

2 • Opera on Bank Street

A squib in *The Villager* for October 1955 bore the headline “Opera Baby Arrives.” We were opera people. Like a child of the circus or a farm, I couldn’t imagine any other life. New York has had live theater since the 1700s, when a downtown theater entertained General George Washington with Shakespeare’s plays, comedies like *The School for Scandal*, and farces with white actors in blackface.

Even if the performers were awful, it was probably a jolly crowd. English immigrants had imported their cheery custom of letting prostitutes ply their trade in the upper balconies of theaters. Policemen pocketed bribes and looked the other way while theater critics warned readers that respectable wives and daughters might be mixed with “the abandoned of the sex.”

My parents, Ann and Larry, met during the Metropolitan Opera’s 1945 season, both twenty, eyeing each other on the cheap seats line for weeks. Ann and her friend Rose went to every Saturday matinee. Ann was a petite, raven-haired stunner with a dazzling smile who favored short, curled coifs, mascara, black eyeliner, and vivid lipstick. On theater day she wore her one elegant coat and spike heels.

Larry Florio, an aspiring theater director from Hoboken, New Jersey, was there with friends. He’d just left the army, a slim charmer with wavy brown hair, big brown eyes, and an easy laugh. “My goodness, how good-looking your father is, Donna,” fluttered Miss Scher, my sixth-grade teacher, after parent-teacher night. “Very handsome indeed.” Marie in apartment 5A, my first babysitter, who was a teenager in 1955, still says that he was a dish.

Their 1950 wedding lasted ten hours, because all of the performer-guests were determined to out-sing each other. They’d arranged a dude-ranch honeymoon but realized on their first morning that it was a ridiculous destination for theater people like them. They

sneaked around New York that week, going to every show they could afford and avoiding their friends.

My earliest memories are the dusty smells of painted canvas and wood-framed scenery leaning against brick walls at the Amato Opera at 159 Bleecker Street, a former movie theater, where Tony and Sally Amato coached students like Mom through roles like Mimi in *La Bohème*. If it wasn't your turn for the lead role, you sang in the chorus, painted sets, and worked the box office.

The theater was scarcely chic. Winos snored and peed on the sidewalk outside the lobby. Dad bribed them to move away with coffee and doughnuts during shows. It was a place for Dad to learn stagecraft with no budget and on the fly. When he rigged a fountain for one scene, he begged the cast not to use the backstage toilet. Inevitably someone forgot. The audible flush was followed by a drooping spray, while the audience tittered.

The Amatos' idea of nurturing opera singers in the States was radical in the 1940s. Europe, the birthplace of opera, was *the* place that produced singers. Impresarios from American theaters like the Metropolitan Opera wouldn't even audition Americans for lead roles. Aspiring singers, many of them first generation from Europe anyway, joined regional companies in Italy, France, Germany, or Hungary. Suitably exotic stage personas were concocted. With a few years of coaching and leading roles under her belt, a Miss Frances O'Brien of Cleveland might return as Madame Francesca DiBrioni of Rome.

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Ann's parents, immigrants from a village in southern Italy, lost their money in the 1930s Depression. Her home, when my parents met, was a cold-water walk-up in the poor Italian enclave of East Harlem, where only bookies and tough guys had money.

The year before they met, Ann had won a national voice competition. Her prize was two paid years of opera study in Rome. "My sister needed to sing and have a big, exciting life like she needed to breathe," Vicky, her younger sister, told me. Two years earlier, she'd won a scholarship to elite Manhattanville College, a school for moneyed Catholics like the Kennedys, but she'd had to give it up when her father lost his job. "She tried not to let me hear but she cried

every night for weeks,” Vicky said. “My poor sister had to be an office clerk, the last thing she wanted.”

Second chances like Rome didn’t often arrive in East Harlem. But Ann’s father, usually indulgent of his beautiful daughter, became a raging peasant. “I’ll never forget the day that award letter came,” Vicky said. “I could hear Pop screaming from the stairs. Your mother was slumped at the kitchen table. She’d been crying so hard her eyes were swollen shut. I’d never seen my father like this, ever. ‘You’ll leave this house married,’ he was screaming, ‘or you leave it dead.’”

Larry fell in love with the Village and the arts as an NYU student. Ann wanted out of East Harlem. Two romantics, deeply in love, they had a child to complete the happy picture. But it didn’t take long for them to realize that bohemia and a squalling baby were a bad mix. So was a third competitor for center stage, something neither of these charming but insecure and immature people, already shoving each other aside for attention, could handle. Screaming fights rang through apartment 2B at least once a week as I groped the line between smiles and fury, trying to be a good girl and keep them happy with each other and with me. “Your parents shouldn’t have had children,” Dad’s closest friend, a conductor, told me decades later. “And they should have divorced, forgive me, Donna, for saying so. Singers, especially women, blame anything but themselves if they don’t make it. They say, ‘If it wasn’t for marrying or having kids, I would have been a star.’ It’s terrible. Their delusions ruin their lives.”

It wasn’t all bad. When the three of us were laughing and telling each other funny stories, we were happy. Our unconventional lifestyle helped, too. Given our varied theater schedules, we simply weren’t together all that much except on Sundays. Grandma, Mom’s mother, moving downstairs to apartment 1A in 63 Bank when I was eight, eased things. Visits with Dad’s sisters and their husbands and children at my Florio grandparents’ rambling old house in Staten Island helped too. But my real haven, where I found the affection and approval our apartment lacked, was on Bank Street with the neighbors who became my allies and surrogate family.

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Ann and Larry were charismatic raconteurs, and my arrival was one of their favorite stories. Sally Amato’s younger sister, Annie, and

Annie's husband, John Frydel, both opera singers, were our upstairs neighbors at 63 Bank, and their daughter, Irene, was a year and a half older than me. Irene's first memory is sitting in a lap, watching my pregnant mother sing, alone in the spotlight on a blacked-out stage, in a white ball gown, celebrating her free life in *La Traviata*, her favorite role. In late October, eight months along, Ann planned a cast party for Dad's production of *Carmen*, opening that night. She'd just stopped performing that week and only because her legs swelled. Even heavily pregnant she could still blast full voice, which astounded her coach.

The supermarket cashier eyed her belly and suggested that the groceries be delivered. "Oh, no need," Ann told her. "The baby isn't due for another month." She pulled her heavy cart home and up the steps. As she prepared the food, I announced my own plans: the first of our many disagreements. She lowered herself to a chair and reached for the phone.

As a kid, I learned to keep out of the way before opening nights. Nervous singers wandered around, humming, practicing scenes. They rolled their eyes if I asked them to play. Stagehands hammered, swearing like pirates. Larry yelled at choristers who still weren't hitting their marks on time. "People! The prisoners have to be in place by the downbeat!" Ann knew she was breaking a cardinal rule with that call.

"Who is this?" snarled Tony Amato, score in hand.

"It's Ann. I need Larry. My water has broken."

"Have you lost your mind? It's two hours to curtain! For Christ's sake, Ann, call a plumber!" He banged down the phone.

Ann listened disconsolately to the dial tone. What now? She seasoned the chicken, wondering what to do.

Sally, folding programs, glanced sideways at Dad and sidled out the door. She dodged through the Bleecker Street pushcarts, running hard, and made it to Bank Street in minutes. "We're taking a cab, Ann," Sally announced grandly. A taxi to New York Hospital on the Upper East Side was a huge expense, but Sally's conscience was sore.

Several hours later, in a labor room full of groaning women, as my father finally arrived to pace in the waiting room, Ann was seriously uncomfortable. She called the nurse over, expecting drugs. In the 1950s, American women were typically knocked unconscious and

presented with their bundle when they woke up. But her chart had been mismarked “Natural Childbirth.” Staying awake and breathing through labor pains was a radical new idea then, and completely unknown to my mother. When the smiling nurse told her that it was certainly “time to do your wonderful breathing exercises,” Ann was flattered. Oh, well, of course, they know I’m a singer, she preened. She started blasting the scales, trills, and arpeggios that had wowed her coach.

Meanwhile, on Bank Street, Annie and John Frydel had the keys to our apartment. Everyone was jazzed on opening nights, and no one, happy and hungry, intended to let my arrival cancel the party. The Frydels unlocked our door, and John mixed his lethal Manhattans. None of them could cook, but they sure could party. (Several years later, Annie Frydel would hustle Irene and me out of 4B as party guests laughed hysterically: Larry and John were freeing soused love-makers who’d gotten wedged into the bathtub.)

As Ann sang me to life, the cast lit our rickety stove and attempted dinner. The nurse rushed in as the phone rang in the labor room. “Could we speak with Ann Florio, please?” slurred a voice on the phone. The nurse heard voices in the background saying, “Where does she keep the pepper?” and “Ask her how long the chicken bakes.”

The nurse threw up her hands and wheeled Ann’s gurney to the phone. “Talk to them, get them off the phone, and then *please* shut up. This place sounds like Bellevue.”

The cast got dinner, Ann got drugs, and Larry got a standing ovation when he came home at 4 a.m.

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I toddled around a warm backstage world of Egyptian slaves, French courtesans, and Spanish gypsies. Women in thick white nylon panties and pointy cone bras smiled as they patted on pancake makeup, and then sat me carefully on their costumes, whispering Dr. Seuss and fairy tales as we turned the pages together. “Don’t be scared. It’s only make-believe,” I reassured friends in the audience. I’d learned that lesson out front when Mommy/Madame Butterfly stabbed herself and fell over dead. I screamed myself onto the stage as she scrambled back to life and took her bows with me crying into her kimono.

I made my debut at four, as the love child of Sally's Madame Butterfly. Everyone fussed as they dressed me in a kimono and flip-flops, telling me that I was the most important part of the show. When Butterfly's maid took my hand, we walked onstage to Sally, who beamed and held her arms open. There is nothing for the child to sing, but that didn't matter. Sally, her black wig sparkling with jewels, was a queen, and I was her princess. I felt the hushed attention of the audience as Sally cupped my face and sang her love for me. My parents came onstage, clapping and yelling "Brava!" when I held Sally's hand and took my first bow at the end of the show. They coaxed me into a snowsuit when we left, but I wouldn't relinquish the flip-flops, so Dad carried me home with his scarf wrapped around my feet. Opera folks were special magic people, and now I was enchanted too, a tiny planet circling two blazing stars.

Singing in the children's choruses in operas came when I was five. Opera is hard work for kids, although no one thought to mention it. Singers have to memorize every note and perform while moving around on cue and in character, under hot lights, wearing costumes that can weigh fifty pounds. I was allowed to rehearse with a score in hand only for a brief period. I was expected to memorize fast and to make note of the interpretations that each conductor gives to a score. Tony Amato was charming, but if I missed the downbeat a third time, he'd bang on the podium and I'd cower. When Mom and I moved from Amato to the Metropolitan Opera, the stakes were far higher, but the rules were exactly the same. If Leonard Bernstein wanted a *legato* here or a *forte* there, I had to memorize his wishes, and fast.

In addition to the conductor there was the stage director. The director told me how (running, sneaking, marching) and where (stage left, stage right, or in position before curtain) my character entered the scene and what I did as I sang. If my role called for using props, like tearing the *Hansel and Gretel* gingerbread witch into pieces, I had to have the right prop at exactly the right musical moment. If I had to change costumes too fast to reach a dressing room, I had to wriggle out of one and into the next in the wings. And whether I was dancing, fighting, or climbing a ladder, I had to watch the conductor's baton as if it were the eye of God.

La Bohème, a perennial favorite, involved a crowd scene and was relatively easy because chorus ladies usually held us in place and

sang with us. *Tosca* was harder. We were altar boys with a priest who had his own music to sing while we skipped around. *Carmen* was the hardest opera for me. I had to spit staccato French lyrics, usually at breakneck tempo, while marching in a crowd. I often stomped on someone's foot or got my own shins kicked. But I had to stay in character and keep going, even if the scenery fell on me. I didn't mind. My parents were right to be theater snobs, I thought. Nothing felt as alive as being onstage.

There is an offstage child shepherd's solo in *Tosca*. A solo is another universe. No hiding behind others if you go off pitch or muff the lyrics. I was deemed ready at seven at the Amato. The shepherd's aria is a soft, plaintive poem to the dawn. It was my own golden moment, just Tony and me, face to face in the tiny orchestra pit. A flute and oboe played quietly, letting my voice glide above them. I remembered Mom's instructions. Breathe deeply. Get onto the first note right away. Hit the descending line just so. Hold the final note until he moves his baton sideways and cuts it off. When the audience applauded and Tony bowed to me from the podium, I felt like a queen. Backstage, my parents hugged me with tears in their eyes.

In addition to working at the Amatos, Dad went on road tours with other companies when I was little. One morning I ran into the living room, thrilled that Dad had come home during the night. A Chatty Cathy doll, my biggest wish, sat in our yellow butterfly chair, and my parents smiled sleepily as I grabbed her and climbed into their sleeper couch. I bragged for days that he'd remembered his special girl on tour until Mom snapped, "Please. I got that doll in Macy's."

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Two huge changes came in 1963, when I was seven: Mom's dad died, and Grandma moved into apartment 1A of 63 Bank Street. Her presence allowed Mom to audition for the Metropolitan Opera chorus, performing their final seasons in their original theater on West Thirty-Ninth Street. The old Met was to be demolished and the company moved to a new theater in Lincoln Center in 1966. They were accepting girls in their children's chorus for the first time that year. I passed an audition, and I too joined the Met. My parents were proud and happy and therefore so was I, although I didn't know that my cozy theater world had just turned upside down.

At first I was scared to death. The old Met had been built in 1898. Backstage looked like a haunted house that went on forever. I was afraid I'd get lost and no one would find me. It was all dusty carved wood and splintered floors, a rabbit warren of lopsided steps with cast-iron banisters leading to dimly lit corridors and strange, hidden rooms. Thick metal pipes ran everywhere: in dressing rooms, through rehearsal halls, and high above audience view onstage. Roman soldiers lumbered by, checking the *Daily News* for the racing results at Belmont.

The chorus women were in a communal dressing room at the top of worn wooden stairs by stage left. Mirrors were ringed with tiny light bulbs in metal cages. Chipped coffee mugs held eyeliners and grease sticks. Wiry old Rosie, one of the ladies' dressers, had been a circus trapeze artist. She coached me through skin-the-cat on a costume bar while the chorus was onstage. The ladies had photos and cards tucked into their mirrors. "See?" Mom pointed to my Kodak picture, missing front teeth and all. "I always have my little girl."

Since I had to wait for Mom to go home, I sat at her cubicle after I'd dressed and studied the mimeographed chorus makeup charts she'd taped to the mirror. Faces were drawn on papers marked "*Faust—Peasant, Act I*" or "*Turandot—Courtier, Act III*." The sketches pointed out correct circle widths under eyes using number 12 brown pancake makeup for the starving Faust peasant and white greasepaint with red lipstick and heavy penciled eyebrows for the Chinese royalty. Powder clouded the air and made me sneeze as ladies flicked matte finishes over their faces with thick brushes and rose like a flock of swans, hurrying to their next entrance.

Rick, the man in charge of the children's chorus, met us at the stage door lobby, signed us in, and marched us upstairs to our dressing room. I was awed the first time I followed him into the wings for an onstage rehearsal. The biggest scenery and black side curtains I'd ever seen towered stories above my head. Stagehands swarmed around us, scrambling up metal side balconies and across high walkways, tying off scenery ropes and positioning floodlights.

In *La Bohème*, my first Met show, I was a Parisian street urchin following a toy vendor, so the costume was easy: ragged pants and a torn jacket. I already knew the music, making the dour chorus mas-

ter nod approvingly when I jumped in without the score at the first rehearsal. I was supposed to be a boy, so I tucked my hair into a black wool cap and lined up in front of the waiting makeup artists, who swabbed Max Factor pancake and greasepaint dirt streaks on with brisk snaps of the wrist. Rick clapped his hands, calling out “Hurry! Places before curtain!” as we rushed to line up.

When I ran onstage, I tried not to stare at the flashes from necklaces and jeweled gowns in the first rows or up at the golden carved box seats. Huge floodlights, embedded in the wooden stage, sent up waves of heat. The prompter’s head peeped out of his little covered box onstage, hidden from the audience. If someone forgot their cue, he’d whisper it. All in all it was a dazzling world: too much to take in all at once.

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I didn’t understand until I was much older that Mom had just started a twenty-five-year prison sentence. Movie extras and corps ballerinās rose to stardom, but in the hidebound opera world, choristers were typecast for life. The steady paycheck came with watching stars like Renata Tebaldi and Maria Callas sing roles that she’d studied for years at her parents’ kitchen table. This time, saddled with bills and a family, there wasn’t going to be another break. When I complained that the chorus master was mean, she told me to work harder and toe the line. I bragged about being a Met singer to my uninterested second-grade classmates at St. Joseph’s School, but I had to force myself to forget the warmth and fun of the Amatos.

The easygoing Frydel apartment, 4B, was my second home. Irene and I played with our parakeets and watched *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, but we didn’t perform together anymore. I rarely saw my father’s shows anymore either, even when they were just a subway ride away at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. It felt like we’d left him behind.

Dad was struggling with his theater career too. He was offered the Met stage manager job, Mom told me years later, but the price was having sex with a man on the board of directors. Dad’s immigrant parents started businesses and bought real estate, bulldozing their way up the American ladder, fierce and tough, ordering him to become a doctor. Dropping out of NYU pre-med and taking up theater was his one and only act of defiance.

“You ruined my life by being born!” he’d sometimes snap. While I cried, he’d pat my back and bang his fist. “Dammit! How could I say that to my own child? Oh, God, I’m sorry.” If he’d been drinking, the cycles of venom and remorse could go on for hours. “Your father needed a mentor,” his conductor friend told me. “He needed guidance and he never got any.”

My father bowed to financial reality and took a sales job in plastics when I was about ten, although he kept his hand in with operas here and there. One pact Mom and I never broke was our unspoken mutual agreement to be kind about his humiliating exile into the ultimate horror: a non-theatrical life.

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I moved to our new Lincoln Center home with the Met in 1966. The backstage looked like a hospital: dull white concrete walls, red carpeting, and featureless blank rooms. The company wasn’t a high-spirited, rushing pack anymore. Soloists, chorus, orchestra, dancers, and stagehands had their own floors and corridors. It was certainly impressive: five underground levels and a stage that could revolve, rise, or drop two stories. But I was used to the bustling old Thirty-Ninth Street house by now and found this one ugly and boring. I had no opinion about the front of house since I was never there.

I took Ann’s realistic advice and worked to please the kid chorus master. Newbies kissed up. “Maestro, do we take this measure as a *legato* or continue the *andante*?” I’d snicker, knowing what was next. First, the cold stare. Then, the disembowelment. “You are, unsurprisingly, a musical idiot. Be quiet. You might learn something.” Rick loved to remind us that hordes of kids out there hoped we’d drop dead or flunk the yearly re-audition.

The Marx Brothers movie *A Night at the Opera* is cinema verité, down to scenery from other shows dropping onstage. As a little acolyte in *Othello*, I stared adoringly at Montserrat Caballé, the Desdemona, during her aria. When she threw out her hands, her ring caught my thick black wig and twisted it backwards around my head. The audience tittered, but I stayed in place, faceless but firm. Montserrat, still singing, twisted her ring off and gently tugged the wig around, squeezing my shoulder in apology. In *La Gioconda*, we little sailors scrambled up hanging fishnets into position before the act

and stayed aloft for the entire act. I missed my grip in the dark and fell sideways, dangling ten feet overhead by one leg but maintaining the director's scene one tableau as the curtain rose.

When a dancer accidentally kicked the prompter's nose, Hungarian curses blistered the air as we sang. One *Tosca* soprano threw herself from the castle parapet and landed on top of a stagehand, snoozing on her offstage mattress. We held hands with a new Gretel and improvised a hopping dance in *Hansel and Gretel's* final scene after the hot stage lights glued her false eyelashes together. When Larry's *Butterfly* child refused to go onstage, he pushed his wrapped dinner into Suzuki's panicked hands and Butterfly emoted to a meatball hero sandwich. The chorus women chased their own ravishers when the barbarian invaders were cued onstage first by mistake. No one else in junior high had a life like mine.

My parents were too busy scrambling for attention themselves to be stage parents or take my developing tastes into account. When I asked for dance lessons, they said that there was no time in my theater schedule. I offered to leave the kid chorus, but then Dad said no, dancers are too skinny and their careers are too short. I'd fallen in love with Broadway. By nine I knew I'd rather shake my hips and yowl as catlike Anita in *West Side Story* than bellow stupid old *Aida* any day. But my parents didn't take me seriously and they ran my life so that was that.

Several years passed. One day, while the Met kid chorus was on loan to the visiting Royal Ballet, I saw Rudolph Nureyev backstage: a Russian sun god with tousled hair, pouty lips, and of course a rippling, perfect body. He looked through me, but his indifference didn't steady my buckled knees. Neither did knowing that he was gay. Flushed and heated, I watched him glide towards the stage like a panther. Rudy's effect had nothing in common with kissing Neal, another kid chorister, in a stairwell, my entire erotic experience at that point.

The chorus master finally laughed later that year when I sidled in to re-audition, trying to hide my new breasts, and we shook hands. The other kids, waiting their turn in the corridor, looked sympathetic for a moment and then turned away. Like so many others I'd waved goodbye to and forgotten, the curtain dropped on the enchanted opera childhood and I was gone, an outsider.

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The Italian director Franco Zeffirelli was directing *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci*, two short operas often performed together. Zeffirelli loaded scenes with action and non-singing character parts, so Ann suggested that I audition as an actress. The concept of not being at the Met was too strange for me to handle so I agreed.

The other extras fussed and preened before we went to be “auditioned.” In my mind, being lumped with them was being flung into mud. Singers were far above extras on the opera hierarchy, and I’d never bothered even chatting with any of them before. And calling this an audition was ridiculous, I snipped to myself. We weren’t singing! We were being looked over like pork chops.

As we sat on the steps of the *Cavalleria* set I pushed dental wax onto my new braces so they wouldn’t flash in the lights. Franco, a slim man in his forties, with graying blond hair, introduced himself in soft, accented, English. Then he looked us over, making comments to an assistant, who wrote them down. I saw him point to me, mimicking my long hair and nodding. And so, at age twelve, I landed a big role in *Cavalleria Rusticana* as a village virgin—past all doubt the only genuine one in the company.

Directors try to minimize staging complications for kids, but I was an adult now and Franco made me work like one in *Cavalleria*. I waved to a church procession from a balcony, then scrambled back to stage level down two backstage flights of dark, rickety stairs, unbuttoning my heavy floor-length dress as I ran. I had to be in my second outfit and back on stage to flirt by a fountain in eight minutes. Zeffirelli was also adamant that I wear a lace-up corset with painful metal rib that left welts. “You are an eighteenth-century Sicilian girl and you have to move like one,” he said when I complained. Between the stair runs, the frantic costume change, and the heat from the lights, I was soaked in sweat by the last scene, when I had to rush up the church steps, yelling that the tenor had been murdered, then collapse with grief as the soprano wailed, my face planted on the dirty painted canvas, until the curtain dropped. It never came down fast enough for me.

Puberty, already bewildering me in the Village, rocked my Met world as well. I had a role in *Pagliacci* too, and a circus fire-eater Zeffirelli had cast in it suggested that we sneak downstairs for a quickie.

He choked on his kerosene when I snidely told him my age. I shoved a chorus man's hand off my behind as we walked off stage. Curious, I let a young stagehand kiss me in the blackout curtains as I waited for a cue and he grabbed my breast. I ran on stage, shaking, and never kissed him again. Rick was fired when a chorus kid's parents accused him of molesting their son. He was hardly the only Met predator in those dismally incorrect times, but he had no star power or allies on the board of directors. I tried to focus on homework in the chorus ladies' lounge as a stagehand's wife cried and begged a chorus woman to stop sleeping with her husband and send him home to her and their kids.

On Sundays, glad for a break, my parents and I piled in the car for a day at Jones Beach and then lobsters in Sheepshead Bay, tanned and happy. They had laughing canasta parties with the Frydels, the adults calling Irene and me when the pizzas arrived. We read *The New York Times* over bagels on Sundays and went to museums and Broadway shows. I sent them dancing at the Rainbow Room for their anniversary. We wanted to make each other happy. We just weren't any good at it.

I lived on the right street, though. "How are Sally and Tony?" I asked Annie Frydel in her kitchen. The Amato Opera was marching on, as it did until 2009, when it closed its doors. "Fine, honey," she replied as we peeled carrots. "Come by and say hello to them, anytime. Stay for dinner tonight. You always have the best jokes, you little sparkler." I could go see what Yeffe Kimball, the Native American artist at 11 Bank, was up to, I thought. She had just had an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Or I could check to see if Al, the bon vivant artist in apartment 2A, was home. He'd listen to my adolescent dramas with quiet respect.

Maybe Billy Joyce, the retired dancer at 113–115 Bank, was having another wine and cheese party down at the pier. I could help him carry stuff while we gossiped. And if Marty or Roz Braverman from 75 Bank Street were out with their dog, I could tell them my PSAT scores. They were so proud of me for going to elite Stuyvesant High School that they'd told the whole block. I had a street full of supporters, young and old.

These Bank Streeters were my family, too. Much more so, in some ways. While there was occasional crabbiness, I hadn't ruined their

lives by being born, and so my existence was never thrown in my face. I was fine as I was. If one of them was sick, I ran errands and brought food. Neighbors sometimes found fault with my clothes, my hair, or my behavior, but their comments were gentle. I, in turn, could hear their opinions without throwing up a yelling, sarcastic shield, trying to hurt them into shutting up. Being an opera singer was fun, but the people on Bank Street, caring for and about each other, taught me what it means to be human.