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# Digging to China

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**WE WORE ALUMINUM DOG TAGS** with our religion stamped on them, so that a stranger would know where to bury us after an atom bomb attack. It was the fifties, a time when televisions were just beginning to appear in the East End. We lived in the West End, near Our Lady of the Benevolent Sacred Heart Church, a wooden building with beige stucco walls and a stained glass window of Christ on the cross facing the Atlantic Ocean.

We were the outsiders, longing to belong, the only kids on the block who had never been inside the church, although we often stood by the heavy oak door peering in. Jewish girls didn't attend Sacred Heart Church and they most definitely did not go to the Sisters of Charity School.

Joanne and I lived on the same block and we ate lunch together every day at school, unwrapping the silver foil on our peanut butter and jelly sandwiches at a table far from the other girls. Her father, Arthur, was a lawyer who was proud to be an atheist. Her mother lit Friday night candles, but never went to synagogue.

My parents ate clam fritters on Friday night. They sent me to the neighborhood elementary school, where green paper Christmas trees adorned the classroom doors and where a torn blue and gold Chanukah menorah was taped carelessly in one corner. Joanne and I knew the words to "Silent Night" although our mothers forbade us from singing Jesus' name. Just mouth the lyrics, our mothers said. Never, never say them.

But I never listened. I sang "Silent Night" at the top of my voice, raising my volume when I came to the words, "Holy Infant So Tender and Mild." After all, it was forbidden. I envied Patricia Everson, the blonde girl who sat in front of me. She was always crossing herself. "Mary, Mother of God, have mercy on me," she said before she did every long division problem. "Lord Jesus help me," she whispered as she stood before the class and tried in vain to spell

the names of the Indian tribes in New York State.

Joanne and I often talked about the bomb. She was sure that it would strike New England, where the Boston Tea Party had taken place.

"Boston is a more revolutionary place than New York," she told me, as we sat in the wet sand, looking for jingle shells. We had studied the American Revolution two years earlier. Now, we were deep into the Cold War and Communism. I was sure that Russia was going to drop a big bomb somewhere and that we would all disappear into a mushroom cloud of smoke.

She argued with me incessantly but there was no dissuading me from this grim vision. I read the newspapers that my father brought home every evening—The World Telegram, The Evening Sun, The Journal American. I'd sit on my front porch, swatting flies, and turning the pages.

My favorite was The Journal American, a paper that included a daily editorial on the woes of communism. "Listen to this, Joanne," I said one day as I pulled a scrap of newspaper from my beach bag and began reading the bold headline: "The Bomb is Ticking. Do You Hear It?"

Joanne shook her head. "Don't believe everything you read," she said. Her voice was loud and dramatic. I continued reading: "If we don't take any action, it will explode on our hallowed soil." "That means on our beach," I said. "Soil means sand."

"I'm not scared," she said. "It's all propaganda. They want us to be frightened."

I twisted my dog tag as she spoke, feeling the raised letter J for Jewish that was stamped above my name. Then, I crumpled the clipping into a ball and threw it into the water. It landed on the crest of a wave, and disappeared into the dark surf.

Russia was far away. Very cold. The people wore fur hats and thick coats that made them look fat. I had seen pictures of them, trudging down snowy streets. In America, we were warm and the sun was shining. We stretched out on the beach in striped canvas chairs, lathered in suntan oil.

Ten feet away from us, closer to the water, four girls were building sand cathedrals. It was a contest to see who could build the tallest one, with gargoyles that would scrape the clouds. The girls filled their pails with water, grabbed handfuls of sand and dripped the wet sand slowly through their small fingers. They moved from side to side, careful not to topple the delicate steeples. The oldest, Barbara, had just finished her second year of Catholic high school.



Thanks to the nuns, Barbara considered herself an expert on churches. I could hear every word she said. "In Europe, there are hundreds of cathedrals, with stained glass windows," she said. "Inside, they are so cold, that you have to wear a sweater in the summertime, and so dark you have to light candles to see."

Barbara always seemed to know what she was doing. She came from a good Catholic family, one of seven children. Her mother went to church every morning and sent all of her children to Catholic school, where the nuns hit your fingers with the metal edge of a ruler if you wrote with your left hand. You had to say your Rosary. Bow before the picture of the Pope. Wear your plaid jumper three inches below the knees. Never chew gum, which the girls did anyway, sticking it underneath the seats of their wooden desks when the nuns approached.

I knew them from my summers renting in the neighborhood, playing stickball on the narrow streets, and digging tunnels in the sand. One year ago, we had finally moved, fleeing Brooklyn and the only home that I had ever known, a red brick apartment building that smelled of cabbage, for a wooden bungalow near the beach. My father, Marvin, wanted to improve our lives, to fill our lungs with fresh air. For him, leaving the city was a step up, worth the two-hour commute each day by train.

Joanne and I attended public school, two blocks from the brick Sisters of Charity building. Compared to their school, our school was old and worn. The windows were always in need of washing, and when the light hit the panes at the right angle, you could see hundreds of pieces of tape, the residue of art projects long since destroyed, clinging to the glass. The schoolyard was covered with a fine coating of sand, blown from the beach, and the seesaw needed a coat of paint.

One of the nuns swept their schoolyard early each morning. She was just finishing up when we passed and she would wave to us, as if to say, this is the proper way to do things. Tell that to your principal. But we didn't say a word. Our principal wouldn't have appreciated it. He had all he could do to keep us under control and to see to it that the cleaning staff emptied the garbage cans, filled with squashed milk containers from yesterday's lunch, and washed the linoleum floors in the lunchroom. Public school kids were an unruly lot, sent to stand in the corner for shooting straw wrappers or spitballs or rubber bands. We talked when we were supposed to be quiet and we wrote the answers to the spelling test questions on the inside of our palms.

None of the girls in the Sisters of Charity School would have dared to misbehave. Certainly not Barbara, who sat on the beach dripping tiny drops of sand onto her church steeples. Barbara understood self-control. If one of the girls interrupted her, she silenced her quickly and easily by raising her finger to her lips. Do not speak, the gesture said. Or else. She had learned it from the nuns.

"Light from the outside filtered in through the colored glass," Barbara said, as she resumed her description of the ancient cathedrals. "It struck the stone floor, making odd patterns. When you looked up, you saw the windows glowing: yellow, red, blue. Christ on the cross, the story of the crucifixion. The Virgin Mary."

The girls nodded as she spoke and then, after a moment's hesitation, crossed themselves. They could imagine the shining glass windows. There was a round, stained-glass window in Sacred Heart, above the main altar. The light from it bounced off a tall, silver chalice, landing magically on the head of the priest.

None of this made any sense to Joanne or me. They were busy building gothic drip cathedrals; we sat there obsessed with digging the deepest hole that we could dig, all the way to China. China was on the other side of the world, far from the West End. China was exotic, a land filled with bamboo. The West End was plain and familiar, a land filled with sand. If you dug hard and long enough, down, down through the coarse, wet sand, you could escape.

China was Communist, I said, but Joanne insisted that it was a good place. The workers ran the country. The leaders read books. Even farmers spouted wisdom. My father once told me that the Chinese expression for suffering was eating bitterness. There was nothing bitter about their food. Wonton soup with strips of pork lurking at the bottom of the white flowered bowl; crisp egg rolls, oily to the touch; lobster Cantonese, sauce streaked with egg white and reeking of garlic. We Jews loved Chinese food, more than we loved the foods we ate in the shtetl, gefilte fish and soup made of potato skins. Chinese food was worth digging to the other end of the earth for.

I imagined that when our tunnel was deep enough I would just slide down the shoot and land on a Chinese street, as shocked as Dorothy, whose house fell to the ground, landing her in Oz. Plop. Plop. Thud. Thud. I would hit the hard mud, rocking back and forth for a few moments, before I gained my balance. I would open my eyes to discover that I was surrounded by a crowd

gaping at me in disbelief. Who was this girl who looked so strange? How white her skin was and how odd the shape of her eyes. Why was she dressed in such peculiar clothing, and how to explain the dark curly hair? The men stared at me. And the women and children, too. Even the babies, strapped to their mothers' breasts, stared without blinking.

We took turns digging. Joanne was stronger than I and she was fearless. When the hole became too deep to reach the bottom, she insisted that I lower her inside, holding on to her ankles as she scooped sand from the bottom. That was definitely too scary. None of this acrobatic upside-down stuff for me. I reached in as far as I could and grabbed a handful of sand. It was wetter and less fine. It felt like coarse salt, the kind of salt that came in a red cylindrical container marked kosher, the salt that my father's mother in Brooklyn sprinkled on her Friday-night chicken while we sat at our table in the West End picking fried bits of clams from our teeth.

Barbara and her friends attended the Sisters of Charity School across the street from the Church. It was filled with neighborhood girls, from junior high through high school, whose blue-collar Irish parents did not want their daughters to share classes with boys. There would be time to marry and have babies. Before that, there was to be no sex.

Most of the girls came from families of 10 or 12 children, crammed into the wooden frame houses by the beach. Their parents had migrated to the little bungalows in the 1930s and 40s, fleeing New York City. They stayed, one generation after another attending mass at Our Lady of the Benevolent Sacred Heart Church.

Their fathers were plumbers, carpenters, and truck drivers. Their mothers were full-time homemakers who sewed their daughters' First Communion dresses and volunteered at the Ladies' Auxiliary. Summers were spent on the beach, where they planted their beach chairs in the white sand, next to the renters, middle- and upper-middle class families from New York City, who bought their kids ice cream every day from the Good Humor truck and whose children wore bathing suits that matched their terry cloth beach shirts.

The kids in the West End passed their bathing suits from brother to brother and from sister to sister, no matter how stretched, torn, and faded. They were badges of honor, like the communion dresses and suits, with their starched white sashes and pristine white shirts, which were passed along from one generation to the next, or the two-wheelers, painted over so many times that their

scratched rear fenders displayed all the colors of the rainbow.

Barbara stopped speaking to concentrate on the sand steeple. She was nearing its pinnacle, time to show her skill. One false move, one drop of sand too heavy, and the steeple soaring toward heaven would topple. She reached into the pail for a tiny globule of sand and let it drip downward, holding her breath. It landed on the top of the tower of drips. For a moment, the tower shook. Then, it was still.

She crossed herself in thanks and the other girls crossed themselves too. Joanne and I stopped digging and watched them, as they huddled in their tight circle. They knew who their God was. They were giving thanks to Jesus, the savior, Jesus the son of Mary, Jesus the Jew. Jesus hovered over their lives, blessing them at every moment—when they crossed the street and when their sand creation was in danger of falling.

We were almost at China now—at least we hoped we were. As we dug deeper, the sand became wetter and wetter. The bottom of the hole was fast filling up with water. My fingers were red from digging, coarse grains of sand under my fingernails.

Barbara reached into the pail again for one more globule of sand. The wind was getting a bit stronger and the tide was starting to come in. Wave after wave crashed against the sand, creeping closer and closer. The girls began their Hail Marys.

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”

I could not take my eyes off of them, these blue-eyed, freckle-faced, blonde-haired girls of the West End. Their voices were loud, interrupted only by the crashing surf. The waves licked the edges of the sand cathedral. They said their Hail Marys again, louder, more fervently. The wind gusted and a large swell of water formed, rising, like a wave during a full moon. The girls fled to the seaweed-covered jetty as the water rolled in. Suddenly, the wave crested and surged forward, crashing over their cathedral.

When the water retreated, seconds later, all that remained was a large mound of sand. There were no gargoyles. There were no gothic spires scraping the clouds. I stared at the mound for a moment, then reached down into the hole and continued digging to China.