

I

STUYVESANT TOWN

To begin at the end.

It took me five years after my mother's death to finally break the lease, empty the closets, and double lock the door for the last time. Of course I looked back as I left (it's only in stories that people don't) at the fourteen-story-high brick wall, punctuated by windows, where my childhood had taken place, that modest aerie.

The last night, after a hot day of packing, my husband, daughter, and I were walking back to the apartment from dinner at a local deli. In the distance I saw a family with a white dog cute as a stuffed toy. I was marveling that people were walking a dog in a place where residents were forbidden to own them, and was thinking about how I had longed for a dog all the years of my childhood, my great unrequited wish. My daughter pulled us towards the dog, and just as the humans were coming close enough for me to see their faces, the woman broke free from the group and came running towards me, crying out my nickname, "Cory!"

It was my childhood friend Marla, grown up, a wife, a mother. She lived out of town and was visiting her mother who still lived here. That she recognized me in spite of the disguise of twenty-five years was a miracle. Our eight-year-old daughters looked so much like ourselves from our past the eye could morph the years between. We all went up to her mother's apartment, a one-bedroom now, more appropriate for her widowed lifestyle, but the same credenza along the wall. (My family did not own one, but it was a word I loved to pro-

nounce as a child; it invoked Venice itself.) While we talked our daughters did gymnastic tricks in the small, overdecorated living room space, my friend's mother insisting it was all right, I needn't worry about them breaking anything: the indulgence of a grandmother. We jumped on the sofa when we were eight (and our mothers yelled at us) but we didn't do gymnastics—girls didn't do things like that, then. Both our daughters now live in houses with stairs, play on grass, own dogs, take for granted what we were forbidden. They wonder at the elevators we traveled in every day, at the acres of playgrounds, at the chain fence that separates the pavement from anything green, at the rules and habits that govern the lives of Stuyvesant Town.

Stuyvesant Town. If this were a novel you would think I made it up. Imagine some giant hand leveling eighteen square blocks of Manhattan tenements, and in their place constructing a utopia of brick apartment buildings laid out around a large central green called the Oval. The only streets, four semicircular drives, one on each side of the perimeter, and a maze of paved walking paths and twelve fenced playgrounds, some with swings and slides, some with basketball hoops, some simply square open spaces. The focal point of the Oval, a fountain with three spires of water, still tempting the children to wet their feet, but that wasn't allowed (and there were guards to see to it). On hot afternoons, in some of the playgrounds, huge showers were turned on over an area with a center drain, and we children ran, screaming, through the icy water.

Stuyvesant Town encompasses all the territory from Fourteenth Street to Twentieth Street, from First Avenue east to the East River—seventy-five acres. Peter Cooper Village, similar, but slightly more affluent (the apartments have two bathrooms and larger living rooms) runs from Twentieth Street to Twenty-third. East River Drive, an elevated highway, separates the complex from the river itself. Underneath what we called the viaduct, is a long parking lot, cheaper than the underground garages in Stuyvesant Town itself. It was there that my father parked, and our car was always covered with soot that fell

from the great metal underpinnings of the highway, and decorated by the pigeons who nested there. Every time when my father went to pick up the car for our weekend excursions he would shake his fist at the birds, yell at them, and laugh. Then he would take a great feather duster from the trunk of the car and brush the soot from the windshield and the door handles. He was always studying the underside of the viaduct, trying to figure out where the pigeons were most likely to roost so he could avoid parking there.

“I’ll outsmart them yet,” he said. But he never did.

Stuyvesant Town had been built in a part of Manhattan that had been filled-in marshy tidelands of the East River. Known as the Gas House District, it was an area of tenements, commercial buildings and gas tanks, economically depressed by 1940, and targeted for re-development by Robert Moses, New York City Park Commissioner. The project was taken on by Metropolitan Life Insurance Company (now called MetLife), who had built a similar development in the Bronx, called Parkchester. The name Stuyvesant Town was selected to give the 25,000 residents a whiff of historical connection, for in the late eighteenth century the riverfront homestead of Peter Stuyvesant III, the great-grandson of the Dutch governor, had stood on the spot.

Stuyvesant Town was a gargantuan undertaking—began in 1944—which involved relocating three thousand families and demolishing five hundred buildings. Construction costs were over a hundred million dollars, and the project consumed 40,000 tons of steel and 36,500,000 bricks. The first families moved in, in 1947.

Unlike the vast city public housing projects in ghetto neighborhoods, meccas of despair, Stuyvesant Town was a middle-class community where little girls took piano lessons and were expected to go to college. If our fathers weren’t doctors or dentists, lawyers or school principals, they worked in offices and on hot days still wore their jackets home from work, with their ties just loosened. If our mothers worked at all, they were teachers. When families got wealthier they bought homes in Scarsdale or Darien or moved up to apartments in Peter Cooper. Some just stayed and kept their money in any

one of the many banks nearby on First Avenue. By the time I was in high school there were more elderly residents, and when they died *Town and Village*, the local weekly newspaper, sometimes reported their estates. A hundred thousand dollars, two hundred thousand dollars, half a million! My mother read these articles aloud at the dinner table.

“It just goes to show you,” she said, she who cherished the modest life. For me the message was a different one. These people were socking away their money while they lived in tiny apartments and lugged shopping carts full of groceries home from D’Agostino’s and shopping carts full of dirty laundry down to the laundromat where they sat with the rest of us watching their clothes slosh around in a foamy sea through the portholes of the washing machines. Were they all mad?

When I had been born, my parents lived on the Upper West Side in a real New York apartment building with an awning and an elevator man. I was as fascinated by this, as if I had spent those first two years of my life in an exotic country. The noise of Seventy-third Street below kept my father awake at night. In Stuyvesant Town, the one-way curved drive had little traffic: a few delivery trucks, a swish of taxi cabs, and on Sundays a few private cars picking up families for outings.

Everyone who lived in Stuyvesant Town was white. Most everyone in my building was Jewish. Families I knew numbered one or two children, occasionally three, except for one Catholic family who had five.

It was only the most fortunate families—nine thousand of them—who got apartments in Stuyvesant Town. When Stuyvesant Town was first ready for occupancy, there were more than 200,000 inquiries, and preference was given to World War II veterans and their families, who made up ninety-eight percent of the original tenants. Most of them were young couples, like my parents, with little kids. The waiting lists were long and you had to pass muster: inspectors visited your current dwelling to see that you’d make a suitable tenant.

A number of my childhood friends still live in Stuyvesant Town. Some occupy the apartments they were raised in—their surviving parents tucked away in smaller apartments, or in nursing homes. Some moved away to the suburbs or the Upper West Side and then were drawn back again. Some, like me, move far enough away so they'll be safe from the pull.

In Stuyvesant Town everything was homogeneous, symmetrical, and orderly. There were eight apartments on each floor, four two-bedroom, two one-bedroom, and two coveted three-bedroom. There were fourteen floors, but the first floor was called "Terrace" (T on the elevator button panel) and the second floor, where you exited at the back of the building on the level above the parking garage, was called, perversely, "Main" (M). This eliminated the unfortunate thirteenth floor. We lived in apartment 9B, but we were actually on the eleventh story.

Ours was a prime apartment, looking south over the Oval. An identical building faced us across the Oval, but it was close to Fourteenth Street, while we were close to Twentieth so there was enough space between for the sun to fill our apartment and goad my mother's geraniums to bloom continuously on the window sills.

The symmetry of Stuyvesant Town bewildered people. Once some old army friend of my father, who was perhaps a bit drunk, came to visit and got lost in the maze of buildings. We heard him bellowing up from the center oval, "Nick Demas, where the hell do you live?" His voice echoed against the buildings, to my mother's horror. Even the natives sometimes got confused, though not the children. In an episode that sounds like familiar fiction, but was in fact quite true, a father in my building went home by mistake to the identical building across the way. He went upstairs in the identical elevator, got off at his floor, went to his apartment, where the door was unlocked (this was the fifties: doors were unlocked during the day so the kids could run freely from one apartment to another) and walked in. He wondered if his wife had gotten new furniture, shouted "Hello!" to her, and a strange woman screamed in the bathroom.

Our apartments were all alike. They had the same layouts, the same sand-colored metal cabinets in the kitchen, sand-colored porcelain fixtures in the bathroom, tan walls (unless you paid an exorbitant fee to have them painted other than Stuyvesant Town “decorator” colors) and the same wooden parquet floors, one foot squares, four boards across. The floors were attractive, but regulations required you kept them carpeted. If you didn’t have wall-to-wall carpeting you could see edges of the real wood.

A friend of mine who grew up in Stuyvesant Town believes the sameness made people crazy—the fact that everything appeared to be identical, but on closer inspection, really wasn’t. I disagree. For children, especially, I think the sameness was comforting. When you went to visit a friend’s apartment the floorplan was reassuringly familiar—the bathroom was in the same place, your friend’s bedroom was the same size as your own. The layout of buildings, playgrounds, walks and drives, was all predictable, once you mastered the design. As a child you grew up seeking out subtle differences, you noticed details.

If Stuyvesant Town was bland, that just made the world outside it more brilliant. The variety of textures of buildings and stores and restaurants in the great city beyond seemed dazzling to me as a child. I’d walk along First Avenue like a tourist in a foreign bazaar. When I got home, Stuyvesant Town always seemed, in contrast, serene. No doubt the deprivations of Stuyvesant Town made me acutely sensitive to my surroundings when I was in the country. The limitless variety of plants, the irregularities of terrain, a feast for my senses. No child reared in Stuyvesant Town ever takes nature for granted.

Stuyvesant Town walls were, I always said, thin, but I don’t think that’s true. They were real plaster, probably thicker than modern sheetrock. The problem was their conductivity of sound, perhaps because all the moldings and doors were metal. (Stuyvesant Town was ideally fireproof. If a fire broke out, you simply shut the door.)

We lived intimately with our neighbors. We could hear them walking around and talking. We knew what program they were listening to on the radio, what they were watching on T.V. The steam

pipe in the bathroom, carried children's laments and mothers' nagging—over tooth brushing, wiping, flushing, and washing—up and down the entire column of Apartment Bs. Children practiced their instruments in the evenings and if you were waiting for the elevator in the hall you'd likely be serenaded by several pianos, a violin or two, a clarinet, and an occasional trombone. The Smiths next door in Apartment C, the one-bedroom, did not have children, so our piano was not on "their wall."

Our kitchen, a lopsided pentagon, fitted neatly against the kitchen of Apartment A, at a right angle to ours. One evening our neighbor, Murray, came home and complained to his wife that he had gotten to work ten minutes early because she had told him the wrong time in the morning. It turned out that when he had called out "What time is it, honey?" his wife was in the hall, throwing garbage down the incinerator, and my mother, in our kitchen, had answered, mistaking his voice for my father's. In our house all the clocks were kept ten minutes ahead in order to help us get to places on time. (A trick that never worked, for I always counted on the extra ten minutes and to this day am thrown off by clocks that tell "true" time.)

We could see into each other's apartments as well. The buildings were H shaped, so all apartments could look catty-corner into others, and some of the apartments looked directly across into ones on the other side of the building. It was easiest to look into windows on floors below. I once saw a boy lying naked on the bed whom I recognized as a kid I'd see bike riding. His body was pale and slender, and he was so innocent of my watching him I felt ashamed. A boy I had a crush on lived in the building across the drive. I knew which block of windows was his family's, guessed which window was his room. It was too far away for me to see in, but I knew what time his shade was pulled down, what time his light went out. I fantasized that he watched my window, too, though I suspected he didn't know, or care, who I was.

There were people whose lives I had glimpses of whom I never saw in person, never heard. There were people whom I heard, whose

apartments were out of sight. Sometimes I could match a familiar voice with someone who rode on my elevator or someone I ran into. Some families' interactions were in the background my whole childhood—the children getting older as I did—sometimes voices disappeared and new ones took their places. If I was a voyeur and an eavesdropper, so was everyone else. I guarded the little privacy I had fiercely, but sometimes I used the theater of neighbors as a weapon in squabbles with my mother. “Lower your voice,” was her constant refrain in my childhood. “I don't care who hears me,” my retort.

All of the windows in our apartment, except one, faced south onto the Oval. The window in the back bedroom, the room where the television resided, faced north, and gave me a glimpse of the spire of the Empire State Building and other uptown skyscrapers, a reminder of the world beyond Stuyvesant Town. In spite of conscious efforts to call it “the den” (which raised images for me of a wood-paneled study in a suburban house) this room was forever referred to as “the backroom.” Cool and dark, approached through a little hallway, it was like an appendage to our apartment. (In fact it was the second bedroom from the one-bedroom next door.)

Everything in Stuyvesant Town was regulated and manicured. Order always prevailed. The playgrounds, all surrounded by metal fences too high to climb over, were locked up at night, although it was never clear what was being kept out. During the day the children inside the playgrounds looked like zoo animals, caged in.

We children enjoyed most playing outside of the spaces allotted to us. We dug in the narrow strips of dirt between the cobblestones around the benches. We wrote messages with chalk on the stone bases of the flagpoles. We were constantly lured by the unpaved areas behind the thigh-high chain fences. There were lawns and patches of ivy and small hillsides between buildings where rhododendron and azalea grew. The guards who patrolled the area and were paid to protect us, we saw as the enemy. I can remember the terror invoked by the cry “Guard!” when I was playing with some friends under some shrubbery on the forbidden side of fence. We ran back to the safety

of our mothers who were chatting on the benches along the playground and were oblivious to our narrow escape.

Only when it snowed did we fearlessly challenge the boundaries. Early in the morning on a snowday that had closed the schools, my friends and I, with our snowsuits on top of our pajamas, stamped out our names in the snow right out in the center of the Oval lawn in letters so big we could read them from my apartment windows. If it stayed cold, they'd remain there for days. As it warmed up, tufts of green would start showing through the thinnest places, our names would grow illegible, and finally they'd disappear so completely into the green lawn that it was hard to believe they had ever been there at all.