

The Invisible Door

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When I was thirteen, and a sophomore in Franklin K. Lane High School in Brooklyn, I was assigned to the honors history class of a man with a gray crew cut and brilliant blue eyes. Samuel J. Halperin, the assistant dean of students, was a 5' 2" man who could make the toughest punk at Lane cringe.

Lane was filled with working class kids like me; most were the children of Jewish, Italian and Irish immigrants. I was a dreamy-eyed girl with a long ponytail that swished from side to side as I raced along Lane's corridors, hoping not to get shoved against the lockers. I was taking stenography and typing so I would have a useful profession.

In the spring of 1954, I had one free period and became Mr. Halperin's secretary. When I mentioned I had read *War and Peace* over the previous summer, he seemed impressed. I didn't tell him I skipped the war parts because I was more interested in Natasha Rostov's romances.

He asked what newspaper I read. "*The Daily News*," I said. What else was there? Bold, racy headlines. Great sports stories about my beloved Brooklyn Dodgers. "You must read this," he said, handing me his neatly folded copy of *The New York Times*.

At first I found the *Times* boring, but soon I was reading "All the News That's Fit to Print," and learning more than I could from any textbook.

The following September I had six majors and no free period, but I would stop by Mr. Halperin's office, where he might be terrorizing some miscreant. Once he was giving a tongue lashing to John Gotti, who later became a top Mafia chieftain.

I'd pick up our copy of the *Times*. One day he added *The New Yorker* with its "Talk of the Town" section filled with gossip about art gallery openings and book parties. I sometimes imagined myself in these places, sipping cocktails and being charming.

What I didn't realize then was that I was on my way out of working class Brooklyn, and Mr. Halperin was providing a road map. A year later, when I was about to graduate, I confided that my parents couldn't afford to send me to college. He talked with a guidance counselor who found a job for me at New York University - secretary by day, student with eight free credits a term at night.

Years later, I tried to locate him to tell him about my first small successes as a writer, but he had retired from Lane, and the phone company no longer had a listing for him. I realized I had never properly thanked him for his influence.

Even now, half a century later and a long way from Brooklyn, I read *The Times* every morning, stepping through the invisible door that ushers me into the world of international politics, mega-mergers and nanotechnology, where I drink coffee with presidents and performance artists.