

Aching Knots

Gabrielle Beck

Sade's sultry voice fluttered on the record player's rusting needle while she rolled each body of flour and sugar, water and yeast. She twisted until the two ends touched in harmony. I sat cross-legged as she sculpted the challah with calloused palms, embedding love in every crevice of the dough.

Taste, Bubbe pleaded as the clamor of Queens, New York, crescendoed. Echoes of police sirens and teenagers beatboxing around the corner writhed through the hollow apartment walls. *I can't hear ya, but I know what ya saying*. My Bubbe only reads lips. She refused to wear a hearing aid. She said she'd earned her right not to listen to people's shenanigans.

I deconstructed bits of challah, while sitting on the floor watching *21 Jump Street*, thinking Tom Hanson was cute. Bubbe, grasping a handheld dustbuster, swooshed me away to clean the already spotless kitchen.

After pretending to wipe away stray crumbs and dough remnants, I pulled out her scrapbook albums from the armoire and laid them out on the floor. I admired the photographs from her youth, the ones that time managed to filter out everything but her. Saccharine and slick. Peggy was a wild thing: light-footed, kinetic, a twist of sweet breath.

Cheekbones slathered in bubblegum pink rouge and lashes drenched in the tar of Maybelline, hair permed and teased to maximum height—all immortalized in the haze of pixels. I thought to myself that she contained a whole universe that I had yet to know.

I'd sit on her couch on weekends as she told her stories of what young motherhood was like, living in the boroughs the same time as Walkmans hung on Bubbe's widening hips and Madonna graced magazine covers. I longed to be embedded in the photographs. I wanted to escape my bleak reality, to feel human connection beyond the clash of dots from my computer, unlike a failed Chuck Close painting.

Bubbe made up for the confiscated challah by taking me for a pastrami on rye at Ragtime Deli, right on Cross Bay Boulevard. Beads of sweat trickled along thick gold rope chains and deft hands pressed the ends of calzones.

I miss all a youse. She declared to the deli men with a Marlboro Red smoldering in her hand. Her thick Queens accent was ever-so comforting to my ears. I spied Bubbe reaching for a box of Lorna Doones despite kvetching about going on a diet. It wasn't the quantity in question. It was quality. Bubbe liked old things.

Antony, get me some hamburgah meat and a poundah peppah loaf. She stood adorned in an Iris Apfel carcanet, goggles, and a zebra print mask. This was the one day a week she could

venture past the confines of her apartment. While Bubbe examined the specialty breads, I walked to the window overlooking Cross Bay Boulevard: boarded up diners, barren avenues, independently-owned-turned-fast-food chains. Its once bustling spirit existed as a hologram of normalcy.

My mind blurred the lines between past and present, hope and despair: closing restaurants effervesced into the Silver Street Disco blaring “Stayin Alive” while girls pranced around with crimped hair in Jordache Jeans, and boys sat under fluorescent light with Members Only jackets—oblivious to the perils of 2020.

As Bubbe drove past the boulevard, the street lights flickered before me, dipping in and out of sense. I remained tethered to a romanticized version of the past as we walked out of RagTime, ignoring the darkness that pervaded Queens’ history steeped in racial inequality and systemic injustices. The jagged edges I somehow smoothed away.

It’s like the night was breathing, like the sound of melted light, tangled and tethered by false memories. Time stretched and slowed, and a new kind of breath filled my lungs.

My time capsule took me to Crossbay Lanes as “Celebration” roared from the speakers, and swift feet in Reebok sneakers shifted towards bowling pins. The hint of a kiss in the air like lilac.

Bubbe stood with her waist cinched by Gitanos while my grandpa grabbed his compact to check his pompadour hair. He’d bought her an Orange Julius and a box of Chuckles. There was a glowing ember of a maybe as I began weaving a world to protect myself from the real one.

Bubble continued driving down Cross Bay Boulevard to Ozone Park to Woodhaven to Rego Park. My nostalgic daze couldn’t withstand the chronic honks that reverberated through the potholed roads. Wading in and out of 2020 and the 1980s, I entered a state of vertigo: there was a strong sense of dizziness that took hold of me as I sat in the back of Bubbe’s Chevrolet Monte Carlo awaiting balance’s arrival. My stomach calcified the bits of dough from before, churned into aching knots. Something was overflowing, spilling into the world.

Disillusioned by a devastating pandemic and the inheritance of a fragmented nation, it was easier to surrender to a false reality. What else am I to do but pray?

Hiding from the side-view mirrors, I held my eyes to the sky.