LOST LUSTRE:
A NEW YORK MEMOIR

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1 My Sixties

I CAN PINPOINT EASILY ENOUGH THE DAY THE 1960S LAUNCHED FOR ME: October 20, 1964. On that date, my mother pushed me into this world at Madame Kladaki's Psychoprophylactic Maternity Home, at No. 26 Bouboulinas Street, in Athens, Greece.

My parents had been criss-crossing Europe for several months in a small, dusty, blue, two-horsepower Citroën, while my father wrote articles for *Holiday* magazine, where he worked as an editor, based in New York. They ended up settling in Athens just before I was born.

But by the time my sixties began, that fall of 1964, my parents' sixties were already nearly ten years old, reaching back deep into the fifties—if the decade is framed not primarily by boundaries of the calendar but by personal points of reference. And I've found that by considering the sixties in this way, I also can mark the day the decade ended for me—as much as it ever can be said to end.

The magazine hadn't sent my father to Europe on assignment; he and my mother had yearned to go abroad, particularly to Greece. They had been inspired by Lawrence Durrell's writings about the country and by the late-night music at the Greek cafés that in the early sixties lined Eighth Avenue, and at the Café Feenjon, on MacDougal Street.

My father occasionally described those nightclubs, painting vivid images of the smoky, early hours, when bangled "Oriental" dancers undulated like wind-blown flames amid the skirl of *bouzoukis* and *ouds*, and men linked hands in snaking lines and did folk dances, and Greek customers flung dollar bills while he and my mother sat together and dreamed of a sun-drenched, peasant-dancing Greece.

All of America seemed to be dreaming of Greece in those years. Tourists flocked to the country as images and songs of Greece invaded popular culture: the 1960 hit film *Never on Sunday*, in which an American tourist tries to reform a Greek prostitute, had unleashed a rage for Greek music throughout the United States. Then came a spate of Greece-inspired films, like *Topkapi* and *Zorba the Greek*. My birth in Athens, across the world from those downtown nightclubs, was in large part the result of an early sixties American fad that had lured my parents, along with thousands of other tourists, to the Mediterranean.

My parents had planned to live in Sphakia, a traditional village on Crete, where my father would write a novel and my mother would care for me and wash grapes in the sea.

They lived in Greece for nearly a year, but they never reached Sphakia: my father was asked to return to the magazine offices in New York. And daily life in congested, alien, difficult Athens was not the idyll they had sought and expected. They returned to the States in wry disillusionment and carrying me, bundled in blankets, aged three months. They were both twenty-seven years old when our plane hit the tarmac at Kennedy Airport on the evening of January 27, 1965.

It was one thing to be twenty-seven then, but in 1967 my parents were thirty, a particularly awkward age to be amid the intensifying tumult of that time. I, for one, would not wish to be exactly age thirty when the slogan "don't trust anyone over thirty" came into vogue. My parents were caught in the crossfire of the country's generational war.

Still, many thirty-year-olds did experiment with LSD and pot, went to rock concerts like that at Monterey, in 1967, and Woodstock, in 1969. (My step-father, who was a year younger than my mother, did go to Woodstock at thirty.) But rock concerts, drugs—these weren't my parents' *bag*, to use a term of the day. They didn't wear far-out clothing—leather sandals, bellbottom jeans, peace medallions—although my father did abandon his 1950s razor-cut. He allowed his

hair to grow freely, until it flowed in thick black waves, flecked with premature gray, over his broad shirt collars; his sideburns sprawled down his jaw in luxurious swirls, like the muttonchops that men cultivated in the 19th century.

He had been forced by his magazine job to discard his army-surplus clothes for suits, but he adopted the hip styles—wide lapels, bold ties, vibrant shirts. My mother, too, wore the mod-but-mainstream fashions—short skirts, wide belts, vinyl boots.

Both my parents came from families with Old Left and bohemian traditions. They met in the mid-fifties, at Antioch College, a liberal campus in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

My mother generally cast a slightly amused and easygoing eye on life. At Antioch, she hung around with student actors, social outcasts, folkies. She considered herself a writer from a young age.

My father also was a writer—fiction, journalism, poetry, criticism, non-fiction. In the fifties, he grew a goatee (a serious statement during the era of the gray-flannel suit), lived in the Village, hitchhiked and drove jalopies across the country, worked odd jobs, froze in garrets, spent a year at the Sorbonne. He was a radical, fought for civil rights in the Deep South. But he, like my mother, could not relate to the drug- and music-based youth culture that later emerged. My parents considered the hippies muddle-headed kids they couldn't quite understand, even if they shared certain causes. As an old-school bohemian, my father scorned the hippies for lacking true intellectual seriousness and passion. He said that in the Village in the fifties you could identify people by the books they read in the cafés, not the drugs or music they were into. ("*Were you reading Bakunin or Rimbaud?*") He saw the 130-year-old, European bohemian tradition fade in Greenwich Village during the years 1957 to 1959, and he once remarked that those years were when *his* sixties began. But then, just when does an era begin and end?

Top: the author's father as a young bohemian in the 1950s; bottom: the author and his mother in Athens a week after his birth, in 1964.

For those older than I am, it may seem too facile to say my sixties opened the day I was born. For millions of Americans, the sixties began, grievously, shockingly, on November 22, 1963—the day President Kennedy was assassinated. But the date of my birth is the point here, because my birth, in late 1964, wedges me into an unusual position among Americans, just as my parents were in an unusual position forty years ago. While I am just too young to remember the sixties with any real clarity, I am just old enough to remember fragments of representative scenes beyond the crib and playground, and, more generally, to have deeply absorbed, largely through popular culture—records, films, television—the charged atmosphere of the period.

Most people I've met who are only a few years younger lack such specific memories and the more amorphous feeling for the mood of the late sixties, which make those years an integral part of who I am, even now. And those who are only a few years older than I retain more

Three albums of the sixties: top to bottom: "Cheap Thrills" (1968); "String Along with The Kingston Trio" (1960); "Recorded Live at Menachem Dworman's Café Feenjon" (1966).

detailed memories of the decade, which bind them more completely to that time. Like my parents, I am by birth caught between generations, but for me, the relevant decades are the Technicolor sixties and the gray seventies.

One friend, born in 1963, clearly recalls his mother telling him that the Beatles had broken up, an event I don't remember. Still, the Beatles—and through their conduit, so much of late-sixties popular culture—occupy an enormous part of the terrain of my early memories.

After my parents separated, in 1968, my mother brought me and my brother, who is two years younger (and who lacks memories of the sixties), to live in a housing development on the Lower East Side, where she played *Abbey Road* on the turntable until I had each of its lush, baroque, gracefully fluid melodies memorized. I also memorized the *Sgt. Pepper* and *Magical Mystery Tour* albums. The haunting, mellotron-laden psychedelia of "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" and the disorienting "I Am the Walrus," with its upside-down horns, inside-out

cellos, and erotic, surreal, mysterious lyrics, opened the door, prematurely, to the dark side of the adult world—LSD, rock music, sex—which I could only partly comprehend: I was still singing "If I Had a Hammer" in class and was only a little beyond books like *Peter Goes to School* and *Mr. Pine's Purple House*.

I saw the psychedelic, animated Beatles film *Yellow Submarine* and owned a toy metal yellow submarine. On my bedroom wall for many years were taped the four Richard Avedon photo-portraits of the Beatles and the jagged, photo-collage poster that was folded inside the 1968 *White Album*.

The Beatles were so omnipresent in my life, they were still current to me long past 1970. They followed me to Ohio each August. In the Cleveland suburb of Beachwood, in our uncle's big house perched on a green crest above the street, I would spend afternoons lying on my older cousin's bed in his attic room, listening to his Beatles eight-track tapes while reading through his stacks of comic books.

Those languid summer days the whole world might have been stopped in 1967, although our annual visits to Ohio didn't begin until 1969. I'd lie reading while outside the window the white homes and broad lawns stretched away below; in driveways rested Cadillacs, Buicks, and Chryslers, their chrome ornaments gleaming like mirrors, their tail fins issuing shimmering heat waves. The sun would slowly bake the roof above the sloped attic ceiling, warming the air until the wall planks released their sweet timber scent, and hot breezes brought whiffs of cut grass and gasoline fumes from the open garage below.

Those afternoons, New York dissolved away, and all the world became an endless suburb of white homes, sunk in the serenity of an eternal summer day, broken only by the lazy *pist-pist-pist* of unseen water sprinklers and the distant whine of a lawnmower's engine. But then I'd press a button on the tape player by the bed, and the Beatles'

electric, layered symphonies would burst from the speakers, joyously rending that silence, blasting me away from Beachwood into psychedelic visions of Penny Lane and Strawberry Fields. And while the Beatles led me with trumpets through musical dreams, I'd turn the inky, flimsy pages of my cousin's comic books. Their pages, strewn with ads for Charles Atlas bodybuilding courses and "X-Ray" Specs and collectible stamps, led me through different visions—visions of underwater kingdoms, of galaxies swirling with violet gasses and abuzz with lime-green rocket ships—visions from the comics' waning Silver Age, when today's computer technology wasn't even a mad scientist's pipe dream.

Eventually, those afternoons would end when the door, with the unused dart board hanging from it, would swing open and my teenage cousins, returned home from wherever they'd gone, entered the attic to read, talk, relax. They weren't quite hippies but they wore their hair long, smoked pot openly, wore colorful clothes, listened to rock albums with guitar feedback and LSD-inspired lyrics—all of which their parents (my mother's family) tolerated in an easygoing way.

That Beachwood house was sold many years ago, but in memory, I still return to that wood-planked attic, where the sixties lingered far into the seventies.

It was my step-father who had first brought us the Beatles. He was far more a part of, or at least receptive to, the sixties youth culture than was my father. He also brought to our apartment an acoustic guitar, bellbottoms, wild hair, and groovy clothes. He drove a sporty orange Fiat convertible, which a couple of years later he replaced with the car that I grew up with: a 1966, shadow-blue Bonneville Pontiac—a massive, low-slung, cruise-liner of a car with a ferocious engine, no air-conditioning, and hand-cranked windows. After the '73 oil crisis, when cars around us on the roads shrank, it was like a dinosaur among rodents, or a magnificent antique from a bygone, opulent age.

My step-father also brought, in addition to his Beatles albums, records like Janis Joplin's *Cheap Thrills* (with its grotesque and explicit cover artwork by R. Crumb), Jimi Hendrix, the Doors, and a lot of blues and jazz. These were added to my mother's folk albums of the Kingston Trio, the Weavers, and the music recorded live at the Greek nightclubs.

From the albums that lined our shelves, I internalized most of the popular-music fads from the previous two decades: the flavor of the Greek music, the working-class rage and laments of the Old Left, the sex, drugs, and peace gospel of rock—though the messages were often bewildering or only partially understood. And of course, I learned from the Beatles that all you need is love.

I spent much of my childhood in New York's epicenter of counterculture, St. Mark's Place, with my friend Jack, who lived there on the top floor of a tenement with his divorced mother and older sister. St. Mark's Place was New York's rough equivalent of Haight-Ashbury, with its gritty mix of hippies, drifters, artists, musicians, writers, counterculture celebrities, derelicts, and lost souls. Just down the block from Jack's tenement was the Fillmore East, where Hendrix, the Grateful Dead, and Jefferson Airplane had performed just a couple of years earlier. There were little bars and shops that sold peace buttons and beads and used clothing. Among those who had lived within a block or so from Jack in the sixties were Lenny Bruce, Abbie Hoffman, and Diane Arbus.

The sixties films, like pop songs, also sent complex messages for a young boy, and Jack and I saw many films at the St. Marks Cinema—a decaying venue that showed second-run double-features, with a long gash down the screen, bums snoring in the chairs, and blue clouds of pot smoke swirling across the flickering light beams of the projector. We saw all kinds of films that we shouldn't have seen; the ticket-takers never stopped us at the entrance. We saw the 1968 film *I Love You,*

Alice B. Toklas a couple of years after it came out. That film plunged me prematurely into the adult world of flower children, drugs, and sex, just as the Beatles' music and the album cover of *Cheap Thrills* had. I remember sitting in the dark theater and being disoriented, fascinated, and frightened.

That film probably was, along with *Easy Rider* (which I believe we also saw at the St. Marks Cinema), one of the quintessential sixties films, replete with pot-filled brownies, a white-clad guru, and a plot about a square lawyer who falls for a hippie girl in California and becomes a hippie himself, wearing a headband and beads. The film was, in fact, mildly skeptical of both hippies and squares, but such subtleties were lost on me. I only perceived that adults were projected on an enormous screen dressed as hippies—and if adults wore love beads and danced amid lava lamps, it all must be what adults properly did—and I assumed that I would, too, someday. Even forty years later, some part of me can't completely reject those love beads and lava lamps.

It's frequently been observed that centuries and decades don't begin and end when they properly should: the 20th century, it's been suggested, began on June 28, 1914, the date of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and ended on November 9, 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell. The sixties, for many, began on November 22, 1963, and ended on various dates: for some it was August 9, 1969, the day of the Charles Manson murders; for others it was December 6, 1969, at the bloody Altamont music festival; for still others it was January 23, 1973, the day President Nixon announced the agreement to end the Vietnam War. Another symbolic date: April 10, 1970—the day Paul McCartney publicly announced he'd broken with the Beatles.

(Their final recorded album, *Abbey Road*, closes with a song titled, almost too neatly, "The End.")

The point is that we know the atmosphere that characterizes a period cannot be wholly contained within the dates that mark our centuries and decades, and so we seek to impose order on, and gain insight into, history by identifying cultural milestones or certain meaningful personal memories as the "true" start or end of an era.

To be sure, the spirit and the pivotal events of certain decades, such as the twenties (boom) and thirties (bust), do seem, almost preternaturally, to fit within their proper periods. But, far more commonly, fixing decades on a zeitgeist is like trying to contain smoke in a wire cage. We know that the cultural and political upheavals and the atmosphere of the sixties did not begin on the morning of January 1, 1960, and end on December 31, 1969. They continued into the seventies, faded and changed as the seventies gradually took its own shape.

During the early seventies, the mood of the sixties remained particularly thick in Greenwich Village—I think of the bearded kids in sandals lounging on the grass in Washington Square Park or strumming guitars in Tompkins Square Park, and I remember the tenement apartments and SoHo lofts where my school friends lived with divorced mothers and their boyfriends, and which always seemed cluttered with pot plants and psychedelic wall-hangings and bongo drums and smelled of burning incense.

In 1970, I started first grade at a school in the West Village, a few blocks from my father's apartment. The school was progressive and "experimental," with "open" classrooms. We addressed our teachers by their first names, in true sixties' style. Our teacher was a young woman with long dark hair and glasses, whose name was Lucy, and I always associated her with "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds." My classmates were, of course, children of Greenwich Village parents, and in our class photograph we all have an abundance of hair. In 1972, a school

friend brought me with his family in their Volkswagen bus to a patch of grass by a highway outside Manhattan, where his blond parents—*real* hippies—decked out with headbands and bellbottoms, got high, a dog nosed around, and the song "American Pie"—dreamlike, grieving, angry, soaring—blared from a radio.

One pop-culture example of how the flavor of the sixties persisted into the seventies is *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In*, a comedy television program as emblematic of the sixties as any, with its flower children and girls painted with peace signs on their bellies, and its tagline, "sock it to me." The show's name itself was a play on the then-current term "love-in." The program, which NBC launched in prime-time in January, 1968, was among the most popular in America for a few years, but viewership dwindled after 1970, and it went off the air on May 14, 1973. (One could say the sixties ended on *that* date.) Jokes about flower power had become passé, but, nevertheless, three years had passed since the end of the previous decade. (NBC's *Saturday Night Live*, which premiered in October, 1975, has been described, rightly, as the seventies' version of *Laugh-In*, with the sixties program's zaniness weighted by post-Watergate cynicism and carrying a political explicitness that had not yet appeared on TV.)

When I attended college in the Midwest, in the early and mid-eighties, there were still discussions on campus about how the sixties' spirit was finally fading. There, too, it might be said, the sixties didn't quite begin and end when the decade should have, but, rather, ran from 1964 to 1978, the dates of the college's experimental educational plan.

As late as 1980, the sixties could suddenly resurge across America (and the world) as a potent cultural force—recall the intense grief that exploded following the murder of John Lennon, in New York, on December 8 of that year. I had spent so many hours communing with the Beatles at home and in that attic room in Beachwood, that Lennon's death felt like the loss of a companion of my childhood. Again, it could

be said that the sixties ended on December 8, 1980, just as the decade started with another murder, on November 22, 1963. But, finally, searches for symbolic boundaries for the spirit of a decade such as the sixties are futile exercises, since such periods never truly begin or end; they reverberate through subsequent generations, just as the Great Depression persists through the parsimony of survivors, or as the Old West lingers in Hollywood westerns, or as the 1950s lived on in our home through my mother's folk records. Like MacArthur's old soldiers, eras like the sixties never die, they just fade away. Even now, forty years after the sixties ended, crowds gather to sing Beatles songs in Central Park across from the Dakota, where Lennon was shot.

The atmosphere of the sixties—the street protests, race riots, civil rights marches, rock music, drugs—which I absorbed in the vague, yet astute and thorough way that young children always absorb their surroundings, is intertwined with the political issues of the period. And while I was far too young to properly understand politics, I already knew, in 1972, that I was a Democrat and that I supported George McGovern's campaign for president. I even wore a McGovern button.

All adults, from my child's perspective, considered McGovern to be Good, and Nixon to be Evil. This was Truth, because my parents, and seemingly all the adults in my world, said it was Truth. A child cannot distinguish among such fine concepts as the "lesser of two evils," which many voters considered the Democratic candidate. So I believed that everyone was emphatically "for" McGovern. But while the election was held in 1972, it was still in many ways a late-sixties-era political contest, and it was the foundation of my identity as a Democrat.

With McGovern as my first childhood political hero, how could I *not* be a Democrat when I reached voting age? Like our religion and

our sports teams, our political affiliations are usually passed down through family. These affiliations are bound up with deep tribal feelings of loyalty, affection, sentimentality and, often, of inertia: to change them requires a conscious effort of the will and often demands careful, logical, difficult thought about what are, at least partly, emotional issues. I never had a need, though, to rebel against my parents' liberalism. I like to think that I have thoughtfully examined the political issues and have come to a reasoned conclusion that I agree with many ideals of the Democrats and the sixties. After all, as the (seventies) song asks: what's so funny about peace, love, and understanding?

But I do know that to hold an allegiance to the Democratic Party solely because it was my parents' party would be absurd; to hold an allegiance to the Democrats decades later because of what it was in 1972 would also be nonsensical. Almost everything has changed—the candidates, many of the political issues, the world itself. Such an allegiance to the Democratic Party would ignore the complexities of the issues not only of the present, but also of the sixties. In a sense, though, I am not an Obama Democrat or a Carter Democrat or an LBJ Democrat. I am by sentiment a McGovern Democrat, who remains in the party admittedly, in part, for sentimental reasons.

Yet, despite all of this, I cannot fully embrace the ideals and culture of the sixties, and I attribute my ambivalence, like my attachment, to my awkward birth year, 1964. The date puts me on the border between the youngest of the Baby Boomers and oldest of so-called Generation X'ers, or Baby Busters, the generation that came of age in the seventies and eighties, disillusioned by the economic and cultural bleakness of those years in America. Like a citizen of two warring countries, I hold a dual allegiance. The sixties youth were rebelling against a post-war

America I hadn't known. As a boy among the hippies of the Village, I knew only the late rebellion, not its cause; knew only the strange and raucous new world created on the wreckage of an America I hadn't lived in. I was a little bundle just starting to be formed by the sixties when it all began to recede. And in truth, most of my clear memories begin at the precise end of that decade: 1970. As the pot smoke and the guitar strumming began to disappear from Washington Square Park, I sensed, although with only a half-conscious puzzlement, that the grown-up world around me was changing, was even rejecting the values I had been taught to embrace.

As an adolescent, I certainly did not consider myself a sixties' child; in high school, in the late seventies and early eighties, my friends and I scorned the small group of second-generation hippies who smoked pot in the nearby park, wore sandals and long hair. Their loyalty to sixties' ideals seemed pitiably naïve, comically outdated. We had embraced the angry nihilism of punk rock. Yet, even then, I intuited that my condemnation was a betrayal of a part of myself. The directly opposed outlooks of these two groups within the adjacent generations—love and peace; hate and violence—co-existed within me uneasily as I grew up. But at some fundamental level, my deepest affection was, and remains, for the world I knew in my earliest years, and my deepest identity is as a child of the sixties.

Today, the sixties are ancient history. Hippies are senior citizens, or nearly so. Generation X has given way to Generation Y and beyond. Adults in their twenties see the sixties as "History" in same way that I see the fifties as "History": they lack that childhood feeling for the period that makes it alive for you, part of you. And sometimes I sense the sixties are more intimately a part of me than even I can know. In

addition to the memory fragments that fasten me to the decade, there are also so many memories that lie submerged until something prods them to the surface. During a recent visit to the New York Transit Museum, I saw a city bus from the sixties, the same model that I had taken each day to and from elementary school, with the primitive fare-collection machine that let passengers' coins fall on a tray that the driver opened by pushing a lever, and which filled the bus with a *chank-a-chank* rhythm that always made me think of "Pick a Bale of Cotton," a song I knew from my mother's folk albums. I had forgotten, or thought I had forgotten, about that machine, that *chank-a-chank* rhythm, that old folk song. I've wondered how many such buried memories fasten me to that time like invisible cords. And I am bound by still older memories, memories so lost in earliest childhood that they will never fully resurface as specific images, will provide only vague and perplexing feelings of recognition for certain objects that I inexplicably associate with the sixties. These feelings are stirred up by the most mundane and unlikely objects, noticed in the briefest of glances—a wooden salad bowl on a wood table; a row of plants along a window sill; a hammock in a yard; a black-and-white television discarded on a curb; a typeface on a shop sign. On a fall day last year, I saw, in a side-street in the Village, a sun-faded sign propped in a dry cleaner's window, with a drawing of a young couple wearing fashions and hair styles that clearly dated from the sixties and which had apparently been sitting in that window for forty years. That image resonated within me the moment I saw it—possibly, I had seen it decades before, perhaps even in that same window.

Nevertheless, in looking back through my personal history, I find I can pinpoint the moment the sixties did, in a sense, end for me. It was, in fact, a day in the early seventies, though I don't recall the date or even the year, and I did not fully grasp the larger societal changes at work. It was not Watergate, or any other headline-making event, but

as is so often the case, it was a small and very personal incident that indicated something profound had altered in the world. One morning, my father emerged from the bathroom and as I looked at him I noticed something was different. I studied his profile as he stood at a table and went through some papers, and then I realized what it was.

"Why did you shave your sideburns short?" I asked.

My father thought a moment, then shrugged. "Fashions change," he said.

2. Farewell, Avenue C

2 Farewell, Avenue C

One day I was walkin' 'n'
Finally came upon a series of alphabet streets
A-B-C and D, but I went for "C"
The most of the hard-to-forget streets

—"Avenue C," Lambert, Hendricks & Ross (1957)

IN THE WINTER OF 1968, WHEN I WAS FOUR YEARS OLD, MY MOTHER BROUGHT my infant brother and me to a new housing development that had risen among the tenements of Avenue C, to start our new life.

She had separated from my father, who had moved to Greenwich Village, and whom we would thereafter visit on weekends.

Our family, until that winter, had lived near Gramercy Park, one of Manhattan's most pleasant middle-class neighborhoods. Our apartment building faced a row of four-story, Italianate and Greek Revival houses—the sort of sturdy yet graceful homes built in the 19th century by merchants and financiers for their sprawling families. There was a vest-pocket park nearby, with green wood benches and sylvan sculptures, where in the afternoons black nannies brought white children—and where our own nanny, a large-bosomed old southern lady we called Mike, brought us, wheeling my brother in a carriage.

As calculated by the map—that is, as measured horizontally—we had moved a distance of only about one mile: four long avenues and twelve short streets. But calculated vertically, we had plunged through the Heavens to a street somewhere in Hell.

At that time, all of Manhattan was suffering from the rising crime rates and financial strains that would plunge the city into crisis in the seventies; but the particular stretch of ruined tenements along Avenue C from Houston Street to Fourteenth Street was, like the South Bronx, disintegrating into one of the most violent and desolate ghettos in the country. The streets just below our windows were already the center of a burgeoning drug market, and in a few years they would become the heroin capital not only for New York City, but for the entire United States. A former Ninth Precinct officer, Edward D. Reuss, who began to patrol the neighborhood about a dozen years later, wrote:

> *The neighborhood had been given the notorious name "Alphabet City." Drug trafficking was out of control. The rubble of the empty buildings provided excellent cover for the sale of narcotics. The dealers had created a labyrinth of connecting tunnels through the walls and floors of the dilapidated tenements. They had placed booby traps in doorways and staircases designed to cause injury...There were so many junkies and coke addicts walking around…Drug dealers would often conceal sawed-off shotguns with shoulder slings under [their] coats. Under the street conditions in the 9th Precinct, the six-shot revolver just didn't cut the mustard. Backup guns were a must and most cops carried them. Double layers of Kevlar bulletproof vests were also commonly worn.… The presence of a marked police car made no difference to those legions of drug users who actually lined up on the burned out stairwells to make their buys…The area was later described in an official NYPD training bulletin as an "open air drug market."*

So what on earth were *we* doing there?

My mother always said, through all the years we demanded an answer to this question, that she had brought us with the expectation that the neighborhood was on the verge of being "gentrified." She clung to this belief for the fifteen years I lived there, despite all glaring evidence to the contrary: to my brother and me, any move to clean up Avenue C would be as futile as sending the NYPD to try to gentrify Hell itself. Still, in the long—the very long—view, her prediction proved prescient: the neighborhood *did* gentrify, though with excruciating slowness. We were in the vanguard of the forty-year gentrification process that is still going on: gentrification was what those towering housing developments were intended for when they were built, in 1967, and I suppose this purpose was achieved, to an extent. The buildings attracted other white, middle-class families, along with Puerto Rican and black professionals and their children, to those condemned tenements, vacant lots, bodegas, and garages. We lived, I felt, precariously, like isolated cliff-dwellers above a barbaric plain.

In truth, Avenue C was not only a lair for drug dealers, addicts, teenage gangs, and derelicts; it was also home for honest, struggling black and Puerto Rican families who ran small shops and businesses: along our block was a corner bodega, a hair salon, a candy-and-newspaper stand, and a bar. At the bodega, the two Puerto Rican proprietors sat at a little counter behind a bulletproof, Plexiglas stronghold. To pay for your groceries, you slid a bill or coins under a thin slot in the fortification. These middle-aged men were trying to scratch-out a living under conditions that must have seemed as deadly and as eternal as a medieval siege. If it had been possible, they probably would have dug a moat.

The Puerto Ricans and blacks had begun moving into the tenements in the fifties, as the old Jews began to die off or flee with their

Top: Avenue C, in Alphabet City, in the 1980s; bottom: Avenue C in 1976.

children to the suburbs. For a white, Jewish, middle-class mother and her two children to move *into* the Lower East Side at that moment in the city's history was absurd. The Latino culture that enclosed us was

utterly alien: we suddenly didn't understand the language of the people we lived among—the shop signs were Spanish; the stray pages of the *El Diario* newspaper in the gutters were in Spanish; the conversations along the streets—the men who drank beer on stoops wearing porkpie hats and flashing gold teeth, the women scolding their toddlers—were in Spanish. The kids who played on the stripped cars and in the water-gushers of the open fire hydrants in the summer shouted at each other in Spanish. The graffiti curses spray-painted on the tenements were in Spanish. Frenetic, tinny Latino music blasted endlessly from transistor radios, and the horns of the flashy pimp cars cruising by tooted "La Cucaracha." Bodega windows displayed dusty yellow packages of Bustelo coffee and cans of Goya beans.

All of this—the Latino culture and Spanish language, the desolation, the endemic carnage, the drugs and violence, along with our location at the very edge of the island, by the East River—coalesced to sever the neighborhood from its surroundings, from the city itself. No subway line ventured so far east; our block was near the terminus for two bus routes. Even the air smelled different here—a mixture of rot from the river, dust from the rubble of ruined buildings, and urine and beer from the gutters. On Avenue C, in an alien, savage region that clung, unwanted, to the periphery of the city, our family was trapped deep within a sort of double solitary confinement: a cultural isolation within a geographic isolation.

Our neighborhood fell within the old designation of New York's Lower East Side: the thousands of 19th century tenements that sprawled from Canal Street north to Fourteenth Street. Our immediate vicinity, north of Houston Street, has often been included as part of the East Village (a name that emerged in the late fifties), but when we arrived, the bohemian culture hadn't yet reached us—or rather, it had approached Avenue C in the late sixties and then receded. The eastern boundary of the East Village was still Tompkins Square Park, a large,

leafy square with bench-lined paths, a decaying, graffiti-covered band-shell, and basketball courts, lodged between Avenues A and B. In the sixties, the park drew Latinos, blacks, elderly East European immigrants, and hippies. In the seventies, the park became a haven for drug dealers, addicts, gangs. The paths were strewn with trash and hypodermic needles, the benches strewn with the homeless.

For me, the western edge of Tompkins Square Park—Avenue A—marked the border where, if you could reach it, civilization began. It was also, when I returned home on the city bus from elementary school in the Village each day, where civilization ended.

On that bus each afternoon, rolling eastward, the passengers would gradually exit, until we reached the park, and I would be alone among the rows of empty seats as the driver bore just the two of us through the increasingly decrepit tenements, the smashed pavements, the stripped cars.

And each day, as we passed the vacant, glass-strewn basketball courts along the edge of the park, my stomach would start to churn, my heart would start to hammer, and I would peer, from low in my seat, through the dirty windows, desperately hoping that the bus would reach my stop before I was seen by the gangs. My prayers on that empty bus each day were almost tearful entreaties for divine protection through that Valley of the Shadow of Death. And my fears were not the wild imaginings of a young boy: there *were* terrors outside. If the gangs spotted me, they would run beside the bus with their sticks or chains, grinning up at me, then wait for me to step off, as I had to, even as I knew what would come. Then they would rob me while the bus driver, who saw it all, would snap closed the doors at my back, and drive on.

The dangers were not only teenage gangs, but also adults. One winter twilight as I sat alone on the bus, which the driver had idling at the traffic light a block from our building, the door was suddenly

struck by a force that rocked the vehicle like an explosion. Then, a second strike, a second thunderous crash. Outside, a man was shouting with insane fury. I saw through the glass doors a tall, gaunt man—a pimp in a long fur coat, his face half-hidden beneath a broad, feathered hat—was demanding the driver let him on, and had kicked at the doors with his boot. The bus driver's frightened stare darted from the pimp to the red traffic light, which seemed never would change to green. I silently implored the driver: *please don't let him on the bus, don't let him on,* while the pimp raged through the glass, pummeling the door with his fists. Then, with a final kick, he struck with such force that the glass shattered and collapsed, and the driver, in panic, gunned the bus away through the red light, blasting the horn, scattering traffic.

The driver, a mountain of a Latino man, had been as frightened as I was. Where could a boy turn for protection in this wilderness?

I didn't fully realize we were living on Avenue C until a couple of years after we arrived. My first memory is of walking home from the bodega holding, in one hand, a paper bag with a quart of milk and, in the other hand, a few coins in change from the dollar my mother had given me to buy it. As I neared our doorway—a modern, glass-enclosed vestibule—three Puerto Rican boys holding sticks appeared around me, blocked my way.

They demanded something, but their words made no sense.

"What's in th' bag?" one said in English.

Another of the boys prodded the bag with the end of his stick. I moved to push past them. Instantly, my hair was seized from behind, I was grabbed from all sides.

"Give us th' bag!"

"What ya got in ya hand? Money?"

Sticks crashed on my neck, my head, my back, a furious rain. Fingers tore at my eyes.

"Give ovah th' bag, maricon!"

"Yo! White boy! Let go of th' bag!"

A final blow on the back of my head. I went down. The bag was wrenched away.

When I sat up, the boys were running around a corner, holding their sticks like spears.

I sat on the pavement looking down Avenue C—this broad street of tenements that I did not know, that I was seeing for the first time.

I ran to our building and rode the elevator to our apartment.

"Some people don't have all the things we do," my mother explained. "But you shouldn't have fought them. If it happens again, just give them what they want. They could have really hurt you."

Such sensible words from my mother, who acted so insensibly! Well, there you were: a quick but effective introductory lesson in Evil and Poverty. Until that day, I had no fear, I had no awareness of where I was. After that day, I knew *exactly* where I was, and as the muggings continued, my days became a continual terror.

It is difficult for me to convey the intensity of that terror—the deep sense of being trapped in the center of a labyrinth of perils. The only person I know who can fully understand it is my brother, who is two years younger.

The terror was not only acute, but chronic; it churned my insides every day, from the moment those three boys attacked me with sticks nearly until I left for college, at age eighteen.

The panic intensified each year, with each mugging, before diminishing during the final few years I lived there. Shortly before I left

Avenue C, I tallied up the number of times I was mugged and reached more than a dozen. I can no longer remember all, or even most, of the incidents. What remain are a few particularly nightmarish moments: I'm with a friend on a basketball court near an abandoned factory, while three young men hold knives to our necks and cars whiz by a few yards away on the FDR Drive; I'm in a tenement hallway, pinned at knifepoint to a wall, watching a neighbor's son violently struggling, until his captor waves a blade in his face and shakes his head warningly, "no"; I'm racing home, pursued by a half-dozen kids with sticks, am caught just outside our glass lobby—I swing at them until I'm beaten down and lose consciousness…

Usually, though, I wasn't badly hurt. They would order you to empty your pockets, then might strike a parting shot or two, shove you, kick you, humiliate you: look you in the eyes while they spat on your face, cursed you (and always your mother), cursed your whiteness, in both Spanish and English, for good measure. *"What'd ya say t'me?"* one of the kids would demand as a pretext for smashing a fist into your face, slamming you back against a wall. And then came the sharp pain when your head hit the bricks, and the dirty faces and broken pavement would begin to lurch. *"What'd ya call my mutha? You call my mutha a whore? Maricon! White muthafucka!"*

To sharpen your humiliation, they often put forward the smallest kid, some kid smaller than you, who battered you, spat at you, cursed you, grabbed your money, while the older kids—often nearly grown young men—taunted you to fight back: *"Hijo de puta! Hit 'im back! Why don' ya hit 'im*!"

"Dame los chavos carajo!"

"Hijo de puta!"

But it wasn't the pain of the blows or the humiliation or the racist hatred that caused the true terror. It was the sensation of being on your way to somewhere—the bodega, or the bus-stop, or a friend's

apartment—and suddenly spotting those kids—perhaps just two, or perhaps a throng of more than a dozen that seemed to fill the entire street. You'd see them striding at you, or tailing you, in their worn sneakers and cheap coats, their stares fixed on you, and you would know, at the instant your eyes met theirs, just what was going to happen, inevitably. And then you'd be abruptly ringed by those deadened stares from those dirty faces, while standing in some broken, deserted street, or forgotten alley, or vacant playground, immeasurably distant from any aid or sanctuary. You were at the farthest edge of the world, as alone as it was possible to be. In those stares you saw that your life, and their *own* lives, were worthless to them. These kids knew they were fated to wander those streets until they were taken away by prison or death, and some of the older kids had already been locked up. The stares surrounding you reflected all the desolation of those streets, those destroyed cars, broken windows, crumbling tenement walls. Encircled by these dead stares, with a knife or heavy chains or a baseball bat in your face, the insane panic that rose in your throat was that of facing imminent death. And that was the real fear: you never knew how they would leave you. And I believed, each time I left our building, for fifteen years, that I might be murdered, tortured, maimed.

While in retrospect, it was unlikely I would have been killed, this fear, on Avenue C, was not far-fetched. They threatened you with death: *"Give us what ya got or we cut you up, white boy."* Once, a black kid, no more than seven or eight years old, standing in a gang that had surrounded me, slyly smiled and revealed to me a pistol, pulling it from his coat.

The evidence of violence and cruelty was everywhere. At night, guns of various calibers boomed and cracked through the streets below. In the day, we found bullet casings in the gutters. Dogs were tortured, squealing and shrieking in the night. I once discovered, as

I cut through a weedy lot on a summer afternoon, the corpse of a pup, its legs bound with electrical cords, its fur charred, its eyes boiling with maggots. In the gutters lay rows of stripped cars—windows shattered, tires gone. Cars, like dogs and tenements, were set afire, and their charred remains sat for months. When a nearby factory was demolished, the newspaper reported that a woman's skeleton had been discovered chained to a pipe. In the lobby of our apartment building, my brother and I, coming home one afternoon, found the glass walls spattered and dripping with blood, the floor covered in dark bloody pools. So when kids with dead eyes threatened to kill you and waved a knife in your face, it was not a joke.

I never carried a weapon, but my brother carried a number of them from age fourteen to eighteen—a chain, a knife, Mace canisters. Like me, he was mugged, beaten, nearly stabbed. (He wrote me: "I remember getting sadistically tortured in public by three kids—two brothers and a sister, who took turns beating me up.") He attended the local high school for a year, and one day came home and said that a corpse that had been sawed in half had been discovered in the garbage outside the school.

Where were the police, our neighbors, our parents? In my memory, adults or police never aided us. I remember, once, my brother and I ducked into a toy store owned by an elderly couple on Fourteenth Street, to evade a few kids who were tailing us. From the street, right outside the shop's glass door, the boys grinned at us, taunted us, mockingly urged us outside. We pleaded with the elderly couple to phone for the police or our parents, and while they clearly saw the kids outside their door, they merely shrugged, with that closed-off, shopkeeper air, and said we could not stay there, we had to leave. And of course, the moment we stepped outside, we were attacked and robbed.

As for our parents, my brother and I eventually realized that our mother and step-father could not grasp the depth of our sufferings.

After all, our housing development was modern and pleasant, we seldom came home with more than a few welts and bruises, and violent crime was mostly confined to youth gangs, the elderly, and junkies; adults such as my parents, who spent little time on the streets (they drove through it in our old Pontiac), were generally left alone. Our step-father, a doctor, seemed to brush aside our complaints, and our mother replied in an exasperatingly distant way to our demands for explanation. As the years passed, three younger step-siblings arrived, and they, too, came to hate and fear our neighborhood, and raised cries to leave.

On weekends, when my brother and I visited our father and step-mother, we appealed to them, asked why we were trapped in that slum, and though they urged our mother and step-father to get out, relations between the households were strained at best, and their urgings were futile.

To say I was mugged a dozen times over the course of roughly as many years is misleading, because it was the countless occasions that I avoided being attacked, that I spotted the danger and skirted it, which contributed to the sense of traversing a battleground and sharpened the sickening panic when I left the apartment for the bodega or got off the bus from school.

Each day, when my brother and I walked through the neighborhood, we scanned every street before entering, scanned every face for signals of danger. The scan had to be instantaneous to avoid confrontation or engagement, and your own expression had to remain unreadable, a blank iron-mask for the panic that roiled your guts and made your hands tremble in your pockets. You learned to discern danger instantly by the eyes—those peculiarly malevolent,

deadened gazes that became so familiar you could recognize them in a glance of less than a second. But often, even by the time you read their gaze, it was too late: they had also read yours.

When you walked, the stride was remarkably subtle in its unconscious calculation: purposeful but relaxed, confident but not a swagger, eyes locked ahead firmly at some distant point, never seeming to be uncertain of where one was headed. It all was meant to send an extremely specific message—that you knew your way around and weren't frightened, but you also weren't looking for trouble.

Our clothes were dull, non-descript, meant to avoid notice and any suggestion we had money. We camouflaged with grays and browns, the same colors as our slum, animals camouflaging against predators. The money we did carry was hidden in our sneakers or gloves, with a small amount carefully reserved for our pockets, to mollify attackers.

My brother and I eluded danger by crossing streets, backtracking, looping around blocks, darting into bodegas and doorways. As we walked, we would arrange, with a murmured word or two, a place to meet—a certain bus stop or a certain corner—if we had to run different ways or were separated. A few blocks later, we would arrange a new place. I don't recall that we ever had to split up and meet at one of our arranged places, but in the back of my mind I always thought that if we ever did become separated and my brother didn't show up at our designated place, it meant they'd taken him, done something unimaginable. And there was a comfort in knowing that if I was captured someone would know to search for me.

We confined ourselves to a few familiar routes: most of the surrounding streets we *never* would venture through, especially after dark, when the neighborhood became even more nightmarish. From our tower, we looked down at those tenements with their windows glowing dully behind worn curtains, heard in our beds the gunshots,

the bird-whistles of the drug-dealer "lookouts," the drunken Spanish arguments on the corner outside Marvin's bar. We watched the prostitutes trolling the empty avenue and the fights with broken bottles and knives. Then, somewhere after midnight, quiet settled on the neighborhood. Avenue C stretched empty under the streetlights, except perhaps for some wandering shadows. An occasional car or delivery truck rumbled by on the old Belgian paving stones that had resurfaced through the tar. Cockfights were held, and each dawn, the incongruous crowing of a rooster or two pierced the silence of our sleeping ghetto.

Some nights, during the quiet hours, arsonists would torch a tenement, and the flames would shoot up into darkness while the occupants streamed down fire escapes. Fire trucks would arrive with wailing sirens, and families, standing in the street in nightgowns, underwear, and blankets, would be trucked off to shelters.

The next morning, on the way to school, you'd pass the blackened hulk and its burnt odor. During the months afterward, the charred building would stand beside all the others that had also been burned for insurance, their rows of windows gaping blackly, or covered with cinder blocks, bricks, or sheets of tin, the doors painted with large, mysterious, vaguely biblical, yellow X's. The labyrinth of scorched ruins resembled an opera set for some war-ruined, 19th century European city.

The condemned buildings would stand for years, becoming defaced by graffiti, their warrens of unlit stairs, halls, and rooms infested by junkies and derelicts. Wreckers might eventually arrive and knock down one of the buildings, leaving perhaps a ruinous, free-standing wall or two, surrounded by yet another vacant lot of rubble, which would soon become home for cast-off shoes, refrigerators, broken dolls, old tires, entire wrecked cars, newspaper pages, beer bottles, syringes, and stolen purses and wallets that had been picked clean and discarded. Over years, tall trees would grow among the weeds. Kids would play in the trash, and gangs would hang around in these

wastelands and size you up as you walked by. In these lots, where no police ever seemed to appear, life was debased nearly to the incarnation of Hobbes' nightmare-vision of primeval man in the state of nature, to the anarchy before the emergence of civilization:

> *…during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man….*

When I first read that passage in *Leviathan*, in a study hall in college, the images of those vacant lots sprang vividly to my mind.

The worst aspect of life during such times, Hobbes notes, is the "continual fear, and danger of violent death…" And that certainly was true for me.

From the view of those kids in the vacant lots, however, Hobbes' other corollary was the truth:

> *To this warre of every man against every man, this also is consequent; that nothing can be Unjust.*

Almost as if to illustrate this, my brother wrote me:

> *At age 14, I was in a street that was deserted and a kid told me it was a "stick up" and took my coat and wallet. He was actually not such a bad kid and he made it clear that it was simply an issue of someone with too little taking a little from someone who had more.*

Violence and hatred are begotten in their victims. My pent-up rage burst out at school, where I continually got into fights, swinging wildly until some poor, dazed kid was lying bloody beneath me and I was

pulled away. I knew school was a safe arena: here, the kids weren't carrying weapons and adults would intervene.

Occasionally, though, even on Avenue C, I did fight back, if the odds looked reasonable: more than once, I simply shoved aside kids who demanded my money.

There were, thankfully, reprieves. On weekends, when we visited our father and step-mother, we savored the leafy lanes of townhouses, the cafés along Bleecker Street, the cozy, subterranean restaurants. But on Sunday evenings, the bus, like Charon's ferry, would always bear us back to our own neighborhood.

I spent as much time as I could away from the neighborhood with my friend Jack, who lived on St. Mark's Place. Or I went with schoolmates to their apartments in the Village or played baseball after school in Washington Square Park.

The greatest respite came each August, when my mother and stepfather took us on vacation. We traveled the country by car and visited my mother's relatives in the suburbs of Cleveland.

There were also the long summer days, particularly in later years, when our street took on an almost homey feel. Ragged garments fluttered on laundry lines strung across the tenement airshafts; the "Mister Softee" ice-cream truck with its familiar musical bells rumbled by on the paving stones; a Puerto Rican man selling "snow cones" sat on a folding chair at a corner beside his cart, which held a block of ice and his row of colored bottles with their syrupy flavors; men and women smoked on the stoops listening to the tinny music on transistor radios while half-naked children played in water gushing from the opened fire hydrants, and shirtless men tinkered with their cars. On days like these, the danger abated, like a quiet day in No-Man's Land, and you felt almost free to walk around. But the respite always ended, eventually, with that blow to the face and that ring of deadened eyes.

During the late seventies and early eighties, the muggings became less frequent and then stopped. In part, I was nearly a man, and the teenage gangs left me alone, and, too, as gentrification finally began to take effect, crime in our neighborhood slowly declined. We noticed that new cafés, restaurants, shops, clubs, bars, were appearing farther and farther eastward.

In high school, I adopted the styles of clothes worn by my art-student and musician friends—I bought an old military overcoat in a thrift shop and plucked a pair of black leather boots from a St. Mark's Place boutique. I wore everything black. But while the menace of our streets had somewhat abated, I wore these clothes with anxiety for the quick attention they always drew on our block. Sometimes, going out at night, I carried my coat under my arm until I had left our neighborhood behind.

The last time I was attacked came just a few weeks before I left for college. I was walking home very late at night, after visiting some friends. As I passed a drug-sentry standing on a stoop, I saw a man staggering toward me under the streetlights. From habit, I braced myself as we came beside each other—and he did abruptly pitch toward me, with sudden violence. He grabbed me, held me almost in an embrace, and began pounding me with his fists even as he tried to hold me, groaning. I thrust him off angrily and he fell to the pavement. He lay cringing, covering his face with his hands against the expected blows. And in my anger, I wanted to kick him, to beat him, to cause him pain. But seeing him lying helplessly, I instead quickly walked away. And as I began to walk, I heard him cry after me in a ludicrous, unrepentant threat, *"Yeah, y'bettah run! Y'bettah run, muthafucka!"* And I heard behind me the echoing laughter of the sentry on the stoop.

The significant gentrification that my mother had for so many years predicted arrived too late for us.

In January, 1984—fifteen years after we arrived on Avenue C and just four months after I had left for college—the NYPD finally *did* move to gentrify Hell itself, with "Operation Pressure Point," a concerted campaign to eliminate the street sales of heroin and other drugs, which brought hundreds of police and undercover detectives to the area. Drug-sniffing dogs appeared and helicopters hovered over the roofs. The Law attacked the very center of the drug market: the streets a few blocks south of our apartment building. The police began sealing off the vacant tenements used for drug deals or as "shooting galleries" and erecting fences around the vacant lots.

The impetus for the campaign was reported as coming from the appointments of a new Police Commissioner, Benjamin Ward, and a new federal prosecutor, Rudolph W. Giuliani. "Both men wanted to make an impression and neither was adverse to positive publicity," *The New York Times* explained in an article about the operation that was published in February, 1984, one month after it was launched. The article described how entrenched the drug economy had become:

> *For the last decade, in scores of abandoned tenements on Manhattan's Lower East Side, drug dealers have flourished openly, serving buyers from throughout the region. The marketing system in what police described as the retail drug capital of America was so well organized that dealers employed local children as lookouts for $100 a day and used pregnant women to move drugs from one location to another. Drugs were so much a part of the community that*

addicts injected themselves openly in vacant lots and dealers used buckets to transfer drugs from their window to a buyer on the street below.

Last week, the streets of the Lower East Side were deserted, particularly the area known as Alphabetville, between Avenue A and Avenue D, from Delancey to 14th Streets. No longer were teen-agers steering out-of-state drivers to dealers' dens in abandoned buildings owned by the city. Gone were the queues of addicts buying drugs on the street.

...Operation Pressure Point, as it is called, ended its first month with officers having made 1,780 drug-related arrests, 607 of which were felonies. Robberies in the area dropped by 48 percent.

By January, 1986, the *Times* was reporting:

In two years, the operation's officers have made 17,000 arrests on the Lower East Side—more than 5,200 of them for felonies—and have seized 160,000 packages of heroin, 32,000 tins of cocaine, 16,000 bags of marijuana, 10,000 hypodermic instruments and more than $800,000 in cash.

But it was a long, tough battle. Meanwhile, a movement within the neighborhood had been intensifying since the seventies to reclaim the streets. Squatters, punks, skinheads, artists, musicians, and political activists began to move into the vacant tenements, and each year, new cafés, clubs, and galleries appeared. Real estate developers returned to the area, began to renovate the tenements. The gentrification—the rising rents, the eviction of squatters—led to protests and battles over

the future of the neighborhood, culminating in a riot at Tompkins Square Park in August, 1988. But I was long gone by then.

The gentrification also came too late for my brother, who left the city the same year I did, to start a new life in the West. My mother, then in her forties, was diagnosed that year with multiple sclerosis, a disease that had already been deleting her memory and would soon confine her to a bed in a nursing home. Like us, she did not enjoy the gentrification she had so long predicted. Shortly before she entered the nursing home, when she was feeble and forgetful, she, too, was finally victimized—robbed of the coat she was wearing as she walked her dog outside our building.

While I left Avenue C in 1983, the effects haunted me for nearly twenty years.

When I arrived at college—a tiny campus tucked away among Wisconsin farms—I was utterly disoriented. On the campus lawns and in the classrooms, I mingled with students who played golf, wore bright clothes, spoke loudly with sublime confidence that their voices would not attract—as I unconsciously feared—a knife-wielding gang into the quad. I despised my classmates as naïve and "soft"—they wouldn't last an hour on Avenue C. And yet, I also envied them, because I still could not speak loudly, wear bright clothes, walk those bucolic lanes without my intricate, self-defensive stride. In my mind, I was still on Avenue C, had brought it, intact, to Wisconsin.

I sometimes bolted awake in my dorm room from nightmares that were always the same: I am running through a bleak region of ruined towers, destroyed playgrounds, empty lots, pursued by kids, teenagers, young men, raging, swinging chains, firing guns. I run through streets, across tenement roofs, along hallways of abandoned buildings,

and everywhere are strewn corpses—naked, bloody, dismembered corpses of entire families, casualties of endless gang wars. I'm lost, frantically searching for our apartment building or an escape from the ghetto, but the wreckage, the corpses, stretch forever. Sometimes, it's daylight—the sky hangs gray, as oppressive as the concrete devastation—or it is night, and then I'm down among those fire-blasted hulks toward Houston Street, the center of the heroin market, those streets I had seen so many years from my high window and where I would never venture. There, I'm running among ruined walls that loom darker than the night itself, rows of windows gaping blackly, while gunshots crack and echo. I hide in silent hallways, in moonlit rooms strewn with the dead, and then I'm again outside, running, running…

And then I would wake—and brush it from my mind as only a dream. I didn't reflect on the nightmares until years later, when I woke one night so shaken that I finally realized I had been having such dreams for more than a decade. They persisted until I was in my thirties, returning every few months. Other after-effects—the inability to wear certain clothes or speak without inhibition or walk in a relaxed way—also endured until I was in my thirties. I could not enter any street that appeared even remotely threatening without severe anxiety and a habitual scanning of everything around me. I could not pass a group of blacks or Latinos without a jittery stomach and a clenching of my fists, poised to run or fight. When I met my wife, at age twenty-four, I could not hold her hand on the street—even the most residential street—without fear of appearing "soft," a target for gangs.

When I saw the 1930 film *All Quiet on the Western Front*, depicting trench warfare in the First World War, I instantly recognized the shivering fear of the soldiers huddled in the trenches before leaping into No-Man's Land. It brought back the gut-twisting panic I felt running home across the street from the bus stop or dashing to the bodega

for groceries. In fact, I probably had a textbook case of the illness suffered by war veterans termed "post-traumatic stress disorder":

> post-traumatic stress disorder *n. An anxiety disorder arising as a delayed and protracted response after experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event involving actual or threatened death or serious injury to self or others. It is characterized by intense fear, helplessness, or horror lasting more than four weeks, the traumatic event being persistently re-experienced in the form of distressing recollections, recurrent dreams, sensations of reliving the experience, hallucinations, or flashbacks, intense distress and physiological reactions in response to anything reminiscent of the traumatic event…*
>
> (*A Dictionary of Psychology*, Oxford University Press, 2006)

Still, the survival skills, the habitual, animal-like awareness that my brother and I developed on Avenue C came to my aid in later years, when working in foreign cities as a journalist. I often ended up walking through poor neighborhoods late at night, and several times I shook off pursuers—I was again a target, now, a rich American. But I spotted them far faster than they knew, and even acquired the dangerous vanity of pride in my street smarts. One evening, a decade after I left Avenue C, I noticed two young Russian toughs in leather jackets walking toward me on an empty street in Moscow, and I recognized in their pale faces that locked, predatory stare so clearly distinguishable from any other expression. I backtracked and ducked into a pharmacy before they turned the corner, then watched them pass outside the window and saw their puzzled faces as they searched the crowds. I knew more tactics of evasion than they could ever guess. And I sent

them off with a silent, scornful dismissal: *Go find another American to rob, you Russian bastards—I'm from Avenue C.*

For many years, I avoided Avenue C. I remained bitter at my mother and step-father for setting up house on that Lake of Fire and remaining while their children suffered. When we cried, "Why can't we leave?" my mother's prediction of the coming gentrification was always so weirdly calm and enigmatic that I sometimes searched for a Purpose to this bleak tale, some meaning to my mother's oracular blindness: Why that mysterious inertia? Why that exit, after fifteen years, at exactly the instant when the police came marching in?

I occasionally read about the neighborhood, which in the eighties began being called "Alphabet City" or "Loisaida." I read about the continuing gentrification and the attendant battles among police and squatters and protesters. I became aware that my old neighborhood had become world famous not only as a crime zone but also as a mecca for youth culture: its streets served as a locale for TV cop-shows and was the subject of rock songs, even of the Broadway rock musical *Rent*, about struggling artists and bohemians, which was set only one block from our apartment, in the late eighties.

Magazines and newspapers began describing the eighties in Alphabet City as ancient history, which, given the vast changes, I suppose it was. In an article in the *Times* about the improvement of the neighborhood that appeared in February, 2008—almost exactly twenty-two years after its description of the then-two-year-old Operation Pressure Point—the paper reported:

> *Few parts of New York City have undergone a more rapid and drastic physical transformation over the past 20 or 30 years*

than the area below East 14th Street known broadly as the Lower East Side. In the 1970s and '80s the neighborhood was a gritty and often dangerous district where the population was dwindling and businesses were gradually being shuttered.

Although the area is now bustling, filled with pricey apartments and a variety of restaurants and bars, 20 years ago entire blocks east of Avenue A consisted of little more than rubble-strewn lots.

… The empty lots are no longer empty, and the abandoned buildings have been razed or rehabilitated.

Last August, I happened to be with my son not far from Avenue C, and on an impulse, I took him to see our old apartment building.

As we walked along the avenue that afternoon, I discovered that the neighborhood had improved almost beyond recognition. We passed new shops, groceries, restaurants, a modern dental-care center. The vacant lots where gangs and junkies once roamed were now community gardens, or the sites of new apartment buildings. Nearly all the tenements had been renovated; the spindly trees that lined the streets of my youth were now tall and broad. The fear and savagery that had once clutched this avenue had vanished. People were calmly shopping for fruit at a grocery; a deliveryman was wheeling a stack of boxes into a new supermarket without any sign of alarm; a young white man wearing preppy shorts and a polo shirt was walking a retriever on a leash while chatting on a mobile phone.

After I pointed out our old tower to my son—still exactly as I remembered it—we walked south, past the familiar blocks and then

farther, toward Houston Street, along those streets that I once would never have walked, that had troubled my sleep for so long—those ruins I saw from our apartment, their dark windows, their walls echoing with gunshots and the shrieks of tortured dogs. And now, walking those same streets, the sky a flawless summer blue, the people going about their business in the daylight, the scene was bewildering—as though the sun were a flashlight shining into a dark cave I had so long feared and now discovered was just an empty hole, after all.

We turned off Avenue C and into Second Street, the old dark center of the drug market itself. As I strolled with my son along this pleasant street, I suddenly realized I was holding his hand without fear. And I knew then that I could truly bid farewell to Avenue C: I knew that, at last, I had left it behind.