

Excerpt from “City Boy”

It was in another life that I’d known him, ten years ago, when I lived on East Seventh Street, between First and Avenue A, a section famous for winning Block Association awards because the windows of the brownstones sparkled so in the sunlight. (Rain or shine, cold or sweltering, the Ukrainian women were out there, cleaning them with newspapers and vinegar.) I was involved with a writer who kept empty milk cartons in his refrigerator and was in love with a short girl who lived in Rhode Island, who’d stopped seeing him because she felt his lifestyle was unstable. I was drinking too much and working part-time at the Yiddish Actors’ Association on Second Street. The building had, at one time, been a theater, and now the upstairs floors were rented to the Pantheon Palace, which featured strip shows and dancing girls who arranged themselves in small booths lined with black velvet.

I worked in the Public Relations Department, where Meyer Lubkin, our boss, spent his days mourning the death of the Yiddish Theater and trying to get Isaac Bashevis Singer on the phone to write something for the few faded stars still around, like Luba Kadison and Stella Adler. Every Friday, he stood before the open window, lamenting, “Where are the Jews? Where are the Jews? What’s to become of us? I’m ruined!”

On Fridays, we got out early for Shabbat, and Ophelia, the receptionist, and I would smoke a joint while sitting on the stone wall by the New York City Marble Cemetery, where James Lenox, founder of the New York City Library, is buried, along with a prosperous merchant named Preserved Fish, a fact we found absolutely hilarious when properly stoned. We’d then go to a bar on Second Avenue to drink vodka tonics that tasted rancid because the glasses were dirty. I was in my mid-twenties and exhausted by the drama of my life, and after seeing a

posting for volunteers on the Met Foods bulletin board, I decided to volunteer at the Thorns of Christ Home for Forgotten Children, a glorified orphanage on Houston Street. I felt that since moving to the city I was living a lost life, and hoped that hanging out with children would help me find something useful.

The vetting process turned out to be an exhaustive affair, involving fingerprints and references and orientations and TB tests. Sister Katherine Sage, who everyone called Sister K, wore PF flyers with her habit, and coordinated the volunteer program at Thorns of Christ, or Thorny, as it was commonly called. The way it worked, you were assigned a child and expected to spend eight hours per month with him or her, in supervised group settings on the grounds of Thorny, for the first three months. After that, you could go on one-on-one outings, as long as the proposed activity was approved at least a week in advance.

“Say your child doesn’t like you,” Sister K said, at the orientation. “Well, so what? Everyone can’t like everyone. We expect you to make an effort, but after the first three visits, if you’re experiencing difficulty forming a connection, you must let us know and in no way feel that it’s your fault. Suffering is not part of this program, for you or the children.”

He was almost six years old when I met him, that first day in the shabby living room. I was disappointed that he was so young; I had hoped for one of the older kids because I had a degree in secondary English and was, in fact, on the Board of Education’s list for substitute teaching. But I was usually too hung over when they called to offer me an assignment. He was big for his age, tall, wiry, with a blonde buzz cut and huge blue eyes fringed by black lashes, wearing too-big jeans, a too-tight red and blue striped rugby shirt and a wary, watchful expression. He folded his arms across his chest when I tried to shake hands and rolled his eyes when I suggested that

we sit down and get acquainted, as many of the other volunteers were doing. I learned that he liked dogs and snakes but hated cats and alligators; liked peanut butter and strawberry jam sandwiches but hated grape jelly; and loved pizza and brownies but hated string beans. When time was up, he still wouldn't shake my hand, and when I said I was looking forward to seeing him next week, he shook his head as though I was an idiot.

Sister K encouraged the volunteers to visit at least weekly, if possible, "to give the children something to look forward to." I went every week but I never had the impression that Stevie looked forward to seeing me or spending time with me; he still refused to shake hands, but agreed to play game after game of checkers, at which he excelled.

I worried that he didn't like me. I tried discussing it with the writer, who sighed, said, "Ah, kids," and turned his attention to the Mets game on television. Ophelia thought I was nuts.

"He's a kid, for Christ sake, who cares if he likes you," she said. She wasn't enthusiastic about the volunteer program anyway, because on the days I participated I wasn't available to smoke a joint or go drinking at the nameless bar on the corner. Ophelia had grown up in the projects, surrounded by single mothers and screaming kids, and wanted no part of it.

I discussed it with Dixie, one of the dancers from the Pantheon Palace whom I'd come to know from going up on the roof to smoke cigarettes; Meyer's wife had died of emphysema and he forbade smoking in the office. Dixie was tall and slender with a great mane of curly brown hair, and always wore killer heels and blood red lipstick. I had mentioned my involvement in the volunteer program casually, but she became interested and asked me how it was going more frequently than I would have expected.

"Whyntcha bring him a toy or something, something little boys like, you know, a GI Joe doll or something," she suggested. But we weren't allowed to bring presents for the kids; Sister

K said we shouldn't try to buy their affections with bribes.

Dixie wrinkled her nose. "What kind a half-assed rule is that?" she asked. "Kids love presents, shit, who doesn't? But listen to me," she said, wistfully, with a self-deprecating laugh, "like I know what the fuck I'm talking about." She was bathed in the musky heat of Indian summer that surrounded the city, a rose and golden glow that illuminated her pale skin and wild hair as she stood against the backdrop of the broken sign that advertised, "Girls! Girls! Girls!" a blurred invitation to men with no place to go and nobody to hold them.