

The Rivers of Babylon



By the rivers of Babylon
There we sat down and wept
When we remembered Zion

PSALM 137

Why are they looking at me? Is the deployment to Korea engraved on my face? Should I stare back at them? What if I stood up to read the ads above the windows? Would their eyeballs roll off my chinos? No, there isn't much to look at in those ads since Miss Subways was derailed.

I was on my way home. The rattling monotony of the subway speeding through the dark tunnel lowered my eyelids. What will I do after I get home? What am I going to do with my \$200 mustering-out pay? Will I fit into civilian life? The train rumbled out of the tunnel. Daylight cut short my reverie. I squinted before I could focus on the Jackson Avenue subway sign, then Prospect Avenue, Intervale Avenue, Simpson Street, Freeman Street, finally, East 174th Street. The doors opened to the familiar gray planked wooden platform on which thousands of laborers had left their boot prints. Now my polished combat boots joined their invisible imprints on my rush toward home.

No matter how I tried, my steps could not keep pace with my heartbeat. I was on my way to 1540 Seabury Place, my home for over 20 years. It was a warm September day. The starch in my chinos was slowly dissolving from nervous sweat. My wrinkled sleeves were chafing the

crooks of my perspiring arms. I approached the light pole that held the blue and white sign, dropped my duffel, looked up and read, *Seabury Place*. It had been nearly two years since I stepped onto its pavement. With my duffel returned to my shoulder, I walked down the block to see if anything had changed.

Luboff, the kosher butcher's lights were out. Shriveled brown flakes of aging sawdust lay scattered on the floor. He probably yielded to Brodsky, the kosher butcher around the corner while I was away. Henry Lee, the Chinese laundryman, was still pushing his iron under his single overhead light bulb. Pinsky, whose wobbly vegetable stand had the life expectancy of a snowflake, had finally melted away. His one store win-



1540 Seabury Place, Bronx, New York.

dow, which had only experienced the spray of water when it rained, still displayed its characteristic near-opaque translucency. I moved on and waved to Nick the shoemaker, who was affixing a rubber heel between a Dover Theater sign and a Cat's Paw ad in his window. Next door to Nick, I received a better welcome from the barber's pole swiftly spinning our nation's colors than I had when I debarked in San Francisco. Not a soul on that mortuary like pier and not a soul on my street.

What had happened while I was away? Did my neighbors know I was coming home? Did they care? Had the door shut been to the street where I once toddled, baked mickies, played Hide and Seek, Johnny on the Pony, and Stickball, and where I had come of age?

I ran up four flights of stairs to apartment 11. Ma and Pa were there, we were transfixed for a moment and then, we in triplicate, formed a tight embrace. When the tears dried, I exchanged my damp, heavy, khaki, chino shirt for a fresh T-shirt. As I tried to tuck it into my pants I felt an upward yank on the shirt from the rear. It was Ma searching for scars from shrapnel or bullet wounds. When her hunt ended in failure, I pointed to my navel and said, "You're looking for a scar, Ma? Here, you missed this one."

"You think I'm stupid, eh? You're making fun of me. Ask the neighbors how I worried about you. Morris, look at him. He's a skeleton. I told you he wouldn't eat that *trayfeh*—unkosher food. And his hair. Hair that is? It's a few violin strings. The helmet he had to wear was like a *ribeisen*—a grater. It scraped the hair off his head."

She retreated to the kitchen where she locked and loaded for an assault on my malnutrition, "Here you'll have healthy food not the *chazzerei*—pork products—they poisoned you with in the army."

Pa, as usual, sitting calmly in his undershirt asked, "Did you use your gun or bayonet?"

"I wrote you—I was in the rear, I didn't have a gun."

Ma came running in from the kitchen.

"What's a bayonet?" she asked, wiping her hands on her threadbare apron.

"It's a big knife," replied Pa.

“Why should he use a knife when he had a gun?”

“He said he didn’t have a gun.”

“Enough! This could go on till midnight,” I shouted, “Thank God Uncle Shrolleh hasn’t come home to add to this insanity. Let’s eat.”

I picked a knife and fork from the cutlery scattered at the center of the table.

“Ma, when are you going to place a knife, a fork and a spoon at the side of a plate?”

“Don’t be so fancy. In the army they also put a knife, a fork and a spoon at the side of your plate? A plate? They gave you a *tsubaygehneh shtik blech*—a piece of bent metal—and threw some *chahzerr*—pig’s meat—on it.”

The browned chicken, stuffed derma and string beans whisked me away once and for all from those killing C-rations and chow lines. I was home with all its accompanying craziness.

With my meal finished, I decided to go to the nerve center of the neighborhood, the candy store. I was no more than a couple of steps



out of my apartment house when a gang of Black teenagers came racing by swinging two-by-fours at a fleeing group of frightened White adolescents. The green painted planks they wielded were ripped from the benches in nearby Crotona Park where my father and his friends would sit and solve the world's problems. Eventually, the only traces of the benches around the periphery of the park would be cement memorials that once formed the supports for the two-by-fours. What have I returned to? Hand-to-hand combat on the home front, I wondered.

After the teens were out of sight, an unsettling silence descended on the street, a silence unheard of before I left for the army. I continued down the eerie block and then turned left on 172nd Street. The old, wooden, weather-beaten newspaper stand still stood guard near the entrance to the candy store. I nodded to the new owner, and then found Irv who was inflating his lungs with a smoldering Marlboro. Seated next to him was an unfamiliar character and Lenny Blum. I checked out Irv's flared, mini-checkered topcoat covering a navy blue suit.

"What's with the suit and topcoat? Were you at a job interview?"



*My Ma and Pa (around 1984
and 1965, respectively).*

"No. Why?"

"Look at you in that outfit."

"I don't wear dungarees anymore. It's for kids."

"Have you seen any of the boys?" I asked.

"I hang out with a different crowd. I don't see them. Where were you?" he asked. "I haven't seen you around."

"I took basic training, then was shipped to Korea."

Lenny, whose uniform was dungarees and white Keds long before I left for the army, chimed in, "Did you see any action?"

"Yes, I did."

"*Yes, I did?* Uh-oh, hold it. Let me get my helmet!" scoffed Irv's friend.

The bodies of Wayne Caton, Harry Lapich, Murray Lichtman, Fostine Rutledge, Moen, Robert Massengale, Camacho, and Edmunds flashed before me. Without a word to that piece of shit, I left the candy store.

On my walk home, the gang wielding planks and that little turd in the candy store blunted the warmth and fun of my apartment. I realized I had not returned to the sheltered nest in which I developed and matured.

"I never saw anything like it, Pa. A gang swinging wooden planks from the park benches was chasing some frightened kids. What is happening to our neighborhood?"

"New things are happening every day," replied Ma. "It's time for the Messiah to come."