

## **The Brown Bomber and Little Finland (1969)**

In 1969, Marie and I took the Brown Bomber,  
the jerkiest ride of any local NJ bus,  
from New Milford to Hackensack  
and then onto Kearny,

where you lived with your father—

    a kind, portly man who once,  
    in his Estonian accent and quiet confidence,  
    requested “smashed potatoes”  
    when the waitress asked  
    what he would like as a “side” for his meal,  
    that we were celebrating for your birthday  
    at the Italian-Irish-Greek restaurant  
    on Kearny Avenue—

and your mother, a nurse,

    who liked to criticize you  
    in front of your friends,  
    as when she pinched my cheeks,  
    saying how healthy and rosy they were,  
    and asked why yours—pale and smooth,  
    under your luminous brown eyes—were not.

I was embarrassed and wondered  
why anyone would praise my ruddy complexion,  
which later turned out to be Rosacea, a medical condition,  
and why anyone’s mother would show off her mean-ness, just so.

The view from your bedroom was onto a used car lot.  
It was always festive, even in the middle of the night,  
    when the white lights shone onto  
    flapping, plastic flags and

blue and yellow and red triangles,  
all strung on high wire around the perimeter.  
It felt like there was always someone watching over you,  
even when it was really empty.

But that evening,  
we didn't stay in your bedroom.  
We guzzled beer (mostly you and Marie)  
while sitting on the curb in front of your house,  
laughing and stashing the brown bottles  
behind open cardigans when anyone walked by,  
or when your mother called out from the house,  
*What are you doing out there?*

So the empty bottles  
got pushed down the sewer drain  
and the clinking glass made too much noise,  
but she was clueless.

We slipped onto a Manhattan-bound bus  
right from Kearny Avenue, a block from your house,  
and headed to Little Finland,  
an upper east-side bar-hang-out-nightclub  
with singers and pianists  
from behind the Iron Curtain.

Sometimes we swayed to the beat,  
or surreptitiously mocked the KGB stiffs  
that they called *Intourist* Guides,  
who sat like potted plants in the dimly-lit scene.

We were cool, wearing pale lipstick and hair-sprayed coiffures.  
You and Marie blew smoke from your cigarettes,  
and all of us ordered vodka with cranberry juice,  
even though we knew they knew we were underage.

Giddy, we made it to Port Authority Bus Terminal before midnight.  
In the main concourse, bustling, though noticeably scarcer of people,  
I realized that my father, headed to his nightshift,  
could be passing through at just this time.

I bent over low and wrapped a kerchief fully  
around my head, yelped in desperate stage-whisper,  
*Put your kerchiefs on! Put your kerchiefs on!*  
Despite my dread, you and Marie reeked of hysteria.  
Marie snorted, *Don't you think you're attracting attention*  
*walking like a hunchback, muttering put your kerchiefs on?*

We made it back to Kearny and your bedroom by 1 a.m.  
and snuck up creaky back steps off the kitchen,  
sliding on nylon-stockinged feet past your parents' bedroom,  
which was just across the hall from yours.

Our faces buried in pillows, we laughed and guffawed  
and talked in slowing dreamy phrases  
until there was nothing but our breathing.  
Other than the terror of being found by my father  
and the chronic mean-ness of your mother,  
we could have believed all was such innocence.

You and Marie and I slept soundly while colored flags  
outside the open window flapped their night-watch.

For Kati  
By Kaja Weeks  
Silver Spring, MD, December 2015