



THE NEIGHBORHOOD

by
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Late on a July afternoon, when I worked for the Department of Buildings, I got a call from the Office of Emergency Management. They informed me that a four-story residence south of Houston Street on Mott was in imminent danger of collapse. This type of structural emergency wasn't anything I hadn't managed dozens of times since working for the Buildings Department, but this one would be personal. The "residence" was on the block where I grew up and just a few

doors down from where I had lived. My job took me to what used to be simply "the neighborhood" and was now fashionable Nolita.

I contacted Tim, the Department duty engineer, and we arranged to meet at the site. As I drove up, the first thing I noticed was the shops at the street level of my childhood apartment building. They were different now. I recalled them starting with Sparney's Corner, a top-notch luncheonette where they made something called the Walk-a-Way Sundae - a small ice cream concoction in a cone-shaped paper go-cup. Buy it, and eat it walking away down the street. Then came a florist where I'd get my mother flowers on her birthday. Ballato's, an Italian restaurant well known to celebrities of the time, came next and was still there. As kids, if someone famous was having dinner, we'd jump up and down in front of the window, trying to catch a peek. Mr. Ballato would come out to chase us away. None of us liked him, and we never ate there. Our mothers, proud Italian cooks, wouldn't stoop to eating in an Italian restaurant. The row of shops ended with Frank's Candy Store. Small but well-stocked, you could get anything there, from school supplies and newspapers to greeting cards and coffee. He made the best soda fountain drinks - cherry cokes, egg creams, and in summer, lime Rickeys.

I parked and met Tim. We found the Fire Department had tied off the endangered area with caution tape. The occupants were on the opposite side of the street, waiting for news on the fate of their apartments and belongings. They were young professionals and nothing like the first and second-generation Italian neighbors I grew up with there. The Incident Commander briefed us. Rain had flooded an excavation, causing a slight shift in the adjacent building. Tim and I entered to do an assessment.

What used to be a butcher shop on the ground floor was now a Japanese restaurant with a sushi bar in the same place the butcher counter had been. The butchers were Larry and Joe. I'd

pick up orders from them that my mother had called in. They would give me beef bones as a treat for my dog Duke, a boxer I often took with me. Over the years since I'd moved on, I went back to visit my parents but didn't spend any time on the street and keep up with how it had changed. After my parents died, I had no reason to go to Mott Street at all and didn't expect the transformation that had occurred.

We went to the roof to observe the excavation from above. I couldn't help looking into the backyards and Saint Patrick's Old Cathedral's graveyard. We would sneak in at night to play hide-and-seek and ring-a-livio. A graveyard may seem a strange place to play, but it was one of the few areas in the neighborhood with grass and trees, and besides, the century-old gravestones seem to have been asking to be used as hiding places. I was baptized in this church and made my first Communion there. Every Sunday, my elementary school class assembled in the churchyard on Mott Street before going into the nine o'clock mass with nuns giving us directions, using scarcely more than stern looks and raised eyebrows.

I was here to do a job but found myself distracted by memories. We'd worked this type of incident many times before, and I wondered what Tim thought of my inattentiveness. We were a few blocks from Chinatown, where a friendly waiter at the Golden Dragon had taught me to use chopsticks. Then there was the whole Lower East Side with its Eastern European culture and food. As a kid, I assumed lox, smoked sturgeon, and chubs were Italian delicacies. Yiddish and Italian accents sounded pretty much the same to me then. When I asked about it, my mother explained how the blue numbers tattooed on some shopkeeper's forearms were one of the reasons my father had fought in the war.

The building owner let us into each apartment, and we saw some cracked plaster but no signs of structural damage. I knew the people who lived there when I was growing up. The

layouts were the same, but the décor had drastically changed. The homey and comfortable were replaced by the sleek and modern. Looking out of a window down onto Mott Street, I thought, could this really have been where I learned to ride a two-wheeler and played kick-the-can and skelzy? Now I was back on that same street as a Buildings Department Assistant Commissioner inspecting a building I had walked past thousands of times as a child on my way to and from school.

We finished our inspection and concluded that the structure had shifted. Damage was minor, with no danger of collapse. I contacted the general contractor, telling him bracing had to be installed immediately to prevent further movement. This work could be done within hours, and Tim would stay until completion. All that remained for me was to explain the situation to the tenants. They were standing in front of a stark, brightly lit storefront. In its window were a few pricey dresses and scarves hanging at odd angles. This used to be a loading dock with a granite base we used for playing stoop ball. Now it was a boutique. Even though we were standing on home base, I managed to block reminiscences of past stoop ball games and assure these people it would soon be safe for them to go back to their apartments. I wanted to say to them, "I used to live here. I played on this block." Instead, I told them what was being done to protect their homes.

As I walked to my car, I passed a store selling elegant Italian shoes in the same location where my aunt and uncle once had an Italian restaurant. They called it *Maria's*. There was no one in the family with that name. They just liked the sound of it. I thought of my uncle, who instead of preparing squid in the kitchen one sunny afternoon, opened the fire hydrant in front of the restaurant, set up a chair and started cleaning them there in a large pot. He was the color of an old penny, never missing an opportunity to sit in the sun and work on his tan. Distracted talking

to a friend, he let the pot overflow, sending the squid floating away down the gutter. My friends and I were playing nearby, and he called us over to run down the block and get them. We made a game of it and managed to catch every squid. I'm sure anyone who witnessed this didn't order the calamari specials on the menu that night.

It was almost dark when I got back toward Houston Street where I'd parked. I looked at my old building and thought of my first friend, Johnny. We lived next door to each other and would play in the hallway outside our apartments. Being on the top floor, a skylight made our public playroom bright and cheerful. We laid out our toy soldiers on the floor tiles and steps leading to the roof, staging miniature battles. Our roof had clotheslines installed for the use of the tenants. I never hung any, but if there were an unexpected rainfall, I would help my mother take down her wash in a hurry. We all spent lots of time on the roof in summer; sunbathing, barbecuing, and gardening. That's where my uncle had his coop with over a hundred fancy pigeons. And quite a few of the tenants had flower boxes, so from May to September, our roof was as beautiful and fragrant as any backyard garden. Everyone knew everyone else who lived there, and we all kept our doors open. I'd say hello to a dozen neighbors and relatives as I ran up and down the stairs.

In the old days, at this time on a summer evening, clusters of women would be sitting on folding chairs arranged on the sidewalk in front of nearly every doorway. They'd gossip and talk about things important to them like the current prices of artichokes. I could almost see the ghosts of the usual group who would be around the entrance of my building, with my mother sitting there saying, "Don't come home too late."

I no longer knew anyone in the neighborhood where I had spent my childhood, and no one knew me. The people living there now were unaware of the comedies and tragedies once

played out on those streets. That was all forgotten. Instead of dying, Mott Street had a new life, but the place I remembered was gone. It would have been sad to see boarded-up storefronts in vacant, graffiti-covered buildings, but this was a change and a feeling I hadn't expected. Everything was familiar to me, but still so different because although I wasn't a stranger to this place, I was to this time. It was a confusing mix of what I remembered and what was there now. The buildings and streets were the same, but what was going on in those buildings and on that street had no connection to my memories of what went on there before. It troubled me that the people living there now couldn't see what I saw. They couldn't see that where they were living wasn't just a quaint section of Manhattan with some historic buildings. It used to be a neighborhood with a heart and soul that made me what I would become. And no one knew it but me.