THE WALL

By
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It was 1982, the end of a hot New York City summer, and I had no idea that my childhood was about to end too. If I had known what was going to happen that night maybe I wouldn't have gone to the movies, then again maybe I would have. Maybe I would've found my way to the Bleecker Street Cinema in the Village or the Thalia uptown, and caught a screening of an old movie, like *White Heat*—one of my father's favorites —the one where escaped convict James Cagney stands atop a burning building and screams "Top o' the world, Ma!" But it wasn't playing that day.

That afternoon, my friends and I sank into the plush, red velvet seats at the Ziegfeld Theatre on West 54th Street and Sixth Avenue in Manhattan to watch *Pink Floyd: The Wall*. We'd taken the train into the city from Queens expecting a rock opera, but instead of The Who's *Tommy*, we got junkie Bob Geldof sans eyebrows slipping into mental collapse, and some old English headmaster screeching about pudding. I told my mother about it later that day, and she deadpanned: "Sounds upbeat."

I was with the Jamaica crew that afternoon: Dorothy, Nikie, Casey, Gerry and my boyfriend, Tommy. Tommy was the second boy I'd ever kissed, and on this day it was his fifteenth birthday. I was fifteen also, and my life was starting to change. I had gone from making prank phone calls as a sort of hobby during the school year to making out with Tommy during a game of seven-minutes in heaven in Dorothy's room over the summer. Unfortunately, he kissed like a slobbering dog, despite his wispy good looks.

Inside the air-conditioned, artificial Cool-Whip dreamworld of the Ziegfeld, this WASPy blonde boy and I sat holding hands, flanked by our pals, oblivious to the fact that we were watching a movie that must be seen on drugs. A Kit Kat and a Coke just didn't cut it. We were into the music but passed each other looks that simply said, "Huh??" during the surreal parts. Yet other scenes, especially the flashbacks of "Pink's" father going off to war, made my throat swell up. I wanted to cry, but not in front of my friends, not in front of Tommy. It was like the time in spring when we played softball in Flushing Meadow, and Casey's curveball accidentally beaned me in the forehead. The old kid-me would've bawled like crazy, but I wasn't a kid anymore.

I didn't know who I was yet, but as I watched *The Wall*, I intuitively understood Pink's mental breakdown. I understood what it felt like to feel empty and dead inside, yet somehow still filled with feeling, with overwhelming grief. I led a pretty regular life and didn't feel on the verge of a breakdown, but I certainly had in the past. Eight years earlier when my father got sick with kidney disease and my parents divorced (that same year) I didn't get any pleasure out of life. Waking up seemed like a chore, not worth the effort. Things got better as time passed, but I never forgot what it felt like to be a totally depressed seven-year-old. I didn't share my thoughts with my friends; I didn't have the right words yet. Anyway, the movie was pretty weird.

My friends and I were logistically blessed enough to be able to ride the E train into Manhattan on a regular basis, but too Queensy to know what was cool and what wasn't, once we were there. We hadn't even heard of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, which had been a cult hit for years.

A few days before the Pink Floyd outing, I saw my father for our regular Saturday visit. The oppressively hot weather was hard for him to take, and I had to get my hair cut later anyway, so we just got together for a late lunch at Pastrami King. We found a meter right outside the joint. He pulled his blue Dodge Dart "Swinger" into the spot in one smooth, liquid move. I popped a couple of his dimes in and twisted the knob. Before we walked in, he took out an unbreakable black Ace comb and scratched at some of the bumps on his arms. They were strange, hard lumps from where he got dialysis treatment for his kidney disease. I stood aside and waited. Out of embarrassment, I did not stand too close to him and out of loyalty I did not stand too far.

"What do you call that hairstyle? Feathers?"

"Feathered."

"Is that like 'wings,'?" he asked, remembering the Farrah Fawcett style I had described to him long before.

"It's very pretty. So, you're getting ready to go back to school?"

"Yeah," I said. "My friends and I are going to the movies this week, and Mommy will probably take me shopping for school over Labor Day Weekend sometime."

"What are you going to see?"

"*Pink Floyd: The Wall*. It's kind of a concert movie."

"A rock and roll movie?"

"Yeah...but Pink Floyd's not exactly like Billy Joel or Bruce Springsteen."

Anytime Billy or Bruce came on WNEW-FM while I was driving around with my father, I would let him know and he'd say "Turn it up." He was more of a Celia Cruz/Chick Corea kind of guy, but he got excited on my behalf.

"I'm kinda dating this boy Tommy who's going. He's friends with my friend Dorothy."

"Oh...that's nice, Jilly."

He smiled, always happy if I was happy. But was I? I wasn't as boy crazy as my big sister, so I didn't make a big deal about it. Tommy and I were just getting

together; I didn't know what would happen. Anyway, it felt bizarre to mention any guy to my father. That was a separate part of my life. When I thought about introducing my father to Tommy, or to any of my friends for that matter, my stomach grew queasy. They didn't know him like I did, and they might not know what to make of him. I knew he was different from other Dads. He had to go to the city hospital three times a week for kidney dialysis treatments. I saw the treatment center a few times, and met the nurses who he was always deferential to, even though my mother told us that he had a habit of getting into fights with his doctors. I never saw this, but I did see my father pick fights with strangers on line at the movies, who didn't understand that he was sick, and wouldn't let him cut to the front. My mother also told me that he went for therapy at Elmhurst Hospital, all covered by Medicaid and Disability benefits, but I didn't know exactly what that meant. "He's been in therapy his whole life and it hasn't helped," she told me. All I saw at Elmhurst were patients sprawled in big reclining chairs, just like at the dentist, their arms connected by plastic tubes to huge white machines, while they read the *New York Post* or *Daily News*, and chatted with each other about their kids, or city politics.

My father lived in a tiny project apartment in the Bronx. He slept on a single bed surrounded by paperback books, numerous SONY portable radios, which he collected as a hobby, and not much else. He only took me and my sister there once; our mother didn't think it was safe to go to that neighborhood. His studio apartment reminded me of the cells in *Escape from Alcatraz* and *Midnight Express*, movies he took me to see. He loved prison stories, and I too felt a strong connection to these cons, these outsiders who'd been scapegoated by the system. We both understood somehow what it meant to have secrets, and to be afraid of authority.

Except my secrets weren't exactly clear to me yet. Inside, I felt equal parts girl and boy but I didn't know exactly what that meant yet. And it wasn't something I obsessed about; I just sensed I was different, a strange mix of genders, somebody who, if questioned under hot lights would reveal herself to be a freak, and proud of it too. Unlike my father, though, I could pass for an upright citizen. Following Sheela's lead, I had started wearing Izod shirts and Bass penny loafers. My mother described me to her friends as "All-American."

I didn't know how to prepare my squeaky-clean friends for the way my Dad looked: not just like a former taxi driver, but unhealthy, and unkempt, like a bum. He was so quiet and out of touch. He knew everything about the history of New York City, but nothing about the New York City my friends and I were growing up in. He could understand Tri-State area working-class heroes like Billy Joel and Bruce Springsteen (even if their music was not his cup of café con leche), but trippy, drugged out Brits like Pink Floyd were beyond his points of reference. My friends were sweet, not catty, and I'm sure they would've liked my father if they got to know him, but in my mind, he was completely outside of their frame of reference.

It was getting complicated, keeping all my worlds separate. I thought my world—my whole world, that is—would've changed the previous summer. That July, in 1981, I went to see the Ramones play at the Palladium. Located on East Fourteenth Street, my Palladium of the '80s (which later became a dance club, and is now a dormitory and athletic facility for New York University) had rows of wooden seats like a school auditorium, and several rows worth of open space in front of the stage. My Palladium with its sawdust-covered floor, and school science lab lighting was the perfect place to discover Punk.

I went with the P.S. 117 gang—Paige, Susan, Chitra and Sheela—to see the cool band we had recently fallen for. We started out the '80s by asking our parents' permission to go to school late so we could stand on line for Billy Joel tickets at the Garden. It was our first concert, and we ended up in the last row of the huge stadium. Luckily my father, enthusiastic about my newfound interest in music, bought me a pair of Hambletonian binoculars to take to the show. He told me they were the kind gamblers watched horse races with at Aquaduct.

Several months later we returned to the Garden, upgraded to seats in the middle tier, to see the Cars, a New Wave group we all loved. Unlike Billy Joel, they had an opening act: the Go-Gos. We worked up a sweat dancing to the candy cane sweet, all-girl band, but, by the time the Cars came on, we knew enough to just stand up and dispassionately nod our heads while the band stood onstage garbed in sunglasses and skinny ties, barely moving.

Then came summer of 1981 and the Ramones: no more safe, family sports arena, with security guards and concession stands. We were going to see these wild, dirty boys in a small club, up close...in the East Village. I had never heard of this neighborhood before. It wasn't on the E line. But the other members of the P.S. 117 gang knew how to get there.

These girls were much more sophisticated than the Jamaica crew, yet they were still sweet. We'd been friends since first grade; my mom loved them and they loved my mom. They were hip enough to smoke the occasional joint at a concert (which I never did), but respectable enough to get all A's and work in Mr. Karasik, the Assistant Principal's office. They didn't hang out with the Jamaica crew; they thought they

were lame. The Jamaica crew, in contrast, wondered why the P.S. 117 gang didn't really hang out with any boys. I couldn't explain either group to the other, and somehow I didn't have to. I'd learned well since my parents' divorce how to maintain my good standing in opposing camps.

Maybe I learned this from my father. He definitely made me feel like I was the only person who existed when we were together. He must've made my sister feel the same way too. They talked on the phone every night. He didn't seem to have this power with anyone else though. Penny and I were different. I was Felix to her Oscar; she liked disco while I liked rock but we both felt like number one with our father. Unfortunately, he really didn't seem to have any friends, just a few other isolated souls he saw once in awhile.

I loved my father, but it was too much for me to think about the loneliness of his life. I adored him, but seeing all he'd lost in his life—his health, his family, his work, his friends—scared me. I wanted to fill in the gaps in my lonely world with as many friends as I could. I got something out of both gangs I hung out with. The Jamaica crew was geekier than the P.S. 117 gang, but they were earthier too, more ready to talk about and experiment with sex, or at least first and second bases. The P.S. 117 gang was cerebral and hip, more secure in their minds than in their bodies, even though they clothed their bodies in understated garb purchased in the city, not in the Queens Mall. They were on the cusp of becoming sexual, but were too restrained to gush about their desires. Time would pass, of course, and Paige would turn out to be a gusher after all; Chitra, a magnet for burn-out boys; Susan, a bisexual; and Sheela would be dead before her twenty-fourth birthday. Three out of four of the Ramones would die untimely deaths themselves.

But on Bastille Day—July 14, 1981—we were all alive and together: The P.S. 117 gang and The Ramones. We arrived at the concert early enough to score space in the open area right in front of the stage. Sheela, a dancer who studied ballet and modern several times a week wore a button that read "Punk/Preppy" on her black "Martha Graham at City Center" T-shirt. When the band charged through their hit, "Sheena is a Punk Rocker," I sang to my pal: "Sheela is a punk rocker. Sheela is a punk rocker. Sheela is a punk rocker now-ow-ow-ow." A few songs into the show I laughed and screamed into her hair: "This is so loud!!" She nodded and laughed, and passed me some Double Mint gum, to help my ears pop. We chewed and swayed, and did our best to avoid being doused with skunk-smelling Heineken by the real East Village punks who fought with us for dance space.

Eventually, the blasting ecstasy of the Ramones' music made me forget my own physical and cultural discomfort. I spit out my gum before I'd sucked all the flavor out, and jumped up and down: higher and higher and higher. Situated a foot away from a huge speaker, my ears became so filled with guitar reverb I thought my brain would melt. It was a good feeling.

Fourteenth Street was muggy and spooky after the show. We bought pretzels from the brave vendor who set up shop outside the concert hall, then walked west to catch the E train back to Queens, humming the Ramones' tag lines: "Hey! Ho! Let's Go." and "Gabba, Gabba, Hey!" the whole way. When I came home that night, my ears still felt warm and numb. I wondered if I'd suffered permanent hearing damage, and didn't care if I had. While washing up, and getting ready for bed however, I discovered something else in my body had altered: I had gotten my period for the first time. It was almost 3 am, too late to wake my mother or to call anybody. I was fourteen years old and I had finally become a woman. Gabba, Gabba, Hey!

Yet nothing really changed, even though I wanted to be an adult, wanted to feel more alive, more free. I still went to school, sometimes hung out with friends after school, to listen to records or go shopping; and most nights I was home with my mother, peacefully watching TV with her in the living room, while my sister went out dancing. I read comic books and potboilers, wrote bad poetry in secret, and looked in the mirror a lot to monitor the changes in my body, and to practice my enigmatic expressions. I thought that getting my period would mean becoming a woman, becoming more clear about who I was, and what I was, but it didn't seem to mean much at all. I just grew more restless, waiting for a sign that I could bust out of the sterile monotony of my Queens life and do something, or have something happen to me that would make me special, that would help me find my path in life. I wrote all the time, and desperately wanted to be a writer, maybe write for the movies one day, but how? I was still a kid and no one cared what I had to say. I didn't even care what I had to say. I was bored with myself.

My father wasn't bored with me though, or with us. That October, for my fifteenth birthday, he took me to see *They're Playing Our Song*, a Broadway musical starring Lucille Ball's daughter, Lucie Arnaz, and one of my father's favorite comedians, Robert Klein. My mother was more of the musical theater fan, but my father was really keen on taking me to see this one. Neil Simon wrote the book, and it definitely had plenty of New York humor to spare. After the show, at my father's suggestion, we waited outside the stage door for the stars to come out. A few other stage door johnnies waited with us on the cold fall night.

"There she is," my father said. "Lucie Arnaz. Go ahead ask her to sign your program. It's okay."

I felt suddenly nervous but I shyly presented the Playbill to the actress and asked her to sign it. She smiled sweetly, asked my name, and dashed off a note, in nice-girl handwriting that reminded me of my cousin Debra's. I told my Dad to get his program signed, but he said, "No, this is your night."

Afterwards we took a horse and carriage ride through Central Park. My father never did corny things like this with me. Used bookstores and pool halls were more of our scene, but I think he thought I was becoming a young woman, and would enjoy a sort of grown-up date with Dad. I thought it was sweet. Both of us were much more comfortable driving around Times Square or playing arcade games on Coney Island, but it was nice to play this game of pretending to live the way (we thought) the other half lived, just for one night. My father didn't say much during the carriage ride, but he held my hand, and he had a very peaceful smile on his face.

"Would you like to get some dessert?" he asked me. "There's a terrific place called Rumplemeyer's. Very famous. It's in the St. Moritz hotel on Central Park South."

I could tell he'd planned this from the beginning and I said, "Sure. That sounds great."

At Rumplemeyer's we relaxed. I had a piece of chocolate cake and we talked about the show and how nice Lucie Arnaz seemed "in real life."

"I love that Robert Klein," he told me. "He reminds me a lot of Alan King—one of the best comedians ever—Alan King's a really sharp guy. Fast. You'd like him."

"Did you ever take him in your cab?"

"No. But I once picked up Frank Sinatra—not too far from here. He was a really spiffy guy."

My father clearly missed those days, and days when he too was a really spiffy guy, dressed up nice in clothes picked out by my mother. He looked good then, with slicked back hair and a handsome forties-movie-star face. His dark hair was still slick, but his face was yellowed and paunchy from the kidney disease. But it was the face that I knew and I loved it.

Saturdays with my father were the only consistently comforting thing in my life. I sensed that even that would change soon. I knew I was growing up and I wanted to spend more time with my friends than with my family. I'd seen my sister go through the same changes several years before, when she was my age. She became less interested in going to amusement parks and pool halls with me and our father, and more interested in hanging out in Hoover Park with her friends, and boyfriends. Did I have a boyfriend now, too? That seemed so unreal, like I was in a movie, playing a part. Maybe that's why I felt such an odd sense of being really alive, holding Tommy's hand at the Pink Floyd movie, and yet really dead too, as if the old me was lost somewhere.

After seeing *The Wall*, images of Pink, the tormented rock star stayed in my mind, as I lay in bed that night reading *My Sweet Audrina*, the follow-up to *If There Be Thorns*, the latest edition in the pulpy V.C. Andrews' *Flowers in the Attic* book series. Before we shut the light in our room, my sister tried my father's number again. She spoke to him every day, but hadn't reached him yet. My mother accused them both of suffering from "telephonitis." I was starting to enjoy talking on the phone to my friends, but I never had much to say to my father on the phone.

"It's still busy," Penny said, placing the receiver back on its cradle, on the floor between our beds. "It's weird."

As I dropped off, it was as if I were being breathed in by a rosy, cottony cloud. The air that was supposed to give me breath was suffocating me. I kept seeing Pink shaving off his eyebrows, blood dripping down his face. I didn't feel scared, sad, or emotional at all. I didn't feel anything. It was just odd, like a memory of another world that I had no desire to return to. I thought of Tommy and looked forward to going to the beach with him and the Jamaica crew soon, or maybe even just the two of us alone. In my mind, I heard Pink Floyd sing, "Mother, do you think she's good enough?" as I drifted off to sleep. Images of the little fatherless boy, Pink, smothered in his surviving parent's clutch, accompanied the music in my head, along with the image of Pink's father, a soldier killed during the war. He actually looked a lot like my father: soulful eyes, jowly face. Maybe all middle-aged, working class men looked like this.

The next morning, my mother gently shook me awake. I could tell from the dim light coming through the Venetian blinds that it was barely past dawn. I don't think I had ever been up that early before. I felt as if I was still dreaming, still in some kind of Pink Floyd hallucination. My sister's sobs brought me to consciousness. She was close to me, our single beds lined up together in an "L" shape; we were connected at the heads like Siamese twins.

"I have something to tell you, Jill," my mother said, sitting on the edge of my bed.

The sound of my name lingered in the air. I was still half awake, half in dreams.

"Daddy passed away yesterday. I knew something was wrong, when you girls said his line was busy all night. I called to have them open up the apartment and they found him. His heart just gave out."

It didn't sound real. Was I in a dream, or in a movie? My father had been sick with a serious illness for most of my life. He'd lived with it this long. How could he suddenly be dead? It didn't make sense to me. What did keep running through my mind was this: All I have left are memories; nothing new will ever happen between us; I'll never see him again. It was like he was trapped in a movie, something I could replay in my mind over and over again, but that would never change. I loved the moment the movies started, when the lights went down, and the previews came on, and then the first sounds and images of what could be a great story filled the theatre. My father's story was over now, and all I could do was replay it, the parts I knew at least, in my mind, again and again, as if I was dying and my life was flashing before my eyes.

I was starting to wake up. I knew this was real, real and awful and permanent. My sister and I instinctively grabbed for each other's hands. Penny wept, yet no tears poured out of me. This was strange. I was the baby. I always cried. I felt ashamed in that frozen moment, on that unforgiving August morning, as I listened to the whirr of the central air-conditioning and the sound of my sister's sobs. This was the time to cry and I could not. I didn't know what this meant, but I knew that it was wrong. ■