

Excerpt from

The eviction notice set all their sorrows into motion. Joseph understood that now in ways impossible to appreciate let alone understand as a shy, nervous kid of ten and a half that April in 1958. Too mesmerized then by his older brother Michael, the four years stretched between them like a lifetime, to resist the larger forces re-making their lives.

He discovered the notice folded in a pocket of Michael's denim jacket late one afternoon, hoping to find enough loose change for a pack of Hot Tamales from the candy store on Hale Street. The Boston Redevelopment Authority had mailed the same letter to every resident of the West End earlier that week, announcing the coming destruction of the world they knew. Joseph's parents had read aloud portions of the BRA's threat in exasperated bursts of Italian and English across the kitchen table. The government had at last taken the neighborhood – all forty-eight acres of it. Seized under eminent domain.

Displaced

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Neighbors argued from stairwells and in doorways, skeptical that the redevelopment would even happen this time. Years of uncertainty had hardened their cynicism – the city’s plans moving back and forth in a confusing bureaucratic shuffle, heralding a tiresome series of preliminary and final approvals in a long, inane process that seemed to bear no real consequences on their own lives. So many previous announcements had provoked a similar upset, inspiring a flurry of community meetings and protests, though no demolition crew appeared in the streets. Delays and empty threats. Why should this time be any different? Life would continue as it had before, the neighborhood enduring, untouched.

Still, there’d been talks of protests. Marches to City Hall. Threats of violence. An address marked in red absorbed Joseph, one scribbled in Michael’s sloppy handwriting beneath the letter’s typeface. 42 Staniford Street. No place he recognized. What did his brother have in store?

The apartment buzzer squealed. Joseph stuffed the eviction notice into his back pocket in a quick, unthinking way, and returned his brother’s jacket to the closet they shared. He sat on his bed, his pulse throbbing and pretended to read a Superman comic. Michael wouldn’t be home for at

least another hour, but he was known to defy any schedule imposed upon him. The masonry apprenticeship their father had arranged was supposed to straighten him out. How volatile he’d become since leaving school that winter, arriving home more than once with a black eye and bloodied knuckles.

His mother’s high heels tapped across the kitchen floor. Coffee percolated. Warm roasted scents pervaded through the rooms. She greeted Myra Horowitz, who lived on Poplar Street, her voice bright with welcome. Another visitor from the Committee. She seldom spoke of her involvement with the organization and their efforts to save the West End. She often read aloud Mrs. Horowitz’s letters published in the local papers, always so impressed by her friend’s arguments against the re-development, and how West Enders took pride in their neighborhood, fighting to use money left in a trust to build an extensive recreation area near the Charles River, contributing to those seasonal joys that Bostonians cherished – sailing excursions and concerts at the Hatch Shell among them. How his mother repeated her words with passion. She’d carved out another identity altogether through the Committee, resisting the small, aproned existence which consumed most other mothers he knew –

slipping off to meetings and protests in and around her domestic chores.

Joseph tossed his comic aside and dug out the wooden cigar box hidden in a drawer full of Michael's socks. He emptied the small collection of pocketknives atop his bed and sorted through them, unable to find the Ka-Bar with its rounded brown handle fit together with leather washers and a curving, pointed blade strong enough to dig trenches, force apart nails and crates or disembowel someone in one decisive swipe.

Michael had winked over the last detail, claiming also that he'd somehow purchased the combat knife from some local pawnshop with so many of them floating around after the war. Who knew how he'd really obtained it, which captivated Joseph's imagination like nothing else, knowing it had once belonged to a real soldier. Now its absence made him nervous, hungry for his brother's plans.

He examined the other knives, their blades no longer than the spread of his palm. He flicked them open and shut the way his brother had shown him with a quick flip of the wrist. Sunlight caught in their handles' iridescent pearl inlay. He fingered one of the duller edges just to see how hard he could press skin against blade before splitting flesh.

"Let them try it." His mother forced his attention. "Eight weeks is not enough time to evict twenty thousand people. What do they think they'll do? Drag us out?"

Joseph left the bedroom, unsettled, and stood in the hallway, hidden against the wall as he strained to listen, dancing a pocketknife between his hands. Apartment noises permeated their walls with television dramas, shouting voices, and baby wails. Cooking smells forever wafted through the floorboards, along with the harsh ammonia and bleach concoction that kerchief-headed Mrs. Polansky used, scrubbing the building's stairways. One could not excise themselves from the intimacy of their neighbors.

"Just weeks ago, the city was repaving our streets and installing new gas meters in all the apartments. Now what sense does that make?" Mrs. Horowitz said.

"They won't go through with it. I don't believe it. You remember this?" His mother rustled some papers. He imagined the old blue shoebox she kept on her nightstand, one full of newspaper clippings and pamphlets tracing the progression of the West End's redevelopment plans. She kept a similar box full of documents related to his late grandfather's long-ago trial, hidden under her dresser. He'd ri-

fled through it once while she was out grocery shopping. The scandal he wasn't allowed to discuss.

"Here it is," she said. "1956. Demolition in eight months. Relocation of all West End residents before the end of the year. Never happened."

Mrs. Horowitz sighed, soft exasperation straining her words. "Even so, we need to organize people. There's still time."

Coffee spoons clinked against saucers. More paperwork shuffled. A kitchen chair scraped across the floor. Joseph's mother hummed a note of concern.

"Oh, Myra, I don't know. Half of them can't read enough English to understand it. They'd get suspicious."

"That's exactly what the BRA has counted on, preying on people's ignorance. Confusing them with bad information in the press. If more were involved in our efforts, we'd help them better. They need us." Mrs. Horowitz tapped out the last three words, and Joseph pictured her knuckles rapping against the side of the table. She spoke of a mother's march at City Hall, one that his own could help lead.

"You have a deep connection to this community, Giulia. More so than our Committee leaders even. It's why the West Enders never took a real shine to us. Not like they should've. But there's still time. If other families see you out there, they'll want to participate too."

Joseph's mother sighed, doubtful. "I agree we need to get more of them at the protests. But it makes some folks nervous getting too involved. Besides, the Committee's lawsuit against the city will stall the evictions."

Life happened in the street.

“And what if it doesn’t?” Mrs. Horowitz’s voice gained an edge. “We need to send a message to Mayor Hynes and his gang of crooks. Make it clear that we all intend to stay in our homes for as long as possible.”

Joseph pressed his thumb against the pocketknife’s blade without thinking and nicked himself. He let out a small cry, dropping the knife against the hardwood floor. The women went silent for a moment before his mother called his name.

“I thought you were out with your friends? Come here.”

A tiny bead of red sprouted from his skin. Joseph sucked the wound and returned the pocketknife to its cigar box, hesitant to leave the room. He knew well his mother’s capacity for sudden rages. Once she’d chased him through the rooms with a wooden spatula, hollering curses, after he’d left his matchbox cars strewn across the living room floor. Hours later she apologized, lavishing kisses against his head and serving his favorite butter-sweet *pizzelle* cookies, their snowflake-inspired designs coated thick with powdered sugar.

He entered the kitchen, unable to meet his mother’s probing gaze. Sunlight beamed through the windows over the sink, streaking through the

faded lace curtains and across the pale-yellow cabinets. ‘Save the West End Committee’ flyers and other pamphlets were stacked on the small round table. Mrs. Horowitz adjusted her browline glasses and

“Save the West End”

directed a small, prim smile at him as she ran a manicured hand along the auburn curls that tapered into a bob around her ears.

“Joey, what happened?” His mother rose from the table, smoothing down the folds of her green circle skirt as she approached him. Her thick dark hair, swept up and back in an elegant bouffant, appeared like a crown. He shrugged, embarrassed. She examined his cut, shaking her head. “Now how’d you do a thing like that?”

She ran the sink faucet over the affected finger and pressed a small dishrag against the wound, ordering him to hold it tight until the bleeding stopped. He did so, uncertain how to articulate

his concerns about Michael or where they'd live if the city destroyed their home. She soon herded him toward the door and fit a quarter into his hand with instructions to be a good boy and fetch a nice watermelon ice for himself.

Life happened in the street. Boys played stickball in alleyways, the girls jumping rope or playing hopscotch, while women in faded plaid house dresses sat together on the stoops of crowded brownstones, whispering together, the occasional cigarette passed between them. Transistor radios played at their feet. Joseph searched beyond their heads, hoping for some glimpse of Michael. The Felman sisters from next door rushed past him on metal skates. The scrape of their wheels against asphalt pricked Joseph with want. Most West End kids possessed at least a scooter, some made of fruit boxes and soda bottle caps. He and Michael had once shared an old, busted-up two-speeder before the bike chain rusted off. Now they were both stuck on foot.

He followed the familiar curve of tall, brick rowhouses lining Pitts Street. West Enders shouted conversations at one another across the street, leaning from black-ribbed fire escapes or windows topped in arch-shaped lintels, while housewives

clipped bed sheets, starched white shirts and limp undergarments to clotheslines strung high between apartments. Most of his own relatives lived within shouting distance. Joseph felt emmeshed within the community, tethered to everyone around. Various languages webbed between those he passed – the Jewish and Polish refugees displaced by the war; the Ukrainian, Greek, and Albanian families who operated small dry goods stores and luncheonettes. A mixed neighborhood, his mother called it. Somehow, folks got along. They even looked after one another sometimes.

Joseph crossed the street, past the kosher meat market with its gold Hebrew letters painted across the display windows, where a row of skinned chickens hung. Hot bread scents lingered in the air. Some of the storefronts appeared dark and empty, the lots vacant for months now. A young couple stood at the curb, watching a sofa hauled away by two heavy-set men into the back of a flatbed truck. Several old men gathered nearby at the corner of Merrimac Street, their hands and fingers stabbing the air, gesticulating toward the movers.

The city had turned against them.