

CROSSING HIGHBRIDGE

by Maureen Waters

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The life of the neighborhood spilled out into the street. In our apartment house, which has vanished completely, windows were open and doors stood ajar. A continual coming and going eroded barriers between public and private space. Every one was familiar. Families grew larger, four and five children were squeezed in together, but no one ever moved because the rent was good. We were accustomed to a rattling hum on all sides, the domestic quarrels upstairs and down. We knew which baby had colic, who had chickenpox, whose father had come home for dinner. We usually knew what he was eating too. The corridors reeked of cooking, ham and cabbage, sausages, beef stew. There was little visiting between one small apartment and another. The women in house dresses leaned over the bannisters or the window sills to talk to neighbors or else went outside, arranging themselves like a Greek chorus along the stone fence across the street.

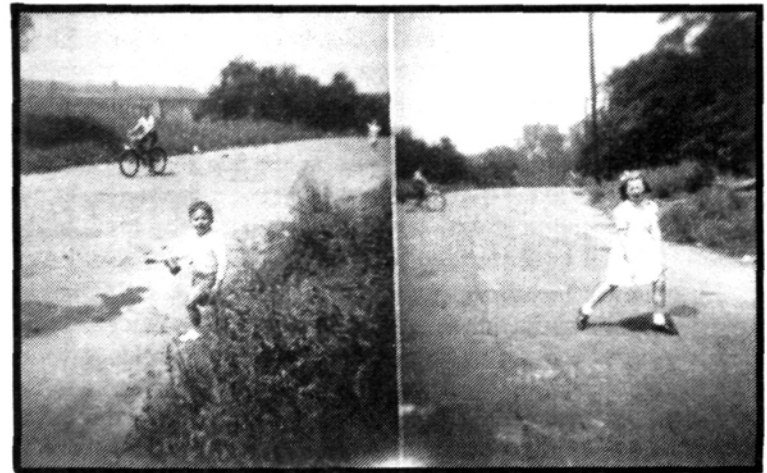
Our apartment house and those adjoining it were only five stories high, the congenial scale of many European cities. In central and southern Highbridge, near the Jerome Avenue Park, were a number of handsome, tall art deco buildings, which combined the exotic-Mayan and Aztec flourishes, twin towers, a waterfall-with a modern, recessed, geometric design. Complete with elevators. In our part of town there were courtyards planted with trees and shrubs, but an elevator was a rarity, so, whether we liked it or not, there was plenty of exercise. Particularly on washdays when the roof was aswarm with flopping sheets and towels and swelling bloomers. I can still smell the tarry, irregular surface of Bronx rooftops and remember the vertigo I felt looking over the edge-like the edge of a subway platform-imagining the whole thing might dip abruptly, and I would be pitched into space.

I early developed a sense that my footing was a trifle uncertain, subject to sudden shifts and dislocations. Irish girls, my father maintained, were awkward on their feet. Like ducks and geese, perhaps, more at home in other spheres. The first sign of this enduring affliction occurred when I sprained my ankle on the steps of the Bronx Courthouse and was forced to resume a seat in the family stroller, a splendid large wicker stroller. Unlike the efficient aluminum matchsticks of today, it was a highly visible affair. Wheeled about for weeks, swathed in adhesive tape from knee to toe, I seethed with misery, fearing that the world would judge me, age 5, an overgrown baby.

Was it then I sensed how reluctantly an Irish family loosens its grip?

On University Avenue there were several older women living near us in mother-daughter combinations, who looked much the same to my child's eye. We saw them rarely but sensed them listening behind their doors as we came and went; the usual bombardment of neighborly sounds wasn't enough for them. Growing up, my sister Agnes and I felt surrounded by curious ears and

eyes, by people who asserted their kinship and hence the right to know everything that went on. We might as well have been living in a Mayo village. No matter what time or with whom we arrived, there was an interested witness "on the fence" or behind a door. And Mother made use of this circumstance to keep us in line: "What will the neighbors think?" "We don't want the neighbors to know." She remained aloof from the enterprising, gossipy inclination of the community.



At play on Lawrence Avenue which ran through Brown's Hill, a tract of vacant land between 164th and 167th Streets that was a favorite place for Highbridge children. This photo was taken around 1947. (Courtesy of Maureen Griffin Mooney.)

Downstairs lived a family of five daughters, the Dohertys, pink cheeked and pretty with fair curly hair and cranky dispositions. There seemed always a smaller and a smaller one trailing down the stairs, struggling to keep up with the rest. They were a provoking lot, inclined to hold grudges and be better than anyone else-regular whirling dervishes-jumping rope. If you tackled one, in an attempt at justice, the whole tribe would be after you. The oldest, who regularly left Agnes' shins black and blue, shocked us all by joining the Sisters of Charity when she was 14. Peggy, who could name all the states in alphabetical order and tell you their capitals and a good deal more besides. If you gave her an opening.

Like most of the kids on the block, they were intensely competitive at ball games, games with marbles and chalk, kick the can, red light: green light, potsie, as well as jumping rope. Ball games were played obsessively against the stoop and along the walls of the buildings, box ball on the sidewalk, softball on the street with the boys jeering from the sideline. There was a fierce interest in coming out on top, holding out the longest, beating off all comers. Nobody played with dolls (at least not in public). What a strange group of girls we were, children of immigrants, fighting for a toehold in the promised land. Expected to be little angels at home and certainly at school, cramped up for hours in small spaces, we had energy to burn.

No one ever turned the other cheek except the one Jewish girl on our block. Marlene, the peacemaker, plump and hospitable, who invited us all to her home, opting for rational discourse at the center of the daily squall. Actually I preferred peace myself and often maintained it as I was one of the older kids. But I went in terror of two other girls-no bigger than myself.

really—yet fully capable of leaving me dazed on the sidewalk. At 12 I struck a truce with the more combative one, a stout girl with eyes like prune pits, because we were both in love with the same handsome boy. When I married (someone else entirely) she attached herself to Mother, often carrying home packages for her from the store, and they would talk about the old days when we were kids together.

In the old days Agnes, younger, small of stature, but wonderfully outspoken, had a much harder time of it. Outnumbered by the usual bloodthirsty gang, she would race for the lobby of our building and frantically press our bell. This was my signal to drop everything and race downstairs to rescue her. All I had to do was emerge ferociously in daylight, and they took to their heels. One time I overreacted by chasing one brat, Margy Shannon, all the way back to her own apartment house and up five flights of stairs. At the top, just as I was reaching for her skinny red neck, her mother appeared—the very image of maternal wrath—and chased me down those same five flights and back up to my own door. Where fortunately my own mother waited—a barrier between me and all harm. Implacable in the teeth of the Shannons: “If I get my hands on that one. . .”

How nimble I was with my rickety ankles securely gripped by Woolworth sneakers. How speedily I covered the blocks, dodging snowballs, rocks, stockings packed with flour on Halloween. When not on foot, I raced on skates, a key in perpetual motion around my neck (and worn secretly under my uniform at school). We played tag flying down the steps of the park and around the stone water works across the way, on and off the sidewalks, defying fate and gravity, a terror to pedestrians.



Charlie, Patrick and Jack Mooney trying out their new tricycles on Brown's Hill in Highbridge, around 1943. (Courtesy of Charlie Mooney.)

The one signal that cleared the block, bringing almost instantaneous peace to the neighborhood, was the summons to supper. There was no ignoring it. The supper hour was writ in stone. Indeed, from one end of the week to the other there was a predictable quality to family meals in the Bronx.

Sunday was the high point. A day which began with fasting before Mass and communion. Actually, under the old dispensation, the fast began at midnight. Whatever you were up to the night before, whatever tasty snack was in your hand, you partied with one eye on the clock. At midnight the dance went on, but neither food nor drink would pass those Catholic lips. There was a certain pleasurable pang in all this self-denial that no doubt went beyond the religious impulse. It set us apart as people who lived up to high standards; it gave us a sense of rigor, of fine aristocratic

purity and reserve. But after Mass we descended in hordes on the neighborhood deli and made off with quantities of baked ham, roast beef, seeded rolls, blueberry pie and—what else—but black pudding kept by the Dutch deli man for the delicatation of his Irish customers.

After lunch we sat around reading the funnies, took sedate walks in our Sunday dresses, watched the boats on the river and otherwise killed time before getting down to the real business of Sunday dinner—usually a splendid roast with all the trimmings, which would reappear on Monday in a new guise. Through the week thereafter the main chance was meat loaf or hamburger or stew. The leftovers, pasted with mayonnaise and slapped between two pieces of Wonder Bread, reemerged as school lunch. On Thursdays when the pickings were slim, Agnes and I were reduced to Velveeta cheese or onion sandwiches dosed with salt. (What excellent digestive systems we had then.) If there was nothing much in the larder, Mother would bake soda bread or mix up a huge batter and fry it in the pan; with butter it was delicious. Friday, naturally, was fish. Frozen and disagreeable, a penitential meal. By Saturday—the paycheck was cashed—we were on the upswing again.

For all my passionate interest in food, I never learned much about cooking in the Bronx. For a time at 11 or 12 with a girlfriend I devoted Saturday afternoons to baking brownies and cookies of the oatmeal and chocolate chip variety. We were making objects out of plaster of paris at the same time; both homemade products had much the same consistency. When my own children were small I mastered the art of cupcake making—both chocolate and vanilla—so the poor things would not be disgraced before their peers. But cooking as an art form or even as a pleasurable and comforting activity had little appeal until much later in life. A good daughter, slicing up the beans or washing up the dishes, I nonetheless resisted the domestic norm. The last thing in the world I wanted to be was a housewife. That was for the intellectually feeble, and blighted or the insane. In high school my electives were math and science, I wouldn't be caught dead in home economics.

Agnes and I shared a room on University Avenue in an apartment that was shabby but comfortable, furnished with more or less the same objects for the 16 years I lived there. We rearranged things or touched them up with paint; very little was ever discarded. Our four rooms with a view had also a large bath and kitchen, and weirdly long halls stretching from the living room to our parents' bedroom and from our room to the front door. At six and seven, before I had become a fully fledged terror in the streets, I was often terrified myself at night by sulfurous dreams in which I was pursued by hairy beasts and fanged serpents (phallic implications, certainly). Half paralyzed with fear I would creep down the long, long hallway to Mom and Dad and safety. Poor Agnes was left behind to be devoured.

When I was younger still, I dreamed of fish that used to be displayed in large tanks at our fish store, the floor of which was heavily strewn with sawdust. A variety of fish, swarms of them, bulking at the bottom, level with my eyes. I watched while they were hauled out, gasping, onto large wooden chopping blocks, their bellies ripped open, the entrails spilling out. Blood streaked the aprons of the fish men, though the blocks were wiped immediately clean. Large, dark cold fish, white bellied, they seemed to be waiting for the knife, numb in the water of the tank, not swimming around gaily like the angel fish or the striped guppies that were pets. At night I dreamed of them. They were flat, toothless, but swam over me in immense numbers. Insistent, overpower-

ing, even monotonous in their bulk and inevitability. Evicted from the warm comfort of my parents' bed, alone in the dark living room, east of the Concourse, I was terrified. I dreamed of them for years.

While I was her staunch defender in public, Agnes and I did plenty of squabbling in the privacy of our room on University Avenue. This became more heated when we were older, and I could no longer regard her as "the baby," a more or less benign figure, to be treated with affection and never taken seriously as a rival. From infancy she grew a solemn little tot, shy but hospitable, inviting neighbors in for tea when Mother was looking the other way. At nine and ten, however, Agnes had pronounced views and pronounced preferences. While I wavered and brooded over a course of action, she would not budge once she had taken a position. In time she even grew taller, a serious affront, to which I could only respond with mockery, a favorite ploy on both sides: "Oh, Maureen's feet are as green as the grass, and the boys all stare when they see her pass/one foot here on the curbstone fine; the other way down on the trolley line."



Maureen & Geraldine Griffin playing on Brown's Hill in Highbridge around 1944. The view is north towards 167th and 168th Streets, with Noonan Plaza in the background. (Courtesy of Maureen Griffin Mooney.)

At one point our differences took the palpable form of painting our room two different colors. The dividing line was drawn through the dead center. The pink side—mine—was embellished with ruffled bed spread and curtains, pleasurably starched and ironed year after year out of fitful longings to be fragiley feminine. On the blue side was Agnes' neatly tailored bed, the radio, the bookstand and the bleeding heart of Jesus—three square feet of it. For 20 years Agnes had to look up at that heart bleeding down over her drop by drop, the mournful face of Jesus inclined toward her as she slept. . . nervously. Would the whole thing collapse on top of her in the night? She got the holy water and the blessed palm too. My side was secular.

Agnes' growing height had one distinct advantage: it got us into movies after 5:00. During the day I advanced on the ticket office looking much younger than my 13 or 14 years (an attribute that disappeared with time when it could have been ever more useful.) While Agnes lurked around the corner, I purchased two half-price tickets. In the evening we reversed the process, becoming adults, so they would let us in. I never understood how the good old Ogden Avenue theatre stayed in business with such crooks as ourselves as patrons. A child's admission fee for a Saturday matinee was 12 cents; it was 50 cents for "adults" in the evening. The first 100 kids to arrive for the matinee received a bonus—a comic book or a package of gum. The show went on for four

hours, offering a double feature, eight cartoons and one or two cliff hangers, which we followed episode by episode from Saturday to Saturday, as well as the News of the World. When that MGM lion roared we were transported to paradise. Of course for the same 50 cents, we could go literally to the Paradise created by Loews and luxuriate in thick red velour, tall sculptured columns, plushly upholstered seats, a winding staircase leading to a balcony, hung with crystal chandeliers and fitted out with sumptuous baroque flourishes. Loew's Paradise on the Grand Concourse near Fordham Road had as well softly rotating lights, starry in design, a great place to go with a date and then to Krums afterwards for an orgy of ice cream.

Agnes and I usually went to the movies together, although we did not always go to the same movie. From 10 to 14 we had different tastes. I liked adventure, mystery, tales of bloodshed and horror, pythons dropping out of trees onto unwary travelers, whole families swallowed up by earthquakes, their hands waving above the cracks. For a while Agnes suffered in silence, her eyes riveted on the red exit sign. Then she rebelled and went off to a musical comedy. Whoever left the movie first waited for the other at the bus stop. She usually rode. I usually walked, thriftily saving five cents, but we always arrived home together. Otherwise we'd never get out again.

How we loved those old movies! Like the radio programs of the forties—*The Lone Ranger*, *The Green Hornet*, *Superman*, *Inner Sanctum*—they fed our hunger for color and adventure. Showed us people who led daring and romantic or, at least, different lives: Dana Andrews in his lone fighter over the Pacific,



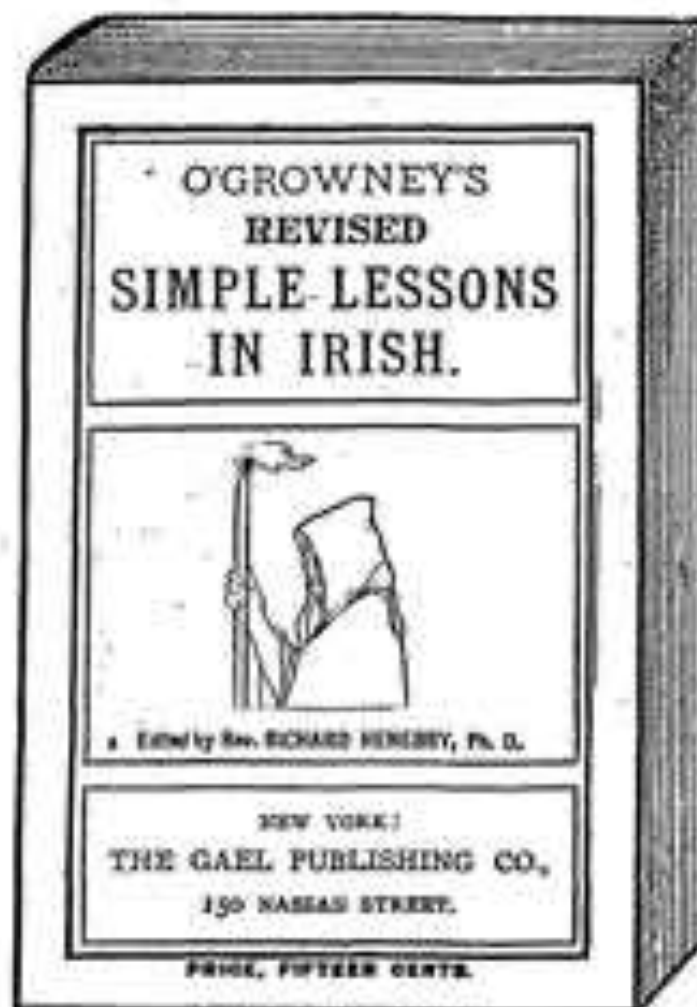
McCombs Park, at the foot of Ogden Avenue, was where almost every Highbridge child had their First Communion photo taken. Anne Conroy and Maureen Griffin's turn came on 3 May 1947. (Courtesy of Maureen Griffin Mooney.)

Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dancing on a penthouse roof overlooking Manhattan. At the movies we saw Paris with Gene Kelly and the West with Gene Autry, splendid even in black and white. Driving through Monument Valley, Utah, in the 80's was like driving through an old MGM movie set. I kept expecting the band of Indians to come racing along the mesa. The movies shaped our expectations, showed us an America that was beautiful and glamorous. We weren't aware that it was racist or sexist. We wanted to be cowboys too.

We all loved Westerns. Mother wanted to see the horses and the green fields; Dad wanted the showdown at the O.K. corral. The virtues they presented were familiar ones. The hero always had the best horse, there was plenty of singing, and the bad guys were vanquished at the end. Actually Dad never had much time for movies, but there was usually a paperback western in his back pocket when he went off to work. He traded back and forth with

his cronies on the subway, hoarding favorites like Zane Grey. There they were 20 feet underground, locked in a change booth, and dreaming of the wild west. I later suspected that in their own way, led by the redoubtable Michael Quill, they were reliving and relishing the old Irish wars, bringing them to much more satisfactory conclusions.

On holidays and summer evenings entertainment was closer to home. It was then that our super, Tom Reilly, played the accordion loudly and plaintively while the neighbors gathered for a dance. The shouts and singing, the pounding rhythms of their feet shook the windows of the fourth floor. Red eyed, our heads muffled in our pillows, Agnes and I creaked along with them through "The Walls of Limerick," "The Siege of Ennis," "The Stack of Barley." On and on through the night. There were limits to our enthusiasm for the old country.



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