

The Great Escape

By Roberta Graff

I didn't move from the Bronx: I escaped. That was 24 years ago when the only acceptable means of get-away was matrimony. My marriage license became my passport when I said "yes" to the handsome Ivy Leaguer who elicited nods of approval from the neighbors who judged my every move.

They congregated on camp chairs outside my apartment building on warm summer evenings, patiently watching as my boyfriend circled the block a dozen times looking for a parking spot. They nodded to each other as if to say, "We knew he'd never find a space," as he double parked. Taking the steps to the lobby two at a time, he dashed into the elevator and pressed the button for Four.

I was always ready, and minutes later we walked back past our audience on the way to the car.

"See, I told you he was for 4B," Mrs. Waxman whispered.

"So again you're right," her husband answered.

How I resented their stares and comments, which inevitably led to a heated discussion with my mother the next day. "Why are they so damned nosy?" I would fume. "Can't they mind their own business?"

"They don't mind their own business because they have no business worth minding," my mother would answer in her most condescending tone. "They are always interested in you. You were the most beautiful baby on the Concourse. You had a white coach carriage. When I pushed that carriage by Poe Park every head turned. Believe me, they're still talking about that carriage."

Though I found it highly questionable that my baby carriage could remain on anyone's mind for more than 20 years, no matter how

uneventful their own lives had been, I wisely chose not to challenge my mother's statements. Instead I would change the subject to my coming marriage, my new apartment, my new life.

"Are you going to move, Mother?" I would ask.

"Because you are moving away, that means I should too," my mother would answer, giving me just that little stab of guilt she found necessary to keep me in line.

"Why should I give up such an apartment — facing the Concourse, southwest exposure, tile kitchen, sunken living room, always a breeze?" she continued like a real estate agent with an unsure prospect. I would think of the sweltering July nights when you could barely breathe...the limited closets...and keep my mouth closed. "No dear," she would conclude, "apartments like this you simply do not give up."

True to her word, she never gave up the apartment, even when her winters in Florida ran into spring and then summer.

"Why should I come home?" she would ask me on the telephone from Miami on the Fourth of July. "It's not even hot here." However, to her newly made Floridian friends: "I have a home up north, you know, and I'll probably go for a visit next month."

But next month never came. The apartment became a storehouse for possessions and memories that my mother would never part with.

And now I have returned to the Bronx, considerably mellowed and minus the hostilities I carried with me when I left. The job of giving up the apartment is now mine. The furniture dealer has been contacted, the charitable organizations, always happy for contributions, have been called, and the realtor has been notified that, after 40 years, 4B is now for rent.

I drive around the block at least six times looking for a place to park. I am luckier than my former boyfriend; someone pulls an old Chevrolet out of a spot not far from my mother's building. I walk down the street where I once roller skated and notice how the neighborhood has changed. The kosher deli, its fat hot dogs dripping with mustard and sauerkraut, is now a bodega. The corner candy store where we'd sip chocolate egg creams topped with white foam, is a bar.

I pass two little black girls jumping rope as I approach the entrance to the apartment house. I look around the once elegantly furnished lobby. There is an old stained sofa pushed off to a corner. Its stuffing is falling out. I walk into the mail room where I often played hide-and-seek. My mother's mailbox is crammed full of junk mail addressed to Occupant and Tenant. One envelope is addressed to Our Friendly Neighbor. Remembering my mother's attitude, I laugh. The names on the letter boxes have changed. Levine and Goldstein have been replaced by Gomez and Hernandez. I open the elevator door. The walls are covered with obscenities I didn't know until I was too old to derive any satisfaction from using them. I feel for the keys in my pocket. There are four, one for each lock on the door of my mother's apartment.

The elevator stops at one. A very old lady eyes me suspiciously, hesitates and slowly walks in. She looks vaguely familiar.

"Mrs. Waxman?" I ask uncertainly.

"Yes, who is it?" she asks nervously as though I had rung her doorbell in the middle of the night.

"I'm sure you don't remember, but I used to live here."

Moving a little closer, she looks up at me and a faint smile crosses her wrinkled face.

"Of course, 4B, what a big beautiful girl you've become," she says appraising all 5 feet, 2 inches of me.

"I can't believe you remember me, after all these years," I reply.

"Why, who could forget that white carriage?"

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