

Introduction: Between the Boulevards

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Imagine having to take the 7 train to the ballpark, looking like you're [riding through] Beirut next to some kid with purple hair next to some queer with AIDS right next to some dude who just got out of jail for the fourth time right next to some 20-year-old mom with four kids. It's depressing.

—John Rocker, former Major League Baseball relief pitcher

It's not the prettiest borough; upon first glance, not the most memorable. Some parts are nice to look at, if suburbia puts you at ease or if you enjoy the passing view of graffiti-adorned Five Points, from the window of an aboveground 7 train. It's rare that you'll hear people wax poetic about Queens the way they might over the concrete canyons of Manhattan or the beautiful brownstones of Brooklyn. The Bronx enjoys a reputation for grit and authenticity, and even Staten Island retains a place in many a New Yorker's heart as the mysterious underdog, a place people love to hate even if they've never been there. People tend to forget about Queens. They're surprised to hear that culture exists here, too, as if some kind of force field exists along the righthand side of the East River. When the Museum of Modern Art moved part of its collection to Long Island City in 2002, art lovers lauded the results; now the MoMA QNS building, once a Swingline staple factory, stands as a big, blue, abandoned carcass—a testament to New York's short-term memory. For the recent city transplant,

Queens is often a footnote, a destination that makes a rare appearance in the New York index, only on those days when Indian food sounds good or there's an afternoon Mets game to attend.

Me? I'm in love with Queens, my home borough and final destination, wherever I may travel. While others neglect its presence in favor of supposedly more exciting places, I'm constantly pulled back by the force of its magnetism—the wealth of culture, diversity, and history that translates into possibility. I'm a Queens girl, through and through, with my long fingernails and hoop earrings, my love of animal prints and propensity to wear too much eyeliner. I've suffered the sting of backhanded compliments such as, “She's such a Queens girl, yet she's highly educated,” and I've put up with friends who never dared to tread across the Queensboro Bridge. Still, nothing can tarnish my Queens pride, passed down from my mother to the kid who always sat in the passenger seat beside her, watching the sights fly by: the Russian storefronts of Rego Park, the bodegas of Corona, Rockaway's boardwalks, the World's Fair Unisphere in Flushing Meadow Park, innumerable historic cemeteries, and the open roads of expressways and highways, stacked and winding and stretched for miles.

I grew up between boulevards, in a co-op by the intersection of Junction and Northern Boulevards. My grandparents left the Bronx and transplanted the Rosenberg family to this very building when my mother was fourteen years old. Junction serves as the borderline between two distinctly different neighborhoods: to the east, ethnically diverse Corona, filled with housing projects and overlooking the relics of the 1964–65 World's Fair, as well as the Queens Museum of Art and CitiField, risen from the ashes of Shea Stadium; to the west, historic Jackson Heights, where my mother attended school—a place I remember for its Tudor-style homes, the lush gardens of St. Mark's Episcopal Church, and rows of sturdy trees that lined the way home from preschool. My mother's walks home were never leisurely; I recall tales of bullies who chased her down Northern Boulevard, hollering nasty names, as if this place didn't belong to her—as if *she* didn't belong. Yet she was resilient enough to stay despite the inauspicious start, talented and sharp enough to become a leader in her field, educating thousands of Queens schoolchildren, and stubborn enough to raise a child of her own in Queens, taking the borough into her heart and carving out a home.

The Kent building, sandwiched between the Lawrence and the Jackson in the Southridge co-op complex between Northern and 34th Avenue, will always be my safe haven, home to two apartments that served as the backdrop of my childhood. My parents bought their co-op a year before I was born, soon after they married and my mother's surname went from

Rosenberg to Steinberg. We lived on the fifth floor in apartment 5V (*V as in Victor*, we always told delivery boys). My bedroom was stuffed with toys and hardly ever clean, much to my father's dismay; it overlooked the playground downstairs, where I slid down the slide, rode the seesaw, and avoided the threatening heights of the monkey bars.

Then there was my grandparents' third-floor home with its rich, chocolate-colored carpeting, library of encyclopedias, and a bedroom reserved for me that once belonged to my mother and aunt. I slept over often, usually after our weekly Wednesday night dinners. Marion, my grandmother, would make something delicious—potted chicken, meatballs and spaghetti, hamburgers—and my great aunt Elsie arrived with the same box of assorted cookies from the same Manhattan bakery she always frequented. We'd pretend to enjoy the rest of the cookies after we divvied up the precious tricolor marzipans. On weekends, during the spring and summer, I'd listen for the familiar jingle of the Mister Softee ice cream truck downstairs and drag my grandmother along, as if life itself depended on catching the truck before it fed all the neighborhood children, then departed—as if it wouldn't sit in that same spot all day, as it always did. I could see my grandparents' bedroom from my own and I always tried to catch my grandmother looking out her window, so we could wave and exchange a serendipitous smile.

Junction Boulevard didn't truly become a part of my daily life until later in my adolescence, when the rides home from school ceased and the bus and subway were the only viable options. The stretch of Junction between Northern Boulevard and Roosevelt Avenue has always been a sort of city unto itself, the dominant ethnicities constantly changing over time. As I grew older, I resented the boulevard for its distinct lack of gentrification while other streets in Jackson Heights got their Starbucks and FYEs. Though I could usually make the trek to the 7 train without anyone's notice, I did get the occasional catcall of "Yo, Vanilla," which left me feeling completely out of place in a moving cloud of Dominican, African American, and Korean neighbors. Still, I took advantage of what Junction had to offer: mainly a plethora of ninety-nine cent stores, two Payless Shoes locations, and beauty supply shops that offered designer hair products at half the usual price. There was also a Wendy's, which morphed into a KFC, then a Duane Reade pharmacy, and now stands as a decimated, empty lot after an unfortunate fire, waiting to be rebuilt into someone else's vision.

I returned to Junction after college, then left soon after I completed grad school, relocating to another infamous boulevard: Queens Boulevard,

known as both a fertile breeding ground for cross-culture life, and as a death trap for hurried pedestrians, unwilling to wait for the light to change. My first apartment was on 40th Street in Sunnyside, a block away from the heavy traffic of the boulevard, smack-dab in an immigrant-heavy neighborhood that enjoyed the diversity of Russian grocery stores, Halal markets, British import shops, and too many Thai restaurants to count. In the summertime, I could grab fresh fruit on a Saturday morning from the nearby farmer's market and sit on a park bench, rows upon rows of postwar buildings to the south and Manhattan's gleaming skyline to the west. I was so close to Manhattan and yet everything I needed was right there in Sunnyside, easily within reach. A short trip on the Q60 bus route took me all the way down the boulevard to the Queens Center mall, a place my parents hated to visit in the '80s, cramped for space and filled with people who seemed to speak in every language except English. Now, the mall is three times as big, chock-full of high-end shops. In high school, my friend Hai-Phung and I would sometimes take a bus there after school, browse and eat in the food court; then we'd sit outside, whiling away the time and feeling rebellious, until she had to travel home to the Bronx and cook dinner for her Vietnamese family.

My mother saw to it that the most pervasive boulevard of my young life was Northern Boulevard, which stretches, long and lazy, all the way across the northern part of the borough, from Long Island City to Little Neck. Afraid that I wouldn't get the best education back in Jackson Heights or Corona, she pulled strings and enrolled me in elementary school in Bayside, an affluent neighborhood that many newcomers to New York have never seen nor visited. While we stayed put on Junction and Northern throughout my childhood, my first real friends all lived a half-hour away in Bayside, where my mother worked and longed to reside as well. They enjoyed suburban lifestyles in two- and three-story homes, content with their outdoor shopping centers and general lack of culture. Still, I sniffed out a hint of diversity in Bayside, a glimmer of the immigrant dream: While one friend's mother had never met a Jew before me, another friend's grandmother chopped the heads off chickens on the kitchen counter, Chinese soap operas on television providing constant background noise.

Because my mother worked at Bayside High School and I attended school nearby, we were constantly on the move between townships, the connecting road being Northern Boulevard. Name any place along its winding path and I'm sure to have a memory of it. I remember bus rides to Main Street, Queens' answer to Chinatown, where my friends and I frequented our favorite pizzeria and then went home for dinner as

if nothing had happened; or the time my parents took me to see *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* at the theater near Northern's intersection with Crocheron Avenue. The film scared me so much, I had nightmares for weeks; I'd turn my head away from the window whenever we passed the theater thereafter, until it shut down and made way for a Korean club.

Go farther east on Northern and you'll hit the intersection with Francis Lewis Boulevard, close to I.S. 25, where I attended middle school. Farther than that is the Bayside Diner, right off the Cross Island Expressway—a favorite eatery of my family's, reserved for special occasions when the Mark Twain Diner in Jackson Heights wouldn't cut it (which also happens to reside on Northern Boulevard and where my father still goes most mornings for English muffins with cream cheese). Though my mother and grandparents are no longer around, I like to go there with my father now and imagine my mother sitting at the table beside me, pulling the Melba toast from the bread bowl; Seymour, my grandfather, returning from the restroom, a slight wobble to his otherwise powerful stride, wondering aloud where the goddamn check is already.

Beyond Bayside, there is Alley Pond Park, then Douglaston and Little Neck—places that exist in my head almost as a dream, as I grow older and lose more of the people who share in my memories. Here, you'll find the Stop & Shop supermarket, which my grandparents frequented every week, despite the fact that it was forty-five minutes away, and their favorite MSG-free Chinese restaurant. And there are even more diners—the Seville (now closed), the Scobee, the Seven Seas—each of which my family derided for their own special reasons. In a way, I feel more connected to these neighborhoods than I do to Jackson Heights and Corona, which both existed right outside my door for years. Though we lived close to the city (code for Manhattan, for those not raised in Queens) and couldn't afford to leave, my mother made sure that I got the idyllic suburban childhood—that I never found myself fleeing from bullies and racing down the street, desperate to get home. Yet, at the time, I felt a different kind of loneliness: a feeling of never quite belonging anywhere I went. Though the color of my skin matched those of my elementary school classmates, it didn't stop the occasional rat-faced kid from spitting “Happy *Hanukkah*” at me in a mocking tone. And when I attended Jewish day camp during the summers, I was seen as the Other by Long Island princesses who had never stepped foot past Douglaston—a city girl from Queens, no better than trash, all because I lived on the wrong end of Northern Boulevard.

Looking back, I know I'm lucky. I'm not just from a particular area of Queens, but rather the entirety of it: the largest borough in New York

and most diverse county in America, with two major airports, numerous roadways, and a long list of neighborhoods. Each street, each avenue, each corner belongs to me. The idea for this anthology came to me when I realized that most people don't know Queens the way I do, nor the way my mother did, and yet there are so many stories to tell. The borough's contributions to pop culture run the gamut from the Ramones to Ron Jeremy, LL Cool J to Fran Drescher; it's the final resting place of Louis Armstrong and the birthplace of hip-hop legend Run DMC, who once announced to the world, "*It's Christmastime in Hollis, Queens.*" In Queens, we do our best to triumph over class-related adversity and we share the unique aspects of our cultures; we grow up in the isolated shadow of old industry, yet we welcome visitors from all parts of the world; we pack the 7 train when the Mets hit a winning streak and we still root for them when they lose—and they lose a lot, but we love them anyway.

With so much of my family gone, Queens will never be the same place I knew as a child, the borough my mother bequeathed to me, inside and out—but the memories are there, and they're a comfort. I write these words from a desk in Philadelphia, where I now reside, only a couple of months after moving out of that apartment back in Sunnyside. I miss it there, and not just for the convenience of stores that carry any ethnic food ingredient I need, or the proximity to the airports, or the overhead rattle of the overcrowded, often foul-smelling, *wonderful* 7 train, filled with all its queers and single moms and diverse faces—but simply the feeling of knowing that no matter what, I'm a *Queens* girl, born and bred, and there, I truly belong.

Just last month, I returned to the crossroads of Junction and Northern, and spent a weekend in apartment 5V for the first time since I moved out. Down on Junction, there's a man who stands outside a cell phone store, screaming at the top of his lungs in Spanish, whose face I remembered very clearly. I hadn't been back there in over two years and yet, it was the exact same man, hollering about cell phones, as if no time had passed at all. When I first turned onto the street, outside of the Kent building, I saw the Junction Food Bazaar in the distance, which lives on the next block. The awning had a large sign attached to it that said WELCOME HOME in all caps, and I startled, wondering if the universe was speaking to me. As I got closer, I tried to find out what the sign meant, but had no luck—just a sign hanging from an awning, for no other reason than to welcome me home; to remind me just where home is.