



I. LIVING CLASS—RIDING THE WAVES



MAIDA BERENBLATT

LOOKING AT UPPER CLASS

As my lifespan becomes longer, memories grow dim but the photographs remain clear. The earliest photo in my album is of my mom standing beside my carriage, wearing a fur coat, reflecting good times. Her black hat has several feathers on the side and I see black gloves covering her hands. I am sitting in my carriage, wearing a jacket, pants, hat and mittens, all in white. The photo is in black and white, but the leaves and trees in the picture spell late fall or early winter. The next photo shows Mom and me in a sparse bedroom with one window on the side of a single bed and a crib; we were essentially homeless while Dad was in a sanatorium recovering from tuberculosis. We were staying for the two years he was away in the house owned by two of his sisters—he had been the youngest of fifteen siblings. Turning the page finds another photo, this one of Mom and me sitting on a swing in front of a cute little house, followed by a photo of Dad and me on a chaise at the beach on a bright, sunny day. Things must have gotten better. That was the rhythm, the twists and the turns in my life's journey.

The following photo reveals my younger sister sitting next to me on the front steps of a different house. It was not clear what house or to whom it belonged. That photo was taken before we moved from Pawtucket, Rhode Island to Boston, Massachusetts then to Claremont, New Hampshire. No one ever explained why or when the moves were to come. Was I too young or the family silent? Actually, no one ever explained anything; I watched the boxes come and then go and heard the words "pack now." There was constant tension and conflict. Sometimes, loud angry fights and at other times, long periods of silence.

One year later there was another big move. We were back in Boston with a new baby brother and an absent younger sister. This time we were in a house living three floors up; I had to climb a lot of steps to get upstairs. The stairs had a creaking, squeaky sound if I stepped in the middle. I tried



MARK PAWLAK

CLASS ACTS

Act I

Wearing overalls on weekdays, painting somebody else's house to earn money? You're working class. Wearing overalls at weekends, painting your own house to save money? You're middle class.

Lawrence Sutton

As newlyweds, Mom and Dad lived with Dad's parents. Their first child, I spent my infancy in that bungalow on Ridge Road in Cheektowaga ("Place-of-crab-apple-trees" in Erie-Seneca). I wasn't quite two years old when they relocated to the Prorok household, Mom's parents, less than a mile away just inside the Buffalo city line. The Polish-Catholic St. John Gualbert parish, to which both Pawlak and Prorok families belonged, straddled the border between the two municipalities. Within its parochial milieu, my parents met, started dating, and eventually married. Their wedding took place in the parish church; a year later, I was baptized there.

Mom was pregnant with brother Chuck when we took up residence in the larger Doat Street house. But the reason wasn't crowding, rather it was the friction between Mom and Grandma Pawlak, a demanding task-mistress. As Mom tells it, she couldn't do anything right in her mother-in-law's eyes. Mom felt belittled by her because she had never learned to cook or sew, or, for that matter, crochet, knit, hang wallpaper, or any of the myriad other skills that Babcia Pawlak deftly executed, all the while nursing her sickly husband. (My Pawlak Dziadek died young from silicosis, a consequence of his job sandblasting castings at a Buffalo foundry.)

I remember almost nothing of Ridge Road in those years, being but a babe. In contrast, I have a wealth of idyllic childhood memories from the bustling Doat Street household that was filled with Polish chatter and the smells of Babcia Prorok's cooking. Mom, the youngest of eight kids, was



II. LOCATING OURSELVES

ANDRENA ZAWINSKI

ON THE ROAD, HIJACKED BY MEMORY

We draw our strength from the very despair in which we have been forced to live.—Cesar Chavez

Riding another lazy Sunday afternoon
along the sun-drenched blacktop stretch
coasting through California's Central Valley,
its pastures peppered by slaughterhouse steer,
its fields dense with migrants—some sporting
United Farm Worker eagles on caps, all of them
packed into growers' whitewashed school buses,
all of them off to bend and hoe, chop and prune,
pick and haul Ag Giants nuts and roots and fruits
for the Walmart Super Centers and Taco Bells.

In the car's backseat, church onion domes
crop up inside my head, their rows of candles
flickering again for all my dead:

For the Ukrainian grandfather, face reddened
from the heat of hot steel, muscles knotted
and clothes grimy, who choked to death
struggling with words in a strange tongue,
lungs dense in smoke and soot, air and water
fouled forging Pittsburgh steel for the Carnegies.

For the Slovak one who carried United Mine Worker
protest pickets to the coal bosses instead of pick and shovel
down into the pitch dark shafts of the Windber mine,
who survived a cave-in, but not being robbed
by the company store and a black lung death.

For my mother, after the assembly line night shift
at Federal Enamel inspecting pots and pans
for dimples and blisters, one hand at the small
of her aching back bent over the Amana. the other
scrambling eggs then scooting my brother and me
off to school neatly dressed with full bellies.

For my father at Pressed Steel welding railroad cars
in the McKees Rocks Bottoms, tagged Cossack
and taunted to jump and spin and kick,
who got lost in a bottle of vodka and thorazine,
another blue collar chasing a middle-class dream.

But the range here today along this California stretch
runs ragged in rain shadow and a watery-eyed sky
looming above tract homes and trailer camp estates,
flashy billboards boasting sprouting condos,
commercial real estate for Nestles' Purina works,
another Chrysler-Jeep dealership, new strip mall
saddling up to wheat and oats and alfalfa,
the Delta's humpback hills carpeted green in spring—
everything predictable, unlike this day trip, hijacked
by memory to detour along a bumpy backroad,
my own breath now so heavy-laden,
my every muscle aching.

HOUSE ENVY

Architects, contractors, general
and sub. From a swallow-you-up
hole in the ground to sconces, shingles, rebar and hinges,
tinted paint, granite and tubs. Where do you want
the light switches? How about this tree? Low flush or
regular? Please sign this change order.

At last we're in. Now what?
Punch lists and heartaches. How can we
not have closet space? What about this leak?
Ninety degrees in the bedroom. Not enough light to cook by.
Get that electrician back here, please!

Friends come looking. Gray tweed
carpet, oh so practical. Red, yellow, even
turquoise. How did they dare skip beige?
With all those stairs, no aging parent could stay here.
Why is his office twice as big as hers? The artwork is
so bold. So cold. All that room for just those two?
I love the view.

I'm quick to tell them it's not perfect.
I always try to share the space. Besides,
it's all my husband's wealth. I used to
be on Food Stamps, long ago. I rarely say
I love the light curling over the kitchen floor,
the mountains from my favorite chair, bright colors

and curves, double showers, big TV.
Roll up the rugs and invite fifty
friends to dance. How lucky can I be?

And still, I envy richer friends whose cabinets
are custom-hewn and dining rooms seat twelve.
Or humbler ones with wind chimes and comfy corners
where you want to sit for hours sipping tea.
Do come in. It's just a house, that's all.