

OUR LADY OF THE BRONX

It was one of those Augusts, when the city is already fatigued from the dog days and all you can do is Zen it out until September. It seemed particularly bad in the Bronx, but I stayed on because she lived there.

I had met her up in East Durham the year before. She was fresh out of Fordham and vacationing with her parents. Right from the start, there was something about her that didn't quite gel; but that's often the case in young Americans with immigrant parents. Her father, who had never assimilated, was old-fashioned and quite stern. There was an odd tension between them.

She was probably the most erotic person I have ever met. The next morning, however, she would be silent and withdrawn. It was a long time before I realized that there was a war going on inside her. That summer she moved into a seedy apartment on Decatur Avenue. I should have wondered why her old man let her live there.

She had a strange crucifix hanging over her bed. Instead of the usual anguished figure, the Christ was beautiful and virile - rather like the young St. Sebastian. She never got angry when I joked about this, but her mood would change subtly. She had given me a key and one day I arrived early and let myself in. She was supposed to be at a job interview in Manhattan but I heard voices coming from her bedroom. I snuck over to the door and caught her kneeling in front of the crucifix. I could have sworn I had heard a man's voice and I was pissed as all hell. She turned in fright when she heard me. Her face was ashen white and she had been crying. The energy in the room was palpable and not altogether pleasant.

As August wore on, the heat got more oppressive and she got even stranger. I found out that she had quarreled violently with her father and been thrown out of the house. She also gave up all pretense of looking for work. At times, I would find her semi-conscious on the floor, lying in a pool of sweat. I tried to get her to go to a doctor but she would smile patronizingly. Sometimes, I would wake alone and find her in the kitchen, staring out into the claustrophobic night.

I was relieved when she broke up with me. I was sure she had found someone else; so I jumped at the chance of a couple of weeks work in Cape Cod. When I called her from the bus terminal, someone picked up and, in the background, I heard a cracked recording of Ave Maria. Then the phone went dead and I thought nothing of it, until some years later when her sister told me the full story.