A Brooklyn Tale

by Daniel Harris

Mine was a humble arrival in the most famous of America's boroughs. I entered Park Slope, Brooklyn, New York in a rental car. I had been offered the car free if I would drive it to JFK from Chicago. My liquidity was $600 cash, a backpack of tattered clothes, art supplies, and the promise of an apartment to sit while its occupants were on honeymoon. I would have ten days to find a place to live. It was 1982, the depths of the Reagan recession and eight months shy of my fortieth birthday.

Park Slope was still home to working class Irish and Puerto Ricans, but it was undergoing rapid gentrification. Every week, another real estate company opened on Seventh Avenue, Park Slope's commercial hub. Mostly the neighborhood consisted of chopped up Gilded Age brownstones, rent-controlled tenements, and abandoned homes repurposed as hangouts for desperadoes and drug addicts. It was a neighborhood in transition, still mostly working class and poor, but the inexpensive housing and proximity to Manhattan were an irresistible magnet for all manner of wannabe twenty-somethings: musicians, artists, illustrators, writers, playwrights, dancers, painters, sculptors, directors, actors, models…. There were a few well-known writers, musicians, and film people living on the Slope, but most incoming residents were ambitious career entrants.

Not far from where I was apartment-sitting was an abandoned building. It had been the Chelsea Clock Company that the owners closed after a bitter strike. A developer planned to convert the decaying hulk to upscale condos. At Jack's Park Slope Tavern, at the corner of Seventh Avenue and Ninth Street, I met a down-and-outer who said he lived in the former clock building in a tent. We left Jack's and repaired to his makeshift digs. He led me to a wing I could have to myself. I was leery of his motives, but mentally filed the information as a plan of last-resort. There was no electricity, but there was running water, and I discovered a working toilet on one of

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the floors. I was stymied in my search for a regular rental situation by my lack of money and secure employment. New York's real estate practice of requiring the first month's rent, last month's rent and a month's commission to a real estate broker, were beyond my reach.

The day the honeymooners returned to their apartment, I pitched my tent in the former clock factory. It was the same day I sold an illustration for an op-ed piece to *The New York Times*. That check doubled my dwindling finances. After ten demoralizing years as an abused, underpaid instructor at a trade school in Chicago's Loop, I confidently claimed Brooklyn as my new home and identity. The twinkle-eyed elderly Jewish lady at *The Times* payroll office told me, "The paper is always looking for new talent, especially if you can turn on a dime."

I was making decent money creating illustrations for *The Times* and a few start-up magazines. All well and good, but I didn't have a bank account and was still a squatter at the clock factory. My membership at the Prospect Park YMCA on Ninth Street in Park Slope allowed me to keep clean and sane. There I showered, exercised and tried to maintain a semblance of normality.

The routine of life in the clock factory came to an abrupt end when I returned one evening after a three-day absence to discover a locked fence around the property, armed guards with dogs, and the wing I was living in gutted. My heart sank. Most of my money was in a tennis ball canister I had secreted in the toilet tank of a non-working toilet. I was broke. I had no place to go. I spent the cold night in the doorway of a warehouse across the street from the clock factory. At six in the morning, the workmen began to arrive.

From the gate of the construction site, I could see a dumpster with my tent in it.

I pleaded with the foreman to let me retrieve my belongings. After greasing his palm with a crisp fifty-dollar bill, the brute gave me fifteen minutes to search the filthy dumpster. I found most of my belongings. As I was leaving, I saw a row of toilets lined up near the gate. I bolted to the toilets. The second one I checked had my tennis

ball canister. I opened it and saw my money, all three thousand dollars of it. Couldn't believe my luck.

I went to the Y to clean up. I convinced the locker room attendant to let me use a locker for a few days until I could find a place to stay. Tired but clean, I went to the nearby Greek diner for breakfast. I was on a first name basis with the waitress who was married to the owner of the restaurant. They had owned the restaurant for twenty-five years.

—Say, Stella, you wouldn't happen to know a cheap place I can rent. I've lost my home. I was squatting at the clock factory, but they kicked all of us out.

—So you're homeless?

—You guessed it. I have money, but I can't afford to go through a broker. And I don't have a steady job, though I sell illustrations to *The Times* and other publications.

—Rum luck, she said, wiping her hands on her apron. This is a long shot, but Tony Z, who owns the closed gas station on Fourth Avenue, was looking for a guard. I think he is there as we speak. If you talk to him, he might hire you as a night watchman. Maybe he will let you stay there during the day.

I paid my bill and hustled down to Fourth Avenue.

Tony Z was a huge Italian in a black leather topcoat and snappy fedora. His vocal delivery was operatic. He would start to answer my questions and then interrupt himself with a story of how he screwed someone in a business deal.

"I ruined those fuckers' day," was the typical ending of his stories. After almost two hours of this, Tony Z had worked up an appetite and needed to feed. He gave me the job, said I could live there if I wanted — paint pictures, do whatever — but I had to log in the deliveries and oil pick-ups. The gas pumps and the lifts in the service bays were gone. There was an overhead pump behind the building to fill the trucks picking up oil. I learned that there were two 30,000-gallon tanks buried under the yard filled with Number 2 home heating oil. I suspected some questionable business in black market heating oil, but I knew to keep my yap shut. I kept a record

of the depth of oil in the tanks, marked down the numbers and issued receipts. Tony Z was pleased with my work. There was no rent, and Tony Z paid me $500 the first of the month. When I explained how the volume of oil would change with the temperature, he took me for a genius.

The former gas station did not have a certificate of occupancy, I was living there illegally, but no building inspector visited the place. Twice two men, who I assumed were law enforcement officers, paid me a visit. They looked at my paintings, made some non-verbal grunts, and searched the building for signs of who knows what. I reported these visits to Tony Z, who would issue a stream of vulgar invective.

—You did the right thing, art man. Were they Feds or City?

—I don't know, Tony, they didn't show me any ID.

—Are you sure they were cops, not mobsters?

—Should I ask?

—Not if you want to live. Cops always flash their ID. You gotta wise up. I thought you were a Chicago boy.

Much as I enjoyed the working space in the gas station, living there was a drag. Fourth Avenue Brooklyn is a main thoroughfare with day and night truck traffic, several subway lines run under the road, and I still had to go to the Y to shower. The gas station had a toilet and sink, but no hot water. Only an electric space heater kept the pipes from freezing. Winter nights could be brutal, and in summer the interior of the station was sub-tropical. Air conditioning was not one of the creature comforts of the place.

I met this woman Gillian, a copy editor at *The New York Times*, at a Brooklyn Christmas party. One of her roommates had moved back to Kansas, and she needed someone to split the rent. I told her my needs. She took me to her place: a large apartment with three bedrooms and two bathrooms. It was the top floor walk-up of a four-flat on Fiske Place in the heart of Park Slope. Compared to the gas station, the place was a palace.

—So, what would my rent be?

—$750 a month,

—What's included?

—Everything except food and sex.

—Hah! I didn't expect either of those. Is there a room I can use as a painting studio?

—Not at the moment, but when Molly moves out — she's a reporter for NPR and being reassigned to D.C. — I'll rent you her bedroom for $250.

Molly didn't leave; Gillian did. I took over the lease, which was only $750 a month. Gillian never said good-bye, but guiltily skulked away in the night leaving *The Times* for a job in Los Angeles. I sold two paintings for some good coin, which allowed me to sign a new two-year lease with the landlord. Molly moved into the master bedroom with me and when the building went co-op we bought our flat for $75,000. I'd come a long way from my camping days in the former clock factory.

Oh, and today, thirty-five years later, the gas station is a craft brewery.