaper carries around and uses as evidence when a desperate soul screams, "But wait, my time can't be up! I've just started to live!" For the life of me, I could not knock on that door. I was not prepared to look through the window that would lead me back into my father's living world. I felt he was with me, sitting on my shoulder like an angel with a dirty face, holding me back. Somehow I knew it was all right to leave, not cross the doorway, leave the past in the dark.

We left Bailey House and I noticed an eddy of wind outside the entranceway. Plastic bags danced in a vortex at knee-level. Was this my father's presence or just a storm of garbage? It didn't matter. It caught our attention and made us happy to be alive. We got back into the car. As we headed next to where my father was born, I couldn't help but notice what a lost land we had happened upon. This was the forgotten borough.

Manhattan is The City. That's where people from East Nowheresville, South Dakota dream of moving to. Brooklyn is always cool. It has warmth, style, culture, history, and attitude. Queens is a no-man's land. People only know it because they have to pass through it to get to its airports. Queens isn't pretty, and it too is gritty like the Bronx, but at least it has witnesses. And Staten Island, well--Staten Island doesn't give a rat's

ass what anyone else thinks of it. Every non-Staten Island native New Yorker's first association with that borough is, "Oh yeah, weren't they going to secede awhile back?" Staten Island doesn't need anything but Staten Island. But the Bronx, the Bronx was a dog that had been kicked around by a cruel master. And someday it will kick back.

We passed a Chinese restaurant that offered take-out, "Young Hong Kitchen," on West Kingsbridge near 225th Street. My father didn't come from the era of takeout. Still, I imagined him walking into this joint, sitting down at a table and ordering his favorite Chinese dish: pepper steak, the most American meal on the menu. During those years when we drove around the city together, my father would remind me of the time when I was a little kid, maybe three, out with the family at a Chinese restaurant in Queens. He loved to tell me how quiet I was while everyone else was talking and eating. "Then all of a sudden, this little hand reached up, and it was Jilly, grabbing a spare rib."

Of course this was the sweet part of the story. The sour part was what my father used to call it, when we went as a foursome, a whole family, for Chinese dinner on a Sunday night: "going for Chinks." You couldn't wax sentimental about Queens in the '70s for long. There's a reason Norman Lear set *All in the Family* there.

Above the entrance to Young Hong was a window that stood out from all the other windows in the decaying tenement building. Pink lace curtains shielded the residents within from the harsh, cold light of the borough.

We followed the path of the BX9 bus and headed east. We passed the Department of Veteran's Affairs on Kingsbridge. It seemed like a place my father might have hung out, even though he never saw war. I could only picture him in hospitals and cars. He was a cab driver and a patient and a father. Those were the only identities I knew about when I knew him. As we drove, I noticed a store that seemed out of place amidst the '70s ghetto squalor. The sign outside read, "Candy. Cigars." It seemed to harken back to the 1940s. A wooden Indian probably lived inside. A soda jerk could have made fountain treats while we waited. We headed Southeast on the Grand Concourse, the Bronx's main drag, and left the last vestiges of my father's death behind us. We wanted to see where his life had begun.

The Grand Concourse is a lot like 14th Street in Manhattan. Sneaker stores. Cheap electronics. V.I.M. Easy Pickins. MacDonald's. Payless Shoe Stores. Legal Help. And one out of place, strangely posh Gap.

There were authentic Italian food stores in this area, and they added a little zest. But this still being the Bronx, the Department of Motor Vehicles and P.S. 205--a decrepit structure known as LaGuardia High School--were also within reach. I remembered my father telling me about Mayor La Guardia, how when there was a newspaper strike he read the "funnies" to the kids on the radio.

We got to 179th and Southern Boulevard, where my father was born, and his streets looked just as bombed out and destroyed as the rest of the Bronx. I didn't have the building number, but I wanted to drive around the near vicinity and see if I could find anything old that might've been there when my Dad was a boy.

As we drove a bit more we came to a building that had more life force than all the others, Public School 67 on

Mohegan Avenue. Outside the school hung a sign: "Drug Free School Zone: Cash For Guns."

The bricks of the low school building were a yellowy cream, the color of pancake batter. A sculpture of an Indian head (presumably a Mohegan), in profile, protruded from the bricks. She had a squaw's face and was painted Crayola crayon brick red. The lettering of the school's number looked like it was etched using a stencil set from an old-fashioned stationery store. Yellow crests, like a signature signifying the identity of the school, surrounded the squaw. We could see into the classroom windows from afar, where flags and pictures hung. I pictured my Dad going here, dreaming of his life as a man, wanting to get out as quickly as possible to do grown-up tough guy things, like his movie heroes, John Garfield and James Cagney, while the horror that awaited him in adulthood was much scarier than a Bela Lugosi picture.

Not that my father's life was a complete horror. It seemed like he and my mother had a normal life for a while, while he was healthy and working. But kidney disease made him a very sick man. And the blow of his illness coincided with the loss of his family through divorce. He also lost his livelihood as a New York City cab driver. During those sad, final years did he miss the simple pleasures of his boyhood?

We headed to the Bronx Zoo, which was right in his neighborhood. I wanted to feel close to my father, to see the sights that he loved, smell the smells of his world, and to enter into the silent, dark, fairytale universe of my childhood Saturdays with him.

I wanted to absorb and feel, but not too much. The thought of the Bronx Zoo itself was a relief. Animals represented peace and comfort to me. We arrived next at the World of Darkness, which looked like a creepy government building from the future. We walked into the newsprint-gray fortress and this sign greeted us:

Animals are very sensitive to noise and vibration. Move quietly and you will see more animals.

Followed by another:

When the sun goes down most of the world's wildlife wakes up.

And finally:

Allow your eyes time to adjust to the darkness.

The animal world sounded a lot like the world of a taxi driver.

I felt at home in this dark world immediately, even though it smelled a little skunky. Somehow it was a pleasant stink, a country road mixed with some good Jamaican pot and a bottle of cold, Heineken beer: absolutely free and decadent and removed from the rules of so-called civilized society. The night monkeys flew from branch to branch. It looked like a party, and I was glad we crashed it.

What did all these nocturnal animals have in common, I wondered? Camouflage? They all hid their true colors and animal natures, either to fool the other animals into becoming their prey or to protect themselves from

turning into prey themselves. The night noises were calming, crickets mixed with silence. And the strange infrared lights inside the place made me feel like I was being watched, tested somehow. But would I make it through the hurdles and find my way to the other side? I didn't know yet.

I couldn't articulate my longing just yet, on that day in the zoo. I knew that I had to keep going, keep searching, and keep fighting for my father. Someone had to tell his story, and I was going to be the one. I didn't realize that it was my own story I was beginning to search for. The last sign I read before we walked from the night-world back into day was this one:

Typically bats sleep by day and awake to forage from sunset to sunrise.

Just like New York City cab drivers, I thought, and their sneaky, writer daughters.

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