

This day in 1955 is as clear a summer day as any I can recall. Mom and I have been staying with my grandparents, a block from Central Park, where I swing and play in the sand. Today's adventure is a trip with Nana on the D train from Columbus Circle to Greenwich Village. She instructs me to hold her cotton-gloved hand, and we step through the tiled portal into a strange subterranean world.

Her best friend, Mrs. Toomey, lives on MacDougal Street, and Nana wants to show me off for the first time. They met in the late 1920's, through her daughter, Katherine, and my mom, Agnes, when they all lived in the Village. Nana and Grandad moved up to West 58th Street when Agnes and her brother were ready for high school. But the women and girls have stayed friends.

Down underground, Nana pays for tokens, which is subway money, at a booth. She lifts me up, drops a brass coin into the slot, and pushes the wooden arms of the turnstile, causing a ratchet sound as we go through. Then she pushes us through a tall gate with bars, and we are near the tracks. I peer from Nana's safety toward the tube with blinking lights. A man shines shoes at a big stand near the back wall, and I smell the polish. By the newstand-the dusky smell of newsprint.

People walk this way and that, while we wait for our train. I spy a glass jug with bubbling, swirling orange drink, and ask Nana. She gives the vendor a coin, and he presses the knob. The cool pleasure of smooth un-carbonated sips of orangeade from a conical wax paper cup stays with me.

Hand in hand we hurry to the train car as the engineer calls out the next stop, and sliding doors hiss and snap shut. Nana guides me toward a smooth, woven rattan seat, near an open-window. As we pick up speed, the breeze builds, and the cold white wall tile outside the train blurs its black writing. Inside, wall fans whir. The car isn't full, so no-one stands at the center steel pole or at the swinging grip handles. In our seats we sway to the click-clack rhythm of track. Ceiling lights flash as we roar through the tunnels. I press against Nana's petite frame for comfort, and her smile shows pride in me. My legs dangle below the hem of my yellow summer dress.

Amid the screech of steel brakes, we arrive at Houston Street station, and emerge into jagged light, stifling New York afternoon, traffic din, and reek of overflowing trash cans. Across the street, red brick dust arises, workmen shout, and a wrecking ball pendulum swings from a massive chain frightening me. Nana holds my hand through the fear, and leads me up the front concrete stoop of an apartment building.

Through the stale hallway by a wall of mailboxes, we climb three narrow flights past shabby plaster and the smell of cooking. Mrs. Toomey has seen us on the sidewalk from her front window and opens to us with a warm smile, and an accent I've heard from my father's great aunt Kate Caffrey. In Mrs. T.'s floral parlor, the two old friends chat, drink hot tea. I kneel on the carpet at the coffee table with cold milk and crumbly powdered-sugar cake. After, I might have napped.

On the train back to 59th Street and Columbus Circle, I sit in a corner seat by myself, while Nana sits adjacent. At the station there's a gum dispenser, and I ask.

Nana produces two pennies, pushes the first into the slot, and says, "Hold your hand under it," and turns the crank. One white Chiclet square drops into my palm. Then another penny, another turn, another Chiclet-both instantly in my mouth-I know what to do with peppermint sugar excitement

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