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A JOY TO BE HIDDEN

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EXCERPT

I only began to really know my grandmother—and that word suggests too much, since as I learned more about her she only became more enigmatic—during the last month of her life. I first went to the hospital in September. She had already been there for two months, and I had no plans to go, only guilty, endlessly deferred intentions. I was very busy, and we never were close. When my mother asked me to visit, I was full of excuses. The hospital was in Brooklyn, two trains away and a walk. It would take me at least an hour to travel each way. I had my classes and I was also teaching, I needed that time to make some money to support my studies.

There was a long silence, so long I thought we might have lost the connection. Then I heard my mother's voice again. “I'm sending you a cheque for a thousand dollars so you don't have to work so much,” she said tersely.

“Go once a week.” It is embarrassing to admit that you visited your dying grandmother because you were paid to do so. We never discussed how long the visits would last, exactly how that thousand dollars broke down into hours of my time and the last hours of her life. It is ignoble, but I do not want to cover the last weeks of her life with any false claim of altruism or nobility. I went because I was paid, although after the first time, I would have kept coming anyway.

I lived on St. Mark’s Place, in the heart of the East Village. The street was legendary, but it was an accident that I landed there. I followed a roommate notice on a bulletin board at the university, and this is what I found. If I had lived in a different era I would have called it fate. The East Village was emerging past the notoriety of the eighties, though I still found people nodding out on my doorstep in the early morning who had been sitting there all night. On one side of the building was a nightclub, and we were lucky to live on the other side; our neighbours heard the bass thrum thrum thrum until the early hours, and in the late nineties, there was nothing but bass. We lived a few blocks from CBGB and around the corner from St. Mark’s Church. Those years held explosive performances and historic readings and epic literary apprenticeships and life-risking, live-saving encounters. I missed all of it, I was too dutiful. I was insufficiently seduced by the chance to squander my youth. Allen Ginsberg died that year, and even I was aware of that. He lived only a few blocks away from me. His last poem was a scribbled list titled "Things I'll Never Do Again." The list included exotic places where he would never travel or to which he would never return: Potala, Bali, Adelaide, the Sphinx at sunrise. But more moving were the mundane losses: the stairs of his 12th Street apartment, the graves of his family at Bnai Israel cemetery. He subtitled the poem “Nostalgias.”

Though it made no sense at all, I lived that period with a preemptive sense of nostalgia. Soon, after all, it would become the past. It seemed perverse to be nostalgic for the present, not only because I inhabited it, but also because everyone else was busy being nostalgic for the storied years of the seventies and eighties, for the city on fire. When I first arrived in New York it was already beginning to lose its edge, to become safer, more comfortable. The East Village was changing because of people like me, writers and artists and students living east of Third, and taking their first baby steps into Alphabet City. The week I moved in, I was welcomed by an anti-gentrification march down the street. It was not aimed at me directly but it might as well have been.

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