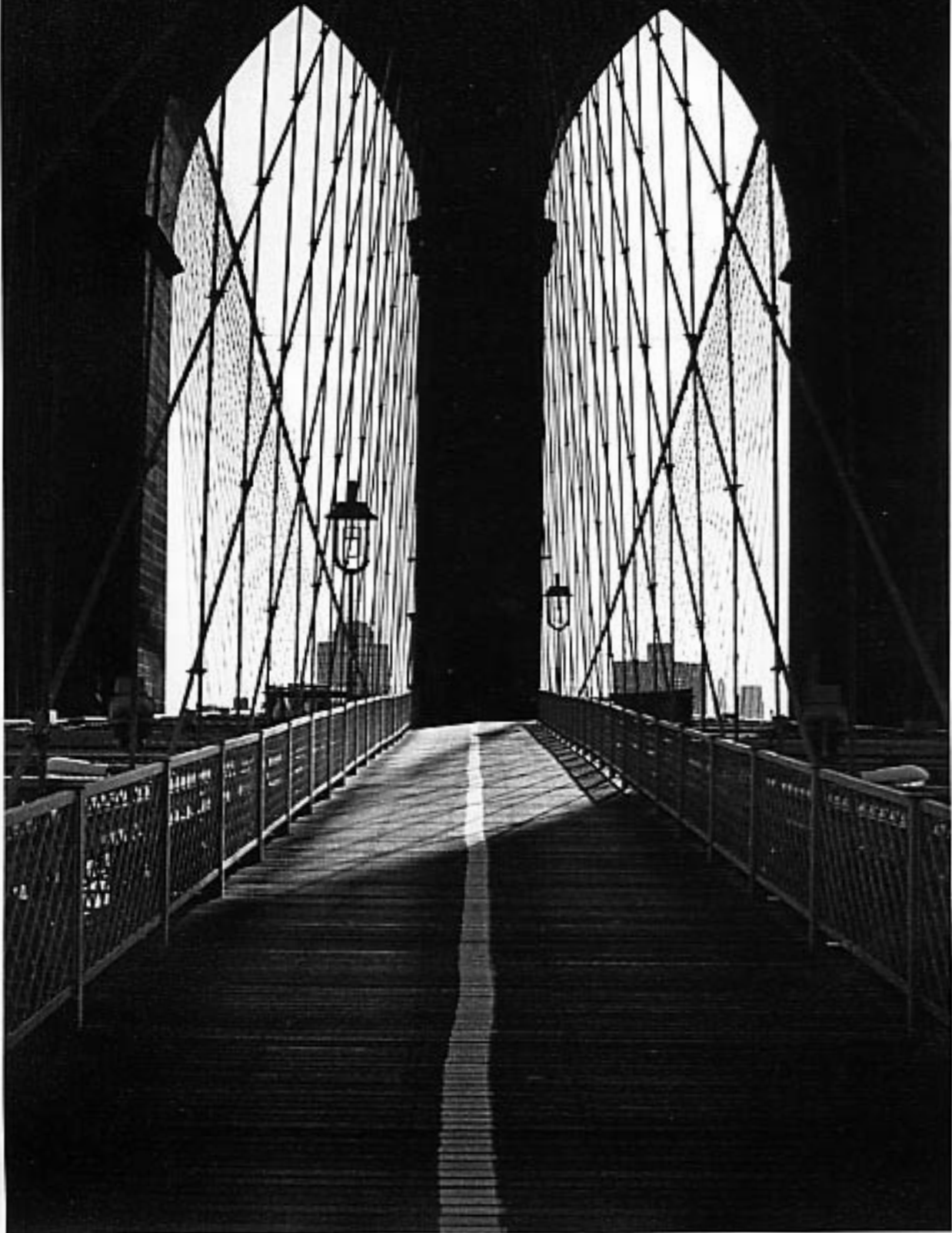


# *The Beauty Of Second Avenue*

MICHELLE CACHO-NEGRETE



RICHARD ROBINSON

**M**y mother is telling a story I've heard before, but she tells it with such flair, such utter conviction in the truth of her words that, at thirteen, I'm mesmerized. She glances at me as we walk, ensuring my full attention. "This *shicker* [drunk] staggers out of a bar, squinting in the sunlight like he's blind. He tugs his coat over his *tuchis* [ass] and staggers down the block. A *shicker*, but he's singing 'I'll Be Seeing You' with this gorgeous voice." She staggers, head wobbling in mock drunkenness. A skilled mimic, she seems to grow taller, broader, mysteriously masculine. Nobody pays attention; this is Brooklyn, in 1958, and there are stranger things to look at.

"It was the first time I'd ever heard the song," she says. She closes her eyes with pleasure and hums the melody. "I followed him for blocks just to listen."

"It's a nice song, Ma," I say.

She stops walking and grabs my arm, eyes burning with disappointment. I've missed her point. "Don't you see? He was only a drunk, but he loved beauty. Why else would he sing? His soul longed for beauty."

She's never added this last bit before, and I'm embarrassed by her melodrama, the passion in her eyes. Then I understand: she's speaking of her own longing for beauty, a longing that makes her life more difficult than I can know. A flush of sadness spreads over me, and I say, "I do understand, Ma."

Satisfied, she lets go of my arm. We walk silently beneath the Broadway El, past the projects, past the cramped shops huddled together protectively. I examine everything with new eyes: the bleak windows, the cracked asphalt, the street-corner boys swaddled in cigarette smoke and bravado. I search for beauty.

**W**e lived in a Brooklyn walk-up: three rooms of sunless windows, stained ceilings, hissing radiators, and clanking faucets that expelled an anemic trickle of water each morning. Yet my mother covered the walls with pale, garden-patterned wallpaper, sewed curtains on her old Singer, and filled the apartment with discarded remnants of elegance ferreted from junk shops along Manhattan's Second Avenue. There was a scuffed but beautifully made oak magazine stand, an oil painting of a woman gazing into her mirror, a crocheted bedspread of delicate lace, four curved maple chairs that she'd refinished herself. She spent hours in those secondhand stores, plowing through old linens and dusty china in search of "treasure." Success brought a flushed face, shining eyes, and an effervescent mood that lasted for days.

We had no knickknacks of the sort that cluttered other people's homes; her art objects were selected for both beauty and practicality. Her greatest satisfaction came from discovering a first edition in a used bookstore, even if the book had been remaindered and forgotten. She kept her books on sagging homemade shelves that lined the walls of our narrow foyer. There were titles by Harold Robbins, Mickey Spillane, and Agatha Christie, but it was mostly more sophisticated reading: Sholom Aleichem, Lillian Hellman, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Bernard Malamud, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Steinbeck. My mother, with only a sixth-grade education, had acquired an

immense vocabulary through her reading and could complete the *New York Times* crossword puzzle. She sat at the kitchen table Sunday mornings in the fleeting patch of sunshine, with the newspaper, a cup of coffee, a pack of cigarettes, and a pen (the ultimate sign of crossword-puzzle self-confidence). Outside, bells tolled from one of the three churches nearby. My brother and I read at the other end of the table, grinning at each other whenever she shouted a word, followed by the triumphant scribble of her pen.

The foyer was home to my mother's books but a place of exile for my brother and me. Around the time I was eleven and he seven, my mother began banishing us, singly, to the foyer without dinner in fits of unpredictable, unfathomable rage. Her volcano-like temper erupted on some internal timetable that seemingly had little to do with anything my brother and I did. We submitted quietly, knowing that protestations of innocence were useless.

Though only a few steps from the kitchen, the foyer was a different world, perpetually dark, as though night had laid permanent claim to it. After exiling me, my mother would turn off the kitchen light and read in her bedroom, while my brother read in our room. I'd pull the dangling chain that hung from the bare light bulb and sit with my back against the front door, raging silently at the injustice of it all until my fury subsided into resignation. Then I'd stand and search for something to read.

Over the years, I read every book my mother owned. In that claustrophobic space, where it was impossible to rest comfortably, I perfected reading as a form of temporary self-annihilation. Everything but the words on the page fell away. Eventually I slept.

**T**he Yiddish Theater was another of my mother's passions and a place of magic for my brother and me. Whenever she could save enough money, she bought three tickets, spreading them across the table on Saturday morning like a feast.

We dressed up: my blue dress that she'd made, my tight curls tamed with a wet comb; dark cotton pants and a white shirt for my brother, his cowlick smoothed with water and my mother's firm hand. My mother wore high heels (in an effort to look taller) and a red dress with a black velvet collar, also homemade. With her perfect skin and short auburn hair, she always looked glorious. The only makeup she wore was a little scarlet lipstick.

On Second Avenue, we joined the long line outside the theater, its brightly lit marquee displaying the show's title in Yiddish. Car radios flooded the street with the voices of Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, and Rosemary Clooney. Vendors hawked everything from knishes to umbrellas. Restaurant doors often stood open, and the pungent smells and assorted languages of Eastern Europe floated out. The weekend was a time when the difficult life of the working poor was concealed by the facade of a carefree existence. The three of us, swept up in the festivities, were suddenly sophisticates. I watched young couples — their clasped hands, excited eyes, and discreet kisses — and wondered if my mother missed having a husband. I decided

she didn't. There was something both deliberate and inevitable about her solitude.

One night we saw Molly Picon, a luminary of the Yiddish Theater, in *Sadie Was a Lady*. She made her entrance by sliding down a chute and then leaping to her feet. I was thrilled at this tomboy behavior, the rightness of it, because I always wore old jeans and a T-shirt, trying to be accepted by the boys in our mostly Catholic neighborhood, who called me "kike," "Christ-killer," and "poodle head." Picon bounded across the stage and was met by a deafening blast of applause, people rising to their feet in the darkness like shadowy ghosts.

Men and women crowded the lobby at intermission, speaking a dizzying array of languages as they extolled the play, and especially Molly. Some, whose short sleeves exposed numbers tattooed on forearms, were the objects of covert, sympathetic looks. Strangers complimented my mother on her lovely, well-behaved children, and she answered freely in Yiddish. With our neighbors she was reticent, but here she laughed and even dared to touch an occasional arm. "*Shain vi der lavone*, pretty as the moon, this play," she exclaimed to a couple who stood beside her. I couldn't reconcile this lighthearted woman with the one who banished my brother and me to a dark foyer. Both personas seemed strangers to me. I watched her as if from a distance while I waited impatiently for the second act to begin.

Later, as my mother, my brother, and I walked to the subway, she taught us a song from the play. Something hummed inside her, resonating with the song. She, the master storyteller,

was telling a story to herself, creating with consummate skill the joyous mother and theatergoer, habitué of this fabulous city. Her eyes danced and fearlessly met the gaze of strangers, who had no choice but to smile at her.

She bought us egg creams at the corner candy stand, with its striped awning. Sticky foam overflowed the glass, and I lapped it off my fingers. The brilliant lights and colorful people on the street seemed like another stage set, and I felt as though we were in a play ourselves. Those moments — the frothy chocolate soda, my brother's contented sighs, my mother's love evident in her smiles — were the closest I have ever come to bliss.

My mother had a natural beauty that could make men stare, but, ever practical, she got her hair cut at the corner barber-shop rather than at a beauty parlor. She'd gone there as long I could remember. "For me, still the same price," she announced, "even though everybody else pays a dollar more."

"The closest you could come to a secondhand haircut," I joked.

She ignored me and gloried in her common sense. She had no patience for women who spent a "fortune" with hairdressers. "I should pay somebody to fuss with my hair? No thanks, I'll save my money for better things." She went every six weeks to keep it neatly trimmed. I cringed whenever I passed the twirling red-white-and-blue pole and saw her in the first chair, in front of the big plate-glass window. I searched the street for schoolmates, whose mothers all went to the beauty parlor. I



LINDA SMOGOR

was already the neighborhood outcast because I was Jewish, had “French-poodle hair,” and didn’t have a father. I feared her stubborn frugality would increase my isolation.

My mother’s tiny body was lost in the big barber’s chair. Her high-heeled shoes twitched impatiently at the bottom of the long white apron. A line of bored men reading newspapers would glance up irritably at this woman who’d invaded their territory. She watched the barber in the mirror as he shaved her neck with his electric shaver. He spoke rapidly and stopped every few minutes to gesture passionately, scissors waving above her head. His blue eyes, shielded by thick glasses, met hers in the mirror whenever he made a point. After her head bobbed to indicate agreement, he pushed it back down, satisfied, and continued cutting.

Back home, she admired herself in the little mirror beside the kitchen sink. “That *mamzer* [bastard],” she said, “such a bigot. Hates the colored. Doesn’t care about Korea. So I don’t give such a good tip, but he knows haircuts.”

“But, Ma,” I protested, “you nod at everything he says.”

She turned to me in exasperation. “It gets you a better haircut if he thinks you agree with him. So what does it hurt if I nod? Big deal. It’s not like I could change his mind or something.” She assessed my appearance. “He says he’d love to get his scissors on those curls of yours! See how good he cuts.” She turned her head left and right to show me. I shuddered at a vision of my tight blond curls dropping to the floor.

Even with a haircut from her barber, I wouldn’t have had my mother’s striking beauty. I had fair, quick-to-burn skin rather than her exotic olive complexion. I didn’t know whom in my family I resembled. The few photographs of my mother’s parents were mostly blurred, and she maintained a stubborn secrecy about them, perhaps a legacy of the need for being closemouthed in the old country. The only thing she told me was that they came from a *shtetl* in Eastern Europe. When I asked where, she said, “What does it matter? All *shtetls* are the same.” Worst of all, she would tell me nothing about my father, despite my persistent questioning. I envied my brother, the product of a brief marriage to a gambler. Although that husband’s habit had left my mother scrambling for rent money, he was a kind man and a presence in my brother’s life two weekends a month.

Once, while searching for a pen in my mother’s drawer, I stumbled across two photographs of her as a young woman. In one she stood beside a tall, long-legged man, his face shadowed by a hat. I held the photograph up to a mirror and examined as best I could the blurred planes and dark hollows of his face, running my finger along the curve of his chin and then my own. The other photograph, her wedding picture, was cut in half: no groom beside the bride. Her face was an impassive shroud, eyes squinting into a hard, bright sun, lips tight, arms pulled protectively around her body. Did the excised groom’s face reveal the same trapped feeling of resignation? I felt the presence of that missing figure the way an amputee feels a phantom limb.

One Saturday, when my brother had gone off with his father, I confronted my mother with the wedding photograph,

waving it wildly and demanding, “Who was my father?”

She smiled slyly. “You have no father. See? Only me in that picture.” She turned her back. I stormed out of the house and wandered around the neighborhood, so obviously furious the street-corner punks were afraid to throw kissing noises at me. I returned home to an almost sympathetic silence from my mother. She’d made chicken soup with rice, and we ate in front of the snowy black-and-white TV that she’d recently bought secondhand.

My mother and I got along better during my adolescence than we had during my childhood. I got my first summer job at thirteen and began working full time when I graduated from high school. We often walked together to catch the train for work. Although I didn’t earn enough to move into my own apartment, my meager income created a truce of sorts between us.

This uneasy peace vanished when I got engaged to a Cuban man from the neighborhood. I was twenty. He was twenty-one. I’d sensed in him a determination as strong as my own to make it out of the ghetto. She stopped speaking to me, swearing she’d sit shiva if I married that goy.

I pictured her doing it: dressed in black, the ripped armband, the mirrors covered, mourning her lost daughter.

“Go ahead,” I said.

We were married on Christmas Eve because my office was closed the following week, as was my fiancé’s college. The city was filled with cheer, streetlights decorated with bright holiday ribbons, lopsided pine boughs in windows. Street-corner Santas rang bells and pleaded for money. But the season’s joy was tinged with anti-Semitism. The day before my wedding, a co-worker accused me of “hating the Savior.” I was furious, but as the lone Jew in the office, I could only answer quietly, “Jesus was Jewish, and besides, I never met him. How could I hate him?” She glared and spent the rest of the day “accidentally” bumping into me or knocking papers off my desk. Some of my other co-workers took the sting off, however, with a wedding gift of towels. After work I couldn’t help but be enthused by the general festivity of Manhattan. At home I stood on a chair in front of our tiny mirror and tried to admire myself in my wedding dress: a white princess-style affair with enormous fake-pearl buttons, a secondhand purchase on Second Avenue.

I pinned orange-juice cans in my hair to straighten it, then went to bed and tossed the whole night through. The next morning, I applied mascara, brushed my hair smooth, and prayed for a day with no humidity. My mother had left the house early without a word, and my sixteen-year-old brother, temporarily staying with his father to avoid my mother’s fury, called to say he’d see me at the wedding. I waited in my dress and high heels for my husband-to-be. He picked me up in his cousin’s car and, pale and solemn, told me I looked beautiful.

*(end of excerpt)*