

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 on Jerome Ave. in the Bronx, my father, Norman Justman, and a friend drove across the continental United States 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 what they were looking for: better jobs. When that prospect failed to materialize, 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 Northern 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. For some time he lacked even a bed, and eventually, when his parents could no longer care for him, he was sent to live with relatives. 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. 170th 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, our street 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 Highbridge 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 venture, we moved with the help of the GI Bill to a two-story house in a pleasant, tree-lined neighborhood in Nassau County, close enough to Queens for him to commute to work in less than an hour, but still far enough from the city 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, for an inventory service, in addition to long 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 evoked 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 in 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. 170th St., which was either our building or very close to it.

What were we doing 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 much of a view, did not face west, and lacked elementary privacy, standing next to the elevator in the middle of the lobby. No doubt it was also too small for a family of five. But in addition to these demerits there was also the proximity of my grandmother, a resolute 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 the five boroughs of New York, thereby putting some genuine distance between himself and his critic 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 permitted.

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 represent an intolerable breakdown of order. Within a generation of our departure from the city, the sidewalks of the scenic section of Washington Heights in which we had once lived became dangerous too. So it was that shortly before the crack epidemic of the

1980's consumed her neighborhood, my grandmother, whom I had come to love, and who had lived in New York since her arrival in the United States in early years of the century, fled the city as well. 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 whisper of racial steering or a rumor of racial panic during my high school years when the civil rights movement came into its own, Nassau County was certainly white—97%, according to the 1960 census.

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, and to refrain from moving to an area that

definitely was safe, 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 in the early 1950’s across Broadway into a mixed neighborhood verging on upper Harlem. 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 as well as himself. Not that he discovered his ambition and discipline only after marriage. Undoubtedly it was 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 reverting to 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 20th century in search of a life free of persecution. Once well

planted, however, they never moved again. Born in “Warsaw, Russia” (as noted in a document dated 1923), my paternal grandfather eventually settled into a modest life in an apartment on a nondescript street in Bensonhurst. 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, 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. Possibly he felt he could make a home anywhere his discontent took him, as long as it had an opera den. Exactly how many times he changed roof I don’t 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. (It also shows that they were not panicked out of Nassau by racial fears the first time.) 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, for some reason. It was in character for my father that two or three days after my mother died, he decided to move yet again 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 and the discontent behind it were so much a part of my father's nature that he never quite understood why they didn't 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 life. 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, 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 what if 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 everyone how methodical he is?" The pursuit of happiness is certainly not as linear as constructing a house, though perhaps that's 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 an internal-combustion engine at his disposal for his whirl across the United States, but no matter. 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.

*

Even Tocqueville, however, takes us only so far. The fact is that my father's biography implicates a much larger story—that of the marriage norms which enable or accompany the formation of a mobile society like that of the United States in the first

place. Writes Joseph Henrich in *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous*:

The families found in WEIRD [that is, Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic] societies are peculiar, even exotic, from a global and historical perspective. . . . We limit ourselves to one spouse (at a time), and social norms usually exclude us from marrying relatives, including our cousins, nieces, step-children, and in-laws. Instead of arranged marriages, our “love marriages” are usually motivated by mutual affection and compatibility.

For most of human history people have lived in kinship groups where these norms, now taken deeply for granted in the West, did not exist.

A large impersonal society like ours implies emancipation from tight kinship networks whose customs order the existence of its members. In principle, the American citizen possesses a mobility foreign to one who belongs to such a network, although the American is in turn subject to marital prohibitions which may well be absent in the other case. Two young Americans marry of their own accord and establish their own household, possibly at a distance from their parents. Geographical mobility represents in this sense a correlate of the independence of love marriage, with *love* subject only to the implicit condition that it excludes relatives like cousins. All this has a great bearing on my father’s life.

On my paternal grandfather's petition for naturalization, filed in 1926, he attests that he does not practice or believe in polygamy. Fortunately for him, the form does not ask if he is married to a cousin, because he was (and a first cousin at that). My father's mother Anna (born 1889), married Harry Justman (born 1886); but Anna's own grandfather was surnamed Yustman. (The two witnesses of Harry's signature spell their name Yustman as well.) By a loop of the clan, Anna was a Justman by marriage as well as lineage, and the family tree in which she figures—an object my mother once undertook to diagram, using asterisks and side panels—is an arabesque. People in the greater family seemed to know how they stood to one another, although I never really cracked the code. That Anna and Harry married around 1909—that is, after emigrating to the United States—means that even on American soil they adhered to practices native to Old World kinship networks.

My father was well aware of the impropriety of a marriage between cousins in the United States and attributed to it a defect I was born with, not as if he blamed his parents but as if he himself, the intermediary, were the guilty one. Though he loved his parents and did not criticize them, he repudiated by his way of life—above all, his mobility both social and geographic—the very notion of an existence highly entwined with kin and accordingly constricted in its possibilities. His parents exemplified that life.

Listed on his petition for naturalization as a “sponger,” that is, a treater of cloth, Harry worked in the textile industry in different capacities, and even if he had wished to get away from kinfolk like the witnesses on his petition (though I have no reason to believe he did), he was probably tied too closely to the industry's center in the garment district of Manhattan to do so. It was a man immobile economically and otherwise who liked to sit at

a window watching the passersby on Bay 25th St. below. My grandparents' decades in that small apartment—a tenure that included the Depression years, when the flat housed a family of five—helps explain my father's wandering ways. Such stasis wasn't for him.

Of Norman's sisters, the elder¹ lived with her parents until they died (perhaps serving as the principal breadwinner at times), while the other lived for some years in the flat next door with her family. In a sense, all but Norman were enmeshed in a single communal story. For my grandparents in particular, life was highly circumscribed. (My grandmother Anna couldn't wait for me to get my license and take her for drives "in the country," which seemed to mean anywhere outside New York.) When my father made his high-speed run across the United States in 1954, the rest of his natal family remained, of course, exactly where they were. He was willing to move 3000 miles from these loved ones at a time when a call from Nassau County to Brooklyn was billed as "long distance."

An assimilated American who would have shunned the very thought of marrying a cousin, my father entered into a love marriage against resistance. Whether because she disapproved of my father's lowly origins or knew his parents were cousins, or both, my maternal grandmother moved her family from Bensonhurst to Washington Heights in an effort to put distance between the two lovers. How well this separation strategy worked we already know. An odyssey in its own right, the subway ride from southern Brooklyn to northern Manhattan was early evidence of my father's will to travel. To live after marriage in the same building as the matriarch who tried to thwart the marriage itself would have hurt my father's pride, and so it was that within a few years he moved his young family of five to

¹ See my essay, "My Aunt's Sham Marriage."

the wrong side of Broadway, a journey of social miles. There he acquired his first car, a 1941 Chevy (with a starter button and throttle and choke levers), which was hardly necessary to get to and from work but possibly served as a promise and augury of flight.

Believer in love, chaser of dreams, devotee of opera: my father was a great romantic. He was also an impulsive spirit, and it was somehow characteristic of him that his fortunes were bound up with America's romance with the automobile, the literal engine of mobility. Others also took what the automobile gave them, moving from the city to the suburbs, for example; but my father did so, as he did everything, in his own way. He threw himself into all he did, and that self was like no other.

As if he remained a Marine in civilian dress, my father had strong loyalties—strong because felt. His loyalty extended to the ideal of self-determination, which he embraced with the ardor of one who never took either its rights or its obligations for granted. For him, after all, the possibility of making a life of one's own came less as an inheritance than a discovery, a novelty at variance with the traditions of his elders, and he lived this possibility intensely. His father, married to a cousin, became an American citizen on paper. He himself became an American citizen in full.

Stewart Justman
2025