Auto Strips and Bonfires in the Boogie Down

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Thoughts on growing up on the BX during the 80s.

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I had two separate and distinct childhoods for part of my young and middle childhood and a part of my teen years. I lived in a wonderful place with lush green banana trees, coconut trees, root fruits and all kinds of food that grew above and below ground. It was like a little piece of heaven. There were mountains and rivers. Basically a great place to live.

For another part of that childhood and teens years I lived in an "urban jungle" a concrete jungle. Buildings for the view and cement and tar for walking. Trees, only to be found in small secluded parks or on the aqueduct, an urban sort of boardwalk that was built on top of an underground pipe that feeds water to NYC from a large reservoir and upstate source. Where once I walked barefoot, on red cool clay, I now had to wear shoes to walk on cement and tar to avoid getting cut by glass or worse be stuck by an addict's needle.

When I lived in my green "jungle" I had the care of two wonderful people, my mother's parents and her uncle. My world there was magical, innocent and beautiful. My world in my concrete "jungle" was bizarre.

I left the green lush world of Boriquen when I was eight. We came to live here to help my little brother who had chronic asthma and would have a better chance with NY hospitals. Even though I had been born in cement city and welcomed by the cruel misery of the boogie part of Gotham I was sent to live in Boriquen when I was five. My beginning, my formative years were spent there. It was not perfect there, we had drug users but they were not really too noticeable. There were little needles that littered the basketball court there by my school but at an early age I really didn't know what they were so my heaven remained a heaven unstained by that little blemish.

When I arrived in the boogie down and I saw where I had come to live, I could not believe my eyes. There was rubble everywhere. It was like someone had taken a sledge hammer and demolished all the buildings. I had come to visit my parents one summer when I was six but I really didn't notice this back then. Rubble everywhere, grey, and garbage littered the spaces where there was no grey. This was 1981. I was eight. My entire world was turned upside down. Like I had stepped into one of those magical wardrobes and arrived in a demolished concrete kingdom.

These memories came to me this morning perhaps activated by a vivid dream of a place very similar to the place I once knew. I dreamed I was somewhere with a fellow professor from the college where I teach on the weekends. For some odd reason she was telling me that she needed a medical book to give to her daughter who was studying nursing. I was talking to her about where to find the book but suddenly and inexplicably I left her house and went on a sort of "Alice in Wonderland" expedition where I found my self entering stores, leaving stores, walking and running and seeing people running in the streets in shorts and short shirts. They looked like they were running / jogging as opposed to running from something. At times it was raining at times it was not.

Then, still in my dream, I found my car. My little Korean SUV that I abuse on a daily basis driving my kids back and forth from school to work, work to home. Now reminded I need new breaks and an oil check (note to self).

When I got to my car, which was parked on a hill, I noticed that the right side car door was missing. I walked around and saw the skeleton of what was once my right side car door was on the ground directly next to the car as if waiting for its harvester to pick it up. I wasn't too angry but I was angry enough to start screaming judgmental comments about the people of the neighborhood. I was calling out to the air above that who ever did this was an animal and anyone who lived here was an animal. Garbage I called them and repeated it time and time again. My mother appeared suddenly and she engaged int he same banter. At one point there was guy sitting down the hill, near a car working with some thing car related and my mother immediately accused him of stealing from me. She got really angry and began to scream and curse at the guy. I began to try to calm her down but it was useless as this is how she is in real life so that only made the dream more vivid.

I woke up and realized it was a dream and I was relieved. Not just for the car because I need that to get to work. I was relieved because I no longer live in that world. Relieved because my beloved boogie down; still with all its current problems, is 100 times better now. Thirty-two years later, it is much better than it was back then. Back then a stripped car and fires were commonplace.

When a car was stripped it usually began with a barely noticed action. The first thing I would notice would be the car, missing tires, suddenly appear on the one way street on Davidson heading north off 181st street. First the car would appear on my way to school in the morning. Something I was quite used to. By the afternoon, on my return from school, the car was no longer a car but a skeleton of what once was a car sitting on top of cinder blocks. At that point it was useful as a child's toy for many of the neighborhood kids would use it to make believe they were driving. I don't think I ever participated in this activity as I was hardly allowed outside but for going to the store, church or school, or my mother's job at the laundromat on Burnside Ave. Sometimes I did sneak out to play with my friends from across the street (residents of the only other surviving building in the entire block). Then, the final fate of the poor vehicle would materialize. It would be lit and like a great bonfire the car would burn, flames high in the air and we would all come out to see the firemen from the Animal House firehouse on Jerome AVe. come out to do their duty. Perhaps never even imagining that this was probably a run in the middle of dinner or worse yet the one that interrupted that precious fifteen minute nap, or maybe even came in the middle of a nice quiet dump.

We would all stare at the firemen standing tall, large white men mostly, with these strange looking mustaches fighting the fire. Those weren't the only fires they fought in my neighborhood. There were fires often everywhere. Around me all the buildings that once stood majestic had all been demolished after the extensive insurance fraud perpetrated by the landlords in the boogie down. All the buildings, if not the majority, were burned down as insurance jobs. Instead of re-constructing after many years of standing vacant they were demolished, rubble not unlike a third world bombed area, left behind of the poor residents to gaze upon. One night a large Victorian, the last on on top of the hill, that sloped 181st, was set ablaze and we watched it burn slowly to the ground. Very sad that I didn't realize the value of the home and the beauty that must have existed inside until I grew up to have my very own 90 year old house.

What a shame that things went down like that. What a shame that greed and desire for money caused those landlords to do what they did. What a shame that people saw people of different colors moving in and instead of staying they ran out as quickly as possible.

Along with the middle class flight from that side of the boogie down went the quality of the living environment, the quality of the schools, and the resources available. I even remember how garbage was sometimes not picked up for what seemed like a long time. This is not a good thing int the summer time. Worms and rats just love this combination. Not good for humans.

When I got to 181st street it seemed it was still OK or somewhat decent. The neighbors in my building were responsible and looked out for each other's kids. They were really good at following the "no children allowed in the hall" rule so we were not allowed to play in the hallway or entrance to the building.

Then this little thing called crack appeared. That was the final blow the Bronx did not need. Like a beaten down drunk, punched right in the face with the huge fist of a bully. The drug that took down an large portion of a generation of people. Once crack came it was followed by AIDS a few years later and that just fulminated the living. We always had the dope addicts, although responsible for the HIV and AIDS epidemic, they really didn't bother you much since you could just push them and they'd fall to the ground. Crackheads were a different breed of people.

They were agitated, aggressive and willing to do whatever it took to get high. Now I had a new set of warnings I would have to heed as I walked past the rubble to my public school a few blocks away. Watch out for the creeper who hides under the stairs in the building. Watch out not to step on needles on the street. Watch out not to step on the rubber things on the ground. Watch out for the perverts who like to expose themselves. Watch out for the creepers in the vans who pick up little girls. Watch out for the skinny people who look all disheveled and exited because they might try to rob you. Watch out for the bullies who are always there, everywhere!

Watch out! Watch out! Watch out! I swear you never get rid of that vigilant spirit once you've grown up like that. I still lock my car door when I am passing a "questionable" neighborhood and I look everyone who passes me in the face, in case they turn around and attack me. Jeez!

My cousin had an apartment that faced the street so I was constantly over her place looking out the window. I found it fascinating how this woman on the corner who was always on the corner, cold, hot or otherwise, would take money from people, reach into her crotch area, and hand them small little somethings. I wondered what was in her crotch that she was selling and then one day my cousin told me to stop looking, that it was drugs and you don't want to be accused of snitching to the police. It was at that same window where I learned that if you saw the cops you had to yell out "AGUA" really loudly. I did this several times not really knowing what I was doing. Later on learning that it meant I was signalling to the drug dealers that the cops were coming.

Another time I was looking out my window which faced one of the rubble littered lots. This area was still covered by a building that was to be demolished. There were mattresses littered there. I saw a woman and a man come there and the man got on top of the woman and started moving up and down on top of her. I didn't really realize what they were doing then as I was still around 10 or 11. Now I know she was probably a prostitute who was turning a trick. My neighborhood, the concrete one, had those situations happening every day. Prostitutes also walked around picking up customers down on Jerome avenue. Once I overheard one arguing with a customer because he didn't pay her the last time they were together.

I can understand why someone looking from the outside like the firemen or the police or teachers or other people who only hear about the horrors on the news or movies would think we were all trash. I totally understand. But that is not the reality of those neighborhoods. Believe it or not the trash is the minority. The decent people are terrified and horrified at what the trash does and they hide in their homes and they hide their children and the work really hard everyday trying to survive and trying to save money to get the hell out!

Those neighborhoods still exist here in this great Gotham. Some of the bad ones became good ones. Some of the good ones became bad ones. The public housing here for the most part is an undesirable place to live, there is crime and poverty and gun violence and babies there sometimes don't live past five, lives cut short by stray bullets. Gang activity is rampant and the city does very little in terms of improving the living environment of the people who live there. Very few of the "projects" are a place anyone would ever want to live in. Meanwhile you have a small group of people sitting on the housing boards who oversee the money that is supposed to go toward improvements and safety and cameras. They all make six figures, get government provided cars and all sorts of government sanctioned benefits, while the housing residents sit and wait for months for a stove to be fixed or for asthma causing mold be removed.

This place we call Gotham and the world's greatest city really is incredible when it comes to class and money. You have billionaires sitting next to people who have fifty cents left until their next pay check on the subway everyday. The poor carried by the middle class. The middle class carrying the rich's tax abatement they get for "developing" the available "land."

I still live here. Albeit in a much nicer part. A part that was not really touched during those crazy years. In part protected by the mafia and caring citizens who stood up to the drugs and the crazy shit.

I think my dream came because I saw a picture a friend posted on facebook yesterday. He, a public servant, went into an elevator in a public housing building and the first thing he saw was excrement. Left behind, more probably than not on purpose, in the middle of the elevator. More probably than not human excrement. Of course I would imagine the first thought that could pass his mind would be how every single human who lives here must be an animal because only animals could live like that. Yet, dogs and cats and I assume other animals don't shit where they eat.

It is sad that this still goes on. It is sad that most people assume that the majority of people living in these buildings are living in luxury because they live in public housing, collect help from the government, live with the "baby daddy" and work off the books. That does happen, it really does. I have met and known people who do this. But, it is not all the peo0ple. Quite possibly the large portion of people are not like this trash.

Sometimes when I meet people who don't know where I come from they always assume that I went to Catholic School when I say I am from the Bronx since I became a prosecutor. There is an assumption that this would have been the only way for me to have survived, thrived and succeeded I am the product of the NYC public school system. I am a person who lived in a crazy little spot in the world, four corners located in the middle of shit, filth and scum. A person who lived in a crazy house with one crazy parent and the other abused by the crazy one. I made it. In my eyes there is no nature vs. nurture. Just pure will to survive.

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