Liz Bolton

Dr. Farmer

Creative Writing 377

February 2, 2020

Brooklyn, A Love Story

In the 1980s Brooklyn was its own country, my neighborhood its own tiny nation state. The bodega on my corner had spotted bananas hanging in the window, always either spotted or dark green, because we probably lived in a food desert except that expression didn’t exist so was it a thing? The older couple who ran it didn’t speak English but they were always nice to me. One time, though, something happened with my mom up there — maybe they thought she was on food stamps and she got offended, or maybe they thought she stole something (there’s no way; she’s the sort of person who goes back to the store because they *under*charged her) — and I vaguely remember she stopped wanting to go there. But when you live in a tiny nation state you buy your milk at the bodega on the corner, and if they think you’ve done something wrong and you can no longer go there, you simply send your children; it’s not an option to stop shopping there.

In the 1980s Brooklyn’s soundtrack was hip hop; it was not yet hip; there were no hipsters in sight. On the day of the Puerto Rican Day parade, you’d see the flags flying out of car windows, salsa music blaring, people drinking early, dancing in the streets. Gallo and Wilfredo taught us white girls how to salsa when we were in fifth, sixth grade. The old Irish ladies with their dyed red hair still sat next to their stoops in battered aluminum lawn chairs, and told stories of the old days, when they put their babies in carriages out front and left them there to nap while they did the dishes and the laundry. We’d never heard of a garage sale or a yard sale or a tag sale, because brownstones don’t have garages and the front yards are concrete and why would you tag something when you could just tell the person how much? We had stoop sales, our merchandise displayed on each ascending step like the stoop was made for it, like someone in the 1870s had specifically designed it not to be walked on but to showcase old stuffed animals and the Game of Life you don't play anymore.

In the 1980s Brooklyn’s trains were covered in graffiti and its train tracks were covered in rats. Its buses were blue metal with silver metal railings and when you put your change or your token in the gunmetal slot it made a loud, satisfying clinking noise. Sometimes it snowed and sometimes it rained, but most of my memories are of sunny days, of ten-cent neon-colored icies in plastic sleeves from Louie’s candy store across the street from school.

School. PS 39, a red brick building built in 1876, had no hallways; we paraded through classrooms already too small and too packed. The lunchroom was in the basement and smelled like bleach and vomit. My mom was home with my baby sister so I could go home for lunch. I wouldn’t have wanted to eat down there. Classes were interrupted by the sound of coal filling the chute outside. We called the lower part of the schoolyard where the coal truck parked “the dungeon,” and when we weren’t too scared to go down there we found crack vials and condoms. I don’t know how we knew what they were, but we did. That is to say, we knew what they were called, but we couldn’t understand what they *were*exactly*.* The upper part of the schoolyard was not a playground, but a field of cement. There were no basketball hoops, no soccer nets; we had hop scotch boards, jump ropes, and balls. It was good enough, I guess.

I was jealous of the Black girls because they were coooool, so effortlessly cool, and because they had braids that made me think their mothers had spent a lot of time touching them, talking to them, pulling jangly beaded rubber bands through thick dark hair. My mother was *present*, she was *home*, but she didn’t call me sweetie or pierce my ears or do anything at all to my stringy hair. Ms. McIntyre was my fifth grade teacher, the one who taught me to really read, beyond the words on the page to the heart of the story, and she had flawless dark skin and a lovely laugh and smoked cigarettes when she thought that children weren’t looking. She was everything that I could never be so I loved her.

I was jealous of the Latin girls because they spoke Spanish at home and English at school and they had fantastic laughs and they embodied their bodies, lived in their bodies, whatever size and shape they were, while I felt long-limbed and bony and uncomfortable. Mrs. Hernandez was my sixth grade teacher and she moved back and forth between languages like she was dancing fearlessly on a low stone wall: when she faced in one direction she danced the merengue; when she faced the other direction it was a foxtrot. She had a smile like the sun and when it shone on me I smiled too.

I was jealous of the Irish girls because they wore beautiful dresses to their step dancing contests and their dads were cops and firemen and their mothers had pretty nails. I was Irish too, in a way: my mother was a McGillicuddy, my dad’s mother was a Byrne, my mom’s grandmother was a Murphy. But I wasn’t *Irish* Irish; we’d been in America too long, and there were Schmidts in our midst, and I didn’t know what county anyone was from. No one in my family had a recipe for soda bread. We didn’t go back and visit relatives. (My only Irish teacher was Miss Noonan, back in third grade, but she was stern and old and I once corrected her grammar and I was right. I wasn’t jealous of her.)

We’re supposed to be jealous of the people with power, and money, and privilege. And in 1980s Brooklyn, I had more of that than most people (still do, really): blue eyes; a house my parents owned. But what I envied was the belonging, the tribalism. I was on the outside of all that, and I don’t say this in a *poor me* kind of way but in a *can you understand that there was a hole in my heart and I wished for things that I was lacking* kind of way. I sought out the people who could fill the hole.

People like Jessie (Irish), my best friend who lived two blocks away. Her mom would send us to the deli to buy cigarettes and it never crossed our minds that we could use the money to buy something for ourselves, or that we could smoke one of the cigarettes. We were “nice girls” that way, nice Catholic girls who didn’t steal or smoke and still don’t, for the most part. What we did was imitate our teacher. Not glamorous Ms. McIntyre or sweet Mrs. Hernandez or pursed-lipped Miss Noonan but curly-haired, curly-tempered Ms. Sparber, the art teacher who was Brooklyn to a tee. We pretended to be Ms. Sparber so often and for such long stretches that our mothers, through tears of laughter, would have to insist that we stop. “It’ll get stuck!” they’d say, as if pretending to have an accent could have a lasting impact. It didn’t on me, of course, because my mother was from Maine and wouldn’t let me say “ax” for “ask” or “cawfee” for “coffee,” though when I get worked up I slip into all of it and I never blame Ms. Sparber because how could it be her fault?

In 1990, I tested into the best school in the city on the basis of an essay I wrote. Skated by on the multiple choice test but my essay put me in the top ten percent. I left Brooklyn behind, and the eighties. I took the subway into Manhattan, an hour each way, for six years, from 12 to 18. Sometimes with my older brother, sometimes with Jessie, mostly alone. There were no cell phones, no Kindles. I did my homework on the train, or fell asleep, waking up to the embarrassing feeling of my head hitting the shoulder of the commuter next to me, or a strand of drool sliding out the side of my mouth. I was a part of the beating heart of the city.

Sometimes it was sunny but most of my memories by then are of cold winter mornings, the foghorns on the Gowanus Canal moaning low in the dark, the soft light drifting into my room from the room next door, a gauzy curtain separating the two; my father saying my name gently through the curtain, telling me the time, as an encouragement, as a warning, as a reminder. I could hear him dressing, belt buckling, shoes going on. I could hear the radiator clicking and clacking, could feel its ancient heat near my feet. Time to leave for school.

School. Hunter, a red brick building built in 1977, with no visible windows; it was designed to look like the armory it replaced. I stayed friends with Jessie and added new friends, Jewish girls who lived uptown and Asian girls who lived downtown. Bat mitzvahs at the Central Park boathouse, sweet sixteens at banquet halls in Little Italy. Their moms did their hair, or they went to a salon and had it done. I did theater with Lin, who became a Broadway sensation, and Chris, who has his own show on MSNBC. I was in math class with Felipe, who won a bunch of Grammys as a rapper, and Toure, who produced Felipe’s records. I went to the prom with Andrew, who had long hair and pouty lips and lived in Queens; he’s not famous. We were just friends, but then he wasn’t allowed to go to Long Island for the after party and our friendship cooled after that, because there were a bunch of us in the limo and didn’t he kind of wreck everyone’s good time? We went to a random McDonald’s in the Village instead, and played pool somewhere downtown, and then watched the sunrise with most of our classmates at someone’s parents’ loft in SoHo. I finally had my hair done for the first time, my nails done for the first time. I wore a vintage dress I found for twenty bucks at Canal Jeans. My aunt told me I looked like a movie star in that dress. I just felt like a New Yorker. I took pictures with all the cutest boys; I was friends with them because I didn’t fit into any category and I’d never had either the courage or the cowardice to sleep around. I danced and danced that night. I was jealous of no one.