

THE OTHER PLAGUE

One plague begets the memory of another.

It's 1951, maybe 1952 and I'm four or five. We are moving to Manhattan Beach, Brooklyn. What will ultimately become Mecca for the well-heeled, is the site of housing for post war veterans. Rows of quonset huts line the once empty beach landscape. As a veteran, my father qualified to enter his name into a lottery for newly constructed housing in Brooklyn. The news that his was one of the lucky numbers was met with momentary disbelief followed by unbridled excitement...at least by my parents. Eager to move up in status and out of my grandparents' apartment in the Bronx, my parents were packed before my father finished reading the letter announcing that he was a winner. There was no sadness in leaving the only home I'd known. It wasn't allowed. Once gone there was no looking back. My parents, my sister, and myself had no sense of a before. Our lives were in motion.

Raggedy homes pass in slow motion outside my backseat window. My father meanders through littered streets en route to the next rung of life's ladder. After much cursing and misguided turns we arrive at a community of flat nondescript buildings. This is the site of our new home.....Manhattan Beach.

All the families are cookie cutter in composition...behind each door that dots the hall is a veteran father, stay-at-home mother and two/maybe three children. There is the occasional oddity of a single mother widowed by the tragedies of war.

My displeasure about the move is palpable and I have no reluctance in spreading it. My frown stubbornly refuses to reconfigure into a smile.

"The hall smells yucky."

"What are you talking about"

The edge in her voice lets me know she's not pleased with me. This is okay since that's the effect I'm looking for. I am purposely looking to be a "burr in her saddle."

"You know...like in Grandma's building. The halls always smelled of chicken soup."

Mom holds onto her edge. "This is not grandma's building."

"I'm not stupid!! I know it's not grandma's building but that doesn't mean it can't smell of chicken soup."

Mom's look makes it clear...discussion over.

It takes me little time to figure out that what I am sniffing is energy, kid's energy. There are kids here, not just grandparents. No urging is necessary for me to fuse with this frenetic mass. Running in and out of each other's apartments, we are a singular force declaring the next generation has arrived. At dinner time, where you are is where you eat. An extra plate, a holler down the hall, possibly a bath is all that is needed to bring the day to a close. The freedom and abandon are intoxicating. The juxtaposition to the restricted and imprisoned lives of so many of the veterans is lost on our carefree souls. Time is lost on us.

We live as a village, caring and being cared for by each other.

Manhattan Beach is on the water. The waves lull me to sleep at night or frighten me with their ferocity in the day. I am glad for the chain link fence that separates the sand from the ocean. My five year old mind invents the reason for the fence.a little girl had drowned... right in that ocean, right by my beach. The fence has been built to keep

this from happening again. It is to protect us children from the awful tragedies that could befall us.

An old wooden sand box sits on the sand side of the barrier. Long abandoned, my best friend Patti and I plant an invisible flag and claim it as our own. Our steel-eyed stares deter any unsuspecting interlopers. The sandbox is our base of operation. With a spark of imagination it can become a fort, home, school, ship. We morph ourselves into explorers, cowgirls, parents, teachers, soldiers. When we open a restaurant we invent delicacies to feed each other. The sand is transformed into puff pastries and jelly donuts.

Patti: "you first."

Me: "No you"

Patti: "you're the one who wanted to play bakery"

Me: "but I didn't say we had to eat anything."

Patti: "you know that's the rule. We eat what we make. So you first"

The reality that this is actually sand is at odds with the rules of our play. I reluctantly take a small handful of sand and eat. I have to remember not to suggest this again, or at least change the rules.

When not embedded in sand we enact imaginary scenes from Tales of Davey Crockett. We trade roles with each episode. Sometimes his love interest, sometimes Davey himself. The most coveted role is that of Betsy, his trusted rifle. Loud blasts of gunfire erupt through little girl lips which compete with the thrashing waves. We play with abandon, innocent of an outside world ensconced in an epidemic.

One morning Patti doesn't show up at our customary meeting place, the sand box. No Patti the next day and the day after that.

"Mom, Patti hasn't been outside to play for a couple of days. Do you know why?"

My mother hesitates.

"Hon, Patti is in the hospital."

"In the hospital....WHY?"

"She has a disease. She has polio."

I know this isn't good as I watch my mother's lips form a straight line of red and her eyes glance downward to avoid my own.

"Polio? What's that?" I've heard the word whispered among the adults. It has to be bad, why else do adults whisper.

"It's when you get very, very sick, so sick you can't move your arms and legs."

"How can you not move your arms and legs....they just do what you want."

"No honey, not when you get sick with polio. Your arms and legs stop listening to what you want them to do."

"Stop listening???" That sounds weird. "When will she be able to play with me again?"

"Hon, I don't know for sure. It's gonna be a while. It may not be for a very long time."

"Can I go see her?"

"No, unfortunately you can't visit her. You can catch polio very easily and we don't want that to happen. The hospital won't let you in anyway, you're too young."

"Is she going to die?"

"No no no. She's not going to die. We can talk about it some more later, but now it's time for lunch."

I want to be reassured that Patti will get better soon so we can resume our sandbox play. But I'm not. There is no more talking, there is no later. I can tell this is as far as my mother will go. Conversation ended but not over.

As young children do, I construct a reality to help me make sense of this. I believe she got it from eating our sand desserts. This means I will get it as well. I am terrified. Unable to sleep I lie awake, awaiting paralysis to claim my limbs. It never does.

What my mother can't tell me is that Patti will never be able to walk again without metal braces and crutches. Polio managed to sneak past the adults whose job it is to guard us. While not looking it claimed my sister-in-fantasy.

I don't have much memory of Manhattan Beach after that. I don't remember seeing Patti again. I don't remember when the magic of my world evaporates...it just does.

The chain link fence didn't protect us after all. The plague seeped through the spaces between the links and found us. Six months later we are told we have to find another place to live. The quonset huts are being leveled to be replaced by attached upscale brick houses. My Manhattan Beach is erased. We move to Long Island where there are rows of detached single houses. This is a neighborhood...not a village....