

## My Father's Life of Flight

In 1954, on his two weeks of vacation from his job as assistant parts manager at a Chevrolet dealer in the Bronx, my father and a friend drove across the continent and back. Their dash for California was quite as frenetic as Kerouac's flight into the Western night in *On the Road* (1957), except that unlike Kerouac they knew exactly what they were looking for: better jobs. When that prospect evaporated, they raced back to New York, driving day and night, and returned to work without an hour missed. The vision of the golden land remained with my father, however, and twenty years later my parents moved to California for good. In time my father became parts manager at a Cadillac dealer in San Francisco, a far cry from his original position.

My father's unrelenting effort to improve his lot, as well as the lot of those who depended on him and whom he loved, was inspired by the conditions of his childhood during the Depression in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn. He had so little that at one point he lacked even a bed. Eventually his parents could no longer care for him and he was sent to live with relatives in West Virginia. He grew up quite without bitterness but with the implicit knowledge that if he were ever to escape from an existence of decent poverty it would be through his own efforts and nothing else.

At the time of my father's transcontinental run, we were living on the corner of W. 170<sup>th</sup> St. and Audubon Avenue, in a section of Washington Heights not far from upper

Harlem. Lacking every trace or reminder of the naturalist's handsome estate in the northern reaches of Manhattan island, the locale had nothing to offer any bird with the exception of the pigeon. Where we lived, if you wanted to see a blade a grass you went to the park.

We too had little. I well remember my father fitting an empty jug of apple juice with a socket, for use as a lamp. I also remember the taste of powdered milk. Nevertheless, within two years of my father's California odyssey, we moved with the help of the GI Bill to a solid two-story house in a tree-lined neighborhood in Nassau County, Long Island, close enough to the city for my father to commute to work in less than an hour, but still far enough away that it felt like an arcadia. Though our house cost only \$17,990, it stretched us to the limit, and my father now worked a second job on weekends in addition to ten- or eleven-hour days in the parts room. My mother worked as a school secretary as well. Among the few books in our possession was one published by the Audubon Society, which awakened no sense of nostalgia whatsoever for Audubon Avenue.

While my parents certainly felt the attractions of suburbia, something more immediate drove us from Washington Heights. There was a stabbing on our block. Gang warfare was all well and good in *West Side Story* (1957), but for my parents the notion of actually raising children in the presence of violence was unthinkable. The incident was the writing on the wall, and they read it correctly. We left Washington Heights in 1956. On July 30, 1957 fifteen-year-old Michael Farmer, a polio victim, was set upon and killed by members of a gang at nearby Highbridge Park. Seven teenagers stood trial for murder, reportedly the largest such trial in the history of Manhattan to that point. The other youth

stabbed, Roger McShane, was identified in the press as residing at 550 W. 170<sup>th</sup> St., which was either our building or very close to it.

Why were we living in this seismic zone? Strangely, we moved there from a picturesque section of Washington Heights itself. Originally we lived in the same building as my mother's parents, except that their apartment had a magnificent view of the Hudson and the George Washington Bridge, while ours was too low to have a view, did not face west, and lacked elementary privacy, standing next to the elevator in the middle of the lobby. It may also have been too small for a family of five. But I doubt it was these demerits alone that drove us across Broadway; there was also the proximity of my grandmother, a formidable matriarch. For my father in particular, living so close to his mother-in-law must have been trying, as she judged him beneath her lineage. A flat on a corner of Audubon Avenue, perhaps a mile away as the crow flies, wasn't much but gave him breathing room. The next step was to leave New York altogether, thereby putting some real distance between himself and his mother-in-law and lifting the lives of his family. He would have transported us to the other side of the American landmass in 1954 if circumstances had been right.

Wrote Jane Jacobs a few years later, "If a city's streets are safe from barbarism and fear, the city is thereby tolerably safe from barbarism and fear." By the same token, unsafe streets signify an intolerable breakdown of order. Within a generation of my parents' departure from the city, the sidewalks of the scenic section of Washington Heights in which they had once lived became dangerous. So it was that shortly before the crack epidemic of the 1980's consumed her neighborhood, my grandmother, whom I had come to love, fled

New York in her own right. She fled to the Bay Area to live near my parents, though they settled her some miles from their door.

\*

Many in academia or its sphere of influence would say that my family's move to the suburbs exemplifies white flight: the tidal shift whereby whites deserted the inner cities in the decades after World War II, leaving them to decay. According to a 2019 article in the Long Island newspaper Newsday, "Segregation hardened rapidly on the Island starting around the time of the civil rights movement, propelled by white flight, racial steering and blockbusting by real estate agents in towns that today have the largest minority populations." While I never caught a mention of racial steering or a rumor of racial panic during my high school years when the civil rights movement came into its own, the area was certainly white. According to the 1960 census, Manhattan was 23.4% and Nassau only 3.0%, black.

Was our move to Nassau then "propelled by white flight"?

My parents fled Washington Heights because our section of it had become unsafe, not because of census figures. That the gang known as the Jesters, headquartered three blocks from us, was white did not make it less menacing. If someone had told my father it was his civic duty to keep his children (one of them almost of gang age) in a neighborhood where knives were displayed on the street, the argument would have struck him as mad, and he would have rejected it with disbelief and derision. With this in mind, let us suspend

the academic prejudice in favor of cynical explanations and test the sociological abstraction, “white flight,” against the realities of my family’s case.

If my parents had been segregationists, we would not have moved across Broadway into a mixed neighborhood verging on upper Harlem in the first place. So too, when my father dashed across the continent in 1954, he was looking for a better job, not a refuge from persons of color. His was “the uniform, constant, and uninterrupted effort . . . to better his condition” affirmed as a universal in *The Wealth of Nations*, except that he labored as he did because he labored for his loved ones. Not that he discovered his drive and discipline only after marriage. Undoubtedly it was just these qualities that enabled his rise from private to master sergeant in the Marines during World War II. And once he had served in the Marines, there was no settling back into life as he had known it in Bensonhurst.

In the case of my father, “uniform, constant, and uninterrupted effort” suggested less the tick of a clock than the hum of an engine, and the life he led in the service of this ethos was one of restless movement. His life was a story of flight, which is to say that his departure from New York for the suburbs was but an episode in a narrative of continual seeking. If the right position in the Hawaiian islands had opened up at the right time, this child of Brooklyn might have moved to the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

Possibly flight was in my father’s bones because his parents, like my mother’s, fled to this country in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in search of a life free of persecution. My paternal grandfather was born in “Warsaw, Russia” (as a document dated 1923 has it) and eventually settled into a modest life in an apartment on a nondescript street in Brooklyn. In

the manner of the guardians of the streets in Jane Jacobs' New York, he liked to sit at the window watching the world go by, but it was not, in truth, much of a world. Though my father was devoted to his parents, and though one of his sisters lived with them while the other lived in the apartment next door, his spirit could not abide such limits, and he led a less resolved life.

Incongruously or not, as a young man my father aspired to be an opera singer, and opera, with its grand passions, remained his own passion to the end. Perhaps he felt he could make a home anyplace his discontent took him, as long as it had an opera den. Exactly how many times he changed his roof I do not know, but I count at least ten. When my parents left Nassau County a few years after I graduated from high school in 1966, it wasn't because they were scared out by racial rumors or crooked realtors but because my father found a better position in Wheaton, Maryland. Moreover, during our years in the suburbs of New York my mother had qualified as a teacher but fared so poorly in the classroom that my father may well have felt that her only hope was to start anew elsewhere. For him the automobile was not only a livelihood but a way of life.

At one time or another my parents bought and sold dwellings in Nassau County, suburban Washington DC, and Contra Costa County in California. That they left Nassau only to return a few years later to almost the same spot suggests that they had no master plan behind all this. Even in a fixed abode they retained a certain spirit of flight. When they moved to a gated city-within-a-city in Contra Costa, even then they did not stay put; they moved inside it. It was in character for my father that two or three days after my mother died, he decided to move and summarily did so. Only then, when he entered a retirement

home in Sacramento, did he cease changing one address for another. He was listening to opera when he died.

\*

Flight per se, not white flight, was my father's theme. To interpret his departure from the inner city to the suburbs as racial in inspiration is to take it wholly out of context—to ignore not only the street violence that precipitated his flight from the city, but his entire history. Flight and the discontent behind it were so much a part of my father's nature that he never quite understood why they did not come as readily to me. In a sense, he always remained the seeker who raced across the entire breadth of the United States in a matter of days in pursuit of a better position. The ashes of this man who grew up near Sheepshead Bay were scattered over San Francisco Bay.

The rhetoric of white flight reveals nothing about my father; its conclusions are too predetermined, its overtones of infamy too deafening, to do justice to the individuality of his case. However, I have learned about my father from a visitor to America who recorded his impressions almost 200 years ago: Tocqueville. I learned because Tocqueville thought philosophically, not polemically.

In a brief, trenchant chapter in the second volume of *Democracy in America* Tocqueville examines “Why the Americans are So Restless in the Midst of Their Prosperity.” Americans are restless because happiness tends to recede even as they pursue it. “In the United States a man builds a house in which to spend his old age, and he sells it before the

roof is on.” My father, who was a bit like this man, might have said, “Why shouldn’t he sell the house half-built if he chooses? What if the child who was to care for him in his old age died, and he can’t bear to go through with the house? Or maybe the house was a mistake to begin with and he decided to cut his losses. Why should he finish it and make himself miserable just to prove to the world how methodical he is?” The pursuit of happiness is certainly not as linear as constructing a house—though perhaps that is Tocqueville’s point.

For my father, the very ardor of the pursuit of happiness seemed to make its possession insecure, much as Tocqueville implies. Tocqueville’s intuition of my father’s restlessness a century and more before the fact is as suggestive as the white-flight narrative is crude and inapt. In a sense, Tocqueville even foresaw my father’s automotive epic of 1954. The American is so restless, he says, that “If at the end of a year of unremitting labor he finds he has a few days’ vacation, his eager curiosity whirls him over the vast extent of the United States, and he will travel fifteen hundred miles in a few days to shake off his happiness.” My father had a gasoline-powered vehicle at his disposal for his whirl across the United States, but no matter. The fact is that he too labored unremittingly, and he too found a measure of happiness, but not content. His flight to suburbia in 1956 was neither the beginning nor the end of his quest.

Stewart Justman  
2024