

BROWNSTONE

By
Lorenzo Caricchio

“It’s about time!”

My mother said, as I came out of my room. “Let me finish tying your shoe laces and let’s go. Your father is already outside, waiting in the car.”

We were going to my Uncle Dominic's house. So I had to put on a clean, starched, white shirt and itchy wool pants. When you're six years old nothing is worse than visiting relatives and having to sit around in itchy wool pants while adults just talk and talk, and you can't even listen to what they are saying if you want to because half of the time they talk Italian.

This was the first time that I was going to Uncle Dominic's house and I wasn't looking forward to it because my Uncle Dominic and his wife Annina were older (he was actually my father's uncle) and didn't have any kids my age. But my mother says that it's high time that we visit them because they haven't seen me since I was a baby. So they pack me into the Packard and drive from Jackson Heights, Queens to someplace on the other side of the Bowery in Manhattan.

Uncle Dominick lived in a Brownstone, one of an entire city block of the imposing, dark stone homes, with cement steps leading up to a stoop at the big front door high above the sidewalk. We didn't have to climb the steps though, because my uncle's family lived, for the most part, in the finished basement. The upper portions of the house were reserved for sleeping and formal entertaining

such as weddings, funerals and visiting dignitaries like the parish priest or snooty Mrs. Clark from up the block, whose husband (God rest his soul) had been a judge, not casual family visits like ours. So we walked passed the stoop, along the black, wrought iron fence next to it and opened a gate to a set of steps leading down to the lower entrance. In a dark pit, below the level of the sidewalk at the bottom of the steps my father pushed the little round doorbell button and waited.

Eventually we heard the click-snap-clunk of locks being undone; the door swung inward and Uncle Dominic greeted us. He stood silhouetted in the dim yellow light that oozed grudgingly from the hallway behind him as he shook hands with my father and kissed my mother on the cheek. He was a small, wiry man with close-cropped, thinning, white/gray hair and gold wire framed eyeglasses. When he bent down to say hello to me I saw, behind the glasses, that one of his steel gray eyes was set in a permanent squint and the other was severely clouded by a cataract. To my six-year-old mind that obscured eye was not a handicap but a supernatural force, like Superman's X-ray vision. Its gaze seemed to penetrate to the core of my existence, seeing all of my past, present and future sins. Uncle Dominic's smile was kind and gentle, but I was sure that his cloudy eye, perhaps with a mind of its own, regarded me with sinister mystical intent.

This eerie feeling was enhanced when the entry door closed heavily behind us as we were ushered inside and led slowly down a long, narrow hallway that was dimly lit at its mid-point by one, bare, twenty-five watt light bulb. The hall dead-ended at a rising staircase and an archway on the left that opened to a windowless room furnished with dark green floral patterned chairs, heavy ebony

cabinets and tables with ornately carved legs. Aunt Annina, square bodied and dressed all in black, stood waiting in the middle of the room. She greeted my parents and sat them down on an overstuffed, cushion-strewn couch that threatened to swallow both of them. Then she looked me over and commented on my height, asked what grade I was in and what I studied in school. But before I could finish telling her about my teacher, my classmates and our exploration of the alphabet she stuffed a hard candy, from the cut glass dish on the coffee table, into my mouth, patted my head and hustled off into the kitchen to start a pot of espresso. Grateful as I was for the peppermint, I couldn't help but feel that she was very easily satisfied about my progress for someone who hadn't seen me since I was born.

By this time my parents were in involved in conversation with Uncle Dominic and except for the occasional, "Don't touch that," or "Sit here and look at a magazine," I was pretty much ignored. I passed the time exploring the room with my eyes and imagination; and my imagination was being nudged into overdrive the more I looked around. This was the spookiest place I had ever seen. A stuffed pheasant guarded one corner of the fireplace mantel. Across the room, on an end table, a squirrel was mounted on a small branch, holding an acorn in his paws. His head forever cocked to the side, as if he had just heard a noise; maybe the click of the trigger of the gun that shot him. The flocked wallpapered walls held a collection of ornately framed pastoral paintings: sheep in a meadow of rolling hills, a golden retriever flushing a pheasant from the bushes (our friend by the fireplace perhaps?), and a Cuckoo Clock. An honest to god Cuckoo Clock,

actually two Cuckoo clocks, there was another in the kitchen (really there were three; I found out later that there was one in an upstairs hallway.) A Grandfather clock guarded the entrance to the basement kitchen and a curved mahogany mantel clock stood in the center of the fireplace mantel. The coffee table was graced by a small ornate, glass encased brass clock with something like an upside-down Pawnbrokers sign visible inside, which spun, hypnotically, first clockwise then counter-clockwise over and over. I suppose that it was inevitable that I became aware of the ticking undercurrent of time slowly passing in this house. And once I was aware of it, the persistent sound got louder and more insistent until it was almost a physical presence. Time itself became a personal burden and weighed heavily on my young shoulders. I could feel my hips sinking deeper into the cushion of the couch where I sat next to my mother. Each sonorous tick-tock of the Grandfather Clock was a hammer stroke driving me down into the padding as the quick tick, tick, ticks of the smaller clocks piled up, around and on top of me like grains of sand about to bury me. It must have triggered some primal, mortal fear in my subconscious because I suddenly felt the need to run.

I struggled free of the confines of the couch until my feet touched the floor and began to head for the hallway with the all the speed my six-year-old legs could muster. I got about halfway to the hall before my mother and the clocks noticed that I was making a break for it. Mom looked in my direction, her mouth beginning to form my name to call me back, but the clocks reacted faster than my mother, and the sounds that ultimately froze me in my tracks were a couple of cuckoos, a deep brassy bong and some Tinkerbell ding-a-lings. Every clock in the

house had struck to mark the passing of the half hour. Was it coincidence? Or had the clocks purposely alerted the house that I was trying to escape from the slow vortex of time that I believed was about to swallow me? Coincidence or not, the momentary opportunity for escape had passed and my path was blocked by a reed like figure dressed all in black. This wraith standing in front of me had descended the stairs from the upper rooms in ghostly silence. Black hair drawn tightly back, from a pale white face, into bun at the nape of her neck, a quizzical far away look on her face, she stared down at me.

My mother, having already partially risen in response to my aborted dash for freedom, completed the movement and came over to us,

"This is Cousin Yolanda, Uncle Dominic's daughter, Say hello," she said.

"Hullo," I said without closing my gaping mouth.

"Hello" responded Yolanda, the faraway look still in her eyes, and the unasked question still framed between her eyebrows and the corners of her mouth. That expression, I learned later in life, was permanently etched on her face as the result of some mysterious traumatic experience that she had suffered in her early teens. Now in her late twenties, she looked down at me and said,

"You're a sweet looking boy. I'll bet you have lots of girl friends."

I shook my head no and started to say that there was a girl that lived across the hall from us that I liked, but she didn't like me because she was eight-years-old, but that I didn't care and I was going to make her a Valentine's Day card anyway. But Yolanda had already turned away. Her black sensible shoes peeking from under her straight, floor length navy blue skirt, barely dented the deep pile of the

dark arabesque rug as she glided in to the living room and took a seat near her father. She sat straight backed on the edge of the cushion, her thin hands folded in her lap, knees together, ankles crossed and tucked in front of her.

"Come sit next to me," she said. "We'll pretend we're at a play and our parents are the actors and we'll applaud if what they say pleases us."

I hesitated, temporarily distracted from my vague plan of escape by Yolanda's words. I once again became aware of the clocks incessantly snipping at my unraveled thread of time. I swayed between the living room and the hall, my gaze sweeping from Yolanda to the pheasant on the mantel, to the squirrel forever holding his acorn on the end table. Should I sit with her and the pheasant and the squirrel or make another break for the hallway, even though I didn't know where I would go from there.

"He doesn't want to play 'girly' pretend games Yolanda!" a loud voice boomed.

I turned to see a young man striding in from the hall in a brown tweed jacket, white shirt, bow tie and brown heavy wool pants (almost like mine), carrying a load of textbooks and notebooks under his arm.

"Let me put these books down and I'll take him out to the back yard to see the fish pond. You'd like to see the fish wouldn't you Old Man?"

He turned toward me as he leaned forward to put the books on the coffee table. He had a broad face with a bulbous nose, his dark brown hair was combed and slicked straight back from his forehead and his dark eyes bulged halfway out

of their sockets as if they were straining to see everything all at once. It gave his young face an intense, wild look that bordered on maniacal when he smiled.

I backed away from him into the room until I bumped in to my father's knee.

"Don't be shy," my father said when I turned and looked at him.

"That's Albert, Yolanda's brother; he's studying to be a doctor. Go shake hands with him".

Gently propelled by a fatherly hand at my back, I inched forward and shook Albert's hand.

"Pleased to meetcha." He said. "Follow me to the kitchen and we'll get some bread to feed the fish and maybe a piece of cheese for ourselves"

It was a chance to escape the room and the clocks so I nodded my head vigorously in agreement and followed Albert, warily eyeing the swinging brass pendulum encased in the Grandfathers Clock and giving it a wide berth, as we edged past it on our way into the kitchen. Albert quickly located a small wedge of Provolone in the refrigerator and tore a large chunk of crusty Italian bread from a loaf in the breadbox that was on the counter near the sink and handed it to me. Then grabbing a paring knife from a drawer, he led me out of the backdoor, up a few steps and into the backyard.

Long and narrow like the Brownstone itself, the yard was bordered on three sides by eight-foot high wooden walls. It was dark; lit only by the ambient nightlight of the city and a few feeble rays that escaped from the upper stories of surrounding houses. When my vision adapted to the gloom, I could make out

some flowerbeds bordering a concrete path; but for the most part the yard was a vegetable and herb garden. Intertwined Zucchini and Eggplant vines, clung to one of the walls grappling for the meager shafts of sunlight that penetrated the city and traced the history of daylights' passage. The North wall, the shortest and furthest from the house, was matted with a mass of snaking grapevines. The West wall, painted dark brown, was weathered and bare of vegetation, except at its' base, where a row of pale cabbage like plants struggled to grow.

In the ground filling the center of the yard, near the house, lay an oval cement pond reflecting the infinite blackness of the night sky in its still water. As we neared the dark pool our perspective changed and I began to see flashes of gold and white in the water. I tentatively edged forward until my toes were at the rim of the pond. From this vantage point I could see that some of the flashes were reflections of stray points of light but that other flashes, below the surface, were produced by the fins and bodies of the biggest goldfish I had ever seen. The fish must have seen us too because their slow random swimming gradually changed to a circling pattern at our end of the pond.

"What do you think of the fish?" Albert asked.

"They're real big for goldfish," I answered.

Albert wielded the paring knife against the Provolone and sliced two pieces from it, handing one of the pieces to me he said.

"Goldfish belong to a really tough family of fish called Carp."

I looked at the fish as I munched on the cheese. Many of them had stopped swimming around and had crowded to the surface in front of us, kind of treading

water, mouths gulping and staring at us with bugged-out fish eyes, as if we were on display instead of them.

"Yeah," I agreed, "they look pretty tough. I'll bet other fish are afraid to fight with them."

Albert chuckled "That's not exactly what I meant by tough, Sport. I mean that they can survive in all kinds of places that other fish can't. Do you know that no one knows how old a carp can live? They don't seem to be effected by time, if something doesn't kill them they'd probably just live and grow forever."

"Forever?" I echoed quizzically, watching the fish as some of them began to poke their gulping mouths out of the water.

"Probably." He answered. "But if you want to see them fight, throw some of that bread in the water."

I popped the remaining bit of cheese into my mouth and picked a large tuft from the white center of the piece of bread that I was holding and tossed it underhand into the pond, right in the center of the gaping school of Carp. Then, I jumped back, totally unprepared for the boiling ferocity that erupted among these timeless fish maneuvering and shoving to devour the bread in seconds, when, if Albert was correct, they had all of eternity. Now they massed tightly together, heads out of the water, all bug-eyes on me, mouths gulping hungrily in my direction, I backed away a little more.

Albert said, "Don't let them scare you they can't get out of the pond no matter how hungry they are. Just throw them another piece of bread." I hesitated,

I wasn't sure that I wanted these fish to live forever. I looked up at Albert, and asked, "They don't really live forever do they?"

"No, but they could." He answered.

"Can other animals live forever too?"

"Well..." he groped for words, his bulging eyes reminiscent of the goldfish's eyes, "most animals live for a certain number of years and then they...ah ...die. You know that things die right?"

"Oh yeah" I said, "That's when you leave here and go to heaven. Well, if you were good you go to heaven, if not you go to the other place"

"Yeah right, well anyway, scientists have figured out how many years most animals can live but they haven't figured it out for goldfish yet."

"Have the scientists figured out how long people can live?"

"Yeah, a long time."

"But not forever?"

"No, not forever."

I looked at the fish again. Why should they get to live forever? They were greedy and ugly and stupid and they scared the hell out of me when they fought over the bread.

"I think I know why goldfish live forever unless something kills them." I said.

"Why is that Sport?"

"Because they know that they're bad and they don't want to go to hell." I felt justified using a curse word because this was a scientific discussion and anyway Albert was almost a doctor. "So they just try to live forever; but because they're bad they kill each other and other animals kill them too."

Albert threw his head back and laughed out loud. "You sure like to wrap things up in neat little packages don't you kid." Then still chuckling he added. "You know what I think? I shook my head no. "I think you're just looking for an excuse to keep all of that good Italian bread for yourself. So if you're not going to feed it to the fish give me some of it and I'll split the rest of the Provolone with you."

We divided the bread and cheese and nibbled at it as we watched the fish watching us with hungry eyes.

"You know I still think it's unfair that those fish could live forever if they would only be good" I said "Some people are very good but they die anyway and even though they go to heaven I bet they would rather stay here with the people they know. Is that why you want to be a doctor; to help people live longer?"

Albert chewed the last remnants of his bread and cheese for awhile before answering. His large eyes retreated momentarily and focused on a distant spot very near the one that his sister's gaze was permanently fixed upon. Then he said,

"There's more to life than living a long time Sport. Come on, lets go back inside it's getting a little chilly out here and I wouldn't be much of a doctor if I let you catch a cold.

I threw the last bit of my bread at the fish and the pond boiled again.

"Stupid fish", I thought emphatically as I turned to follow Albert Back into the house, "they're not going to live forever".

The house reabsorbed us and after tersely answering some brief questions about our excursion to the fishpond Albert was quickly drawn into the general adult conversation and I was once again seated in the folds of the couch next to my mother. The clocks re-initiated their assault and it wasn't long before I began to fidget and whine about going home and after three or four assurances from my mother, that we would be leaving soon, we finally did get up to go. Uncle Dominic again escorted us through the long dimly lit hall. We said our good-byes in the cool evening air just outside the door, he leaned down to shake my hand, his good eye smiling but his cloudy eye just starred at me, and he said that next time I came to visit I could feed the fish again.

I tried to stay awake in the car until we got home but fell asleep right after we crossed over the Fifty-Ninth-Street Bridge. My last blurry vision was of a sign above a gas station that pictured a red horse with wings that flapped when the neon lights blinked on and off, I had seen it before and I knew it meant that we were almost home.

I saw Yolanda and Albert many years later, at my father's funeral, after I was grown and had children of my own. Yolanda's gaze was still fixed on something in the distance, though now whatever it was seemed much closer, and Albert's aging face was barely able to contain his eyes, still straining to get out of their sockets. Uncle Dominic had died. Aunt Annina had died. Yolanda and

Albert had inherited the brownstone, neither of them had married and they still lived there. They told me I should come for a visit, that I wouldn't know the place now that they had redecorated. They didn't mention the goldfish and I didn't ask.