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It Began with a Walk

In 1975 a friend lent me his New York apartment at 33rd Street and Lexington Avenue for a respite from the burdens of family, work, and college. I ventured out, heading north to view an exhibit about women at the International Center of Photography (ICP), an institution that had opened two years earlier. That walk changed my life.

On the first floor were a reception desk, two galleries, and a bookshop, with an elegant winding stairway that led to the second floor, which housed the major gallery. The offices and the classrooms were on the upper floors, while darkrooms and educational galleries were in the basement. Every photographer I have ever met loved the place, and I was no exception. I immediately signed up for a class.

At this point in my life I was in my mid-thirties and living a very busy life in Summit, New Jersey. I had just separated from my second husband and was raising four children—two of my own and two foster kids. I had recently passed my General Educational Development (GED) exams, having dropped out of high school, to my great regret, when I was fifteen.

Now I was enrolled in college classes, eager to pick up where I had left off in the hope of finding out who I really was. Painting was my passion, but over the years life had gotten in the way. The last thing I needed was another course. I merely wanted to learn to use my camera better so I could take pictures of subjects I wanted to paint.

The Children's Aid Society's Sloan Center, 1978.

One of the first class assignments was to photograph our neighborhoods, and I immediately encountered a problem. For most of my life I had lived in various suburbs and always found them boring. I rarely got to know my neighbors and had trouble relating to their interest in activities like shopping, parties, and home decoration.

When the photo assignment was due, all the other students turned in their work for critique, but I had nothing to show. It was a very serious school with competitive students, and I was uncomfortable with my lack of material.

My instructor was an established photographer about ten years younger than I was. She was a demanding and intense teacher who referred to her class as a "boot camp." Some members of the class had dropped out on the first day, and I recall how they told me they were not coming back because of her painfully frank criticisms. My instructor was not happy when I failed to complete the first assignment.

"What is your problem?" she asked me.

"I live in the suburbs, and it's boring," I replied.

"Then why don't you move?" she said.

"I don't want to move; I just don't want to photograph it," I answered.

I was stunned when she suggested I travel eighty-eight blocks south of ICP to the Children's Aid Society on East 6th Street, where I could photograph children at the Sloan Center. Her instincts told her I would do well with children. Moreover, in the aftermath of the War on Poverty, the lives of the poor still raised potent issues. My instructor saw value in documenting this East Side neighborhood.

She wrote an introductory letter, and I followed up with phone calls. The director of the Sloan Center was hesitant. He told me another photographer with a similar request had insisted on taking photos of children in a nearby park instead because the neighborhood was so dismal. I assured him I would never do anything so rude. To him I projected confidence, but I was terrified. My conditioning led me to be suspicious of anything different, and I knew that the place I was being sent was beyond different from anything I had experienced before.

East 6th Street ran through Avenues A, B, C, and D to the East River, an area known as "Alphabet City." Avenue A was probably the safest, but I would spend most of my time there on Avenues B and C, occasionally venturing onto D.

The *New York Times* would describe Avenue D this way:

> One of the meanest streets in America, a narrow corridor of poverty and violence running north from Houston Street, parallel to the E. River. . . . It is a street where murders take place in the afternoon sunlight, where drug dealers operate boldly, fearing one another

> more than the police who occasionally cruise past in radio cars; a street where men gripping beer bottles in brown paper bags exchange prison memories, while little boys practice kung fu and karate and their mothers shop with food stamps for Cafe Bustelo and yellow rice. It is a street of housing projects and crumbling tenements, some abandoned and burned out, a street where the language of choice is Spanish and the old men play dominoes.

On my first visit I saw all that for myself, and it truly was a mean street and a dangerous neighborhood. I remember doing breathing exercises and praying to the spirits to guide me and keep me from being killed. My mind was filled with daily news stories about the dangers of the inner cities—the everyday shootings, car thefts, and robberies, similar to certain sections of Camden and Newark today. I listened to my instructor because I believed that going to East 6th Street was somehow important, but more than that, I needed to contribute some work to the class to please her.

That first day in June 1977 after deciding to photograph the area, as I was walking slowly down the street with my manual camera around my neck and light meter in hand, I gave myself courage by repeating something I had read over and over: "If you don't take a risk, you will never do anything meaningful." That became my mantra. I didn't know where I was walking to or what I was going to do; only my mantra was clear.

Men Playing Dominoes, 1980.

On East 6th Street I was in a strange and hostile environment, standing in a world I never knew existed. I was so filled with fear that everything seemed to be out of focus. I heard the sounds of people laughing, arguing, and yelling as swirls of colorful clothes swam before my eyes. The neighborhood was dotted with burned-out buildings. Police sirens, honking horns, and the blaring of fire engines filled the air, and grim-looking men dressed in dark clothes hovered in doorways. Rotting garbage, piled high in plastic bags and cans, polluted the sidewalks with heavy odors, while children played in the rubble-strewn lots.

That first day, standing in the Children's Aid Society doorway, I was transfixed by everything I was seeing. My emotional foundation had shifted, but I didn't know why. My life was on edge in this dangerous area, but as fearful as I was, I knew deep in my gut that this was the neighborhood I wanted to photograph. The seed had been planted.

It didn't take much to see the many differences between the inner city and the suburbs where I had grown up. Hardly anything changes in the suburbs, whereas in the inner city, changes occur daily. Every time I visited East 6th Street I learned about someone moving in or moving out, dying or being born. Buildings were constantly being burned up or torn down. But except for the colorful clothing of the female Hispanics and the decorative attire of the crossdressers, the residents of the Lower East Side looked the same as those in the suburbs. Many dressed in thrift-store clothing that looked like it could have come from where I bought mine. It was the environment that was different, not the people.

East 6th Street residents were white, black, and brown. They were southerners, native New Yorkers, and Hispanics. Young and old. Straight, gay, and transgender. I won't say I was color blind, but focused literally as I was through the eye of the lens, I saw them as individuals whose lives I wanted to document. I was never aware of racial or ethnic tensions.

The residents I met on East 6th Street helped me survive and learn on my feet. They told me which side of the street was safe to walk on, how to avoid getting in the line of fire if shots broke out, and about the danger of objects thrown from roofs. They also warned me not to walk too close to doorways—you could be pulled in. People told me to stay away from East 4th Street, where the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang had their main headquarters. I hurried past the building once or twice and saw the motorcycles lined up, but felt no desire to take photographs. The gang had a fierce reputation, and I already felt I was in over my head.

On one block I noticed some women sitting on a stoop watching the children playing around them. I pointed to my camera and then to the children, and the women nodded yes. I told them I would return on the same day the following week to give them the photographs I had just taken. But when

I did what I promised, the women looked at me with a cardboard expression as though they had never seen me before. I was thinking about going home and would have left with the attitude that some people didn't appreciate what I was trying to give them. But I was more curious than disappointed about their lack of response. Finally I heard some children speaking English and asked them why their mothers didn't want the photographs.

"*No dinero. No dinero*," they answered.

"I don't want any money. The photos are free," I explained.

With those words the entire scene changed. Soon the women were absorbed in the photographs and passing them around. I ended up taking more images and promising to return again the following week.

If I had gone home, I would have missed a major turning point in my life. It scares me now to think I was on the edge of leaving. But something made me stay, and from 1977 to 1981 I continued to explore my new world. In the process, I learned to trust my intuition. This inner voice grew stronger and clearer the more I listened to it. I found that choices turned out better when I respected this interior compass, while mistakes happened when I was lazy or in a hurry and avoided the guidance from within.

Even though I was becoming accustomed to visiting East 6th Street, I still felt afraid every time I drove in. But once I actually arrived there, the fear was diminished. When I drove down East 6th Street looking for a parking space, the men in the doorways nodded to me and the children would run alongside my car, yelling for me to take their pictures. The residents would smile and wave, and my heart would burst with joy. I had never felt so accepted in my life.

I wasn't comfortable going up to strangers and asking their permission to photograph them. I had to psych myself up in order to leave my comfort zone. My instructor at ICP told students we would be more successful if we approached people at festivities or casual events rather than while they were doing something stressful, like running in or out of the supermarket in the rain.

When I asked permission to photograph someone, the response was always, "What should I do?"

I would ask them to be natural, to relax, as though I wasn't there. This was difficult for some people, so I learned to take a mental photo of what the person was doing that had attracted me in the first place. This allowed me to remind them how they had been standing or holding their hands and sometimes even to demonstrate the posture so they could recreate it for me. I also asked what they had been thinking about when I saw them.

"Can you think that thought again?" I would ask. When they were able to recapture the thought, their eyes took on a deeper look, like they were back in their own world, unaware of the camera.

Woman in Motion, 1977. *The woman shown in this image does not seem threatened but may have been shy or caught by surprise. People did not, at that time, often take pictures on the street as they do now. Today, by contrast, we don't see many women wearing housedresses, and we don't see many metal garbage cans or stray dogs on the street.*

Garbage and Hanging Out, 1980.

Residents on Street, 1978. *Pedro (center, facing camera) and his neighbors are shown here keeping watch over the streets. This photograph illustrates how comfortable the residents felt with my presence—some of the same folks whom I had been deathly afraid of only a few months earlier.*

Older Man Posing, 1977. *This man enjoyed having his picture taken and struck a serious pose that amused bystanders. The relaxed residents created a nice contrast alongside the proud and stately man.*

Of course, I also had to deal with people saying, "cheese" or making the peace sign behind someone's head. In those cases, I would take the photograph anyway just to make them happy.

I always gave people prints of the photos I took. One time I had a huge stack to distribute. People poured from the tenements when they saw me arrive. After I had handed out the photos and was leaving, I looked back. People on the third floor were hanging out the windows waving their photos and showing them to people on the floors below. The fluttering black-and-white prints reminded me of a ticker-tape parade. My heart swelled. Then it began to rain and I wanted to yell, "Cover the prints!" But instead I smiled and let myself enjoy the moment.

To my surprise, no one I photographed in the inner city preened or fussed with their hair or clothes as suburbanites routinely did when I prepared to press the shutter. Showing respect by asking permission was important to me, even though it often disrupted the moment. Most people have a short attention span, so if I waited long enough I became invisible and people went back to being natural again. That was when I took the photos that would become my favorites. I rarely recaptured what I initially saw, but my camera almost always captured something both surprising and riveting. The spirit of the moment kept the image true, even if it was not my original vision.

When I pleaded with people to keep still for a photograph, most of them did as I asked, although it could take several minutes for me to prepare to

take the shot. The process of conducting light-meter readings and adjusting camera settings made me nervous and stressed, because I knew the seconds lost in this procedure could change the scene before me. To me it was a miracle I was able to capture anything at all.

However, later I wondered if the same process that stressed me out had the effect of relaxing the people I was preparing to photograph. The mechanics of what I was doing with these complicated, unfamiliar-looking devices must have seemed magical to some people and helped them take me more seriously. In some ways it seemed magical even to me.

I was engrossed in photographing the area and the people, and I seldom thought of asking questions about anyone's personal life, as that seemed to me like an intrusion. I hated being asked personal questions and didn't want to put anyone else through the same anxiety. What I learned about the people I met came mostly from whatever they were comfortable sharing with me.

The neighborhood and the people had a reputation for hostility and violence, but in my photos the people do not appear menacing. My camera saw the neighborhood as my subconscious did—friendly, caring, and natural.

The Children's Aid Society was started in 1853 by a group of social reformers to help an estimated thirty thousand homeless children. There were no child resources at that time. The Society dispatched the children on "orphan trains" to farming families in the Midwest who needed their work

Teenager on Car, 1979.

Sloan Center Sidewalk, 1980.

and could also give them a home. It was the beginning of modern-day foster care in the United States and the end of indentured servitude. Some of the children were adopted by the families, while others returned to New York. The society also initiated the first free school-lunch program in the United States.

The building housing the East 6th Street branch of the Children's Aid Society was named the Sloan Center in honor of Emily Vanderbilt Sloan, a member of the famous Vanderbilt family. The Vanderbilts were major contributors in funding the building's 1946 renovation. The center was the heart of the community, offering daycare, English lessons, recreation, breakfast, and lunch. The staff and volunteers helped the residents deal with piles of confusing forms related to welfare, housing and school problems, immigration, and health issues. The rooms at the Sloan Center were always crowded. When someone managed to get a job, the news traveled like electricity through the neighborhood and people gathered to celebrate.

I later spoke with C. Warren Moses, a social worker who was involved with the Children's Aid Society for many years. He echoed the *Times* in describing the area as "the meanest streets I'd seen anywhere." Moses told me there was "a murder a month, and even more frequently. As soon as the resourceful families could leave, they did." Moses added that he himself was hesitant to visit the Sloan Center even in daylight and never went at night.

On one side of the Sloan Center was a rubble-filled lot. On the other was an abandoned synagogue that had been broken into and vandalized. Some

residents were hoping to turn the synagogue into a new community center. A young man named Howard Brandstein was a central figure in the effort to save the building, and he often spent time there to keep vandals away until financing for this project could be established.

On and off during those early years, some of my photographs turned out blurry, and neither my classmates nor the instructor could figure out why. Then one day, as I was looking through the viewfinder, ready to take the photo I would later title "Boy Holding His Head," I happened to notice how violently my hands were shaking. To put it simply, I was afraid. Since I used a manual camera, I just had to increase the shutter-speed dial to freeze motion in order to correct that problem. In that moment, I confronted my simplest but most constant obstacle—fear.

I was intrigued watching children play on the Lower East Side, and I wanted to capture their spirit and imagination. The children I met constantly amazed me with their ability to cope with their dismal environment. They were always alert for the smallest opportunity to turn the harshest circumstances into fun. They were inquisitive, caring, and trusting toward

Children and Trash Cans, 1977. *The sight of my camera could have an especially powerful effect on children. When I crossed the street and approached the tenement shown in this image, the only children in view were the two girls sitting on the step. However, when I took out my camera, more children came spilling out of the building, eager for a place in the picture. I was amazed by the way they created their own natural composition without my input.*

Boy in Empty Lot, 1977. *Amid the desolation of a neglected playground, this boy remains dignified. The knee of his pants is ripped as if he'd been in a scuffle, but his scarf is neatly tied.*

Boy Holding His Head, 1979. *The boy gazing up at the burned-out tenement seems vulnerable and innocent in contrast to his environment. Inner-city children often struggle to cope with the chaos that surrounds them.*

The Graduate, 1977. *As this kindergarten graduate stepped out of her rundown tenement, she brought to mind an angel emerging from ruins.*

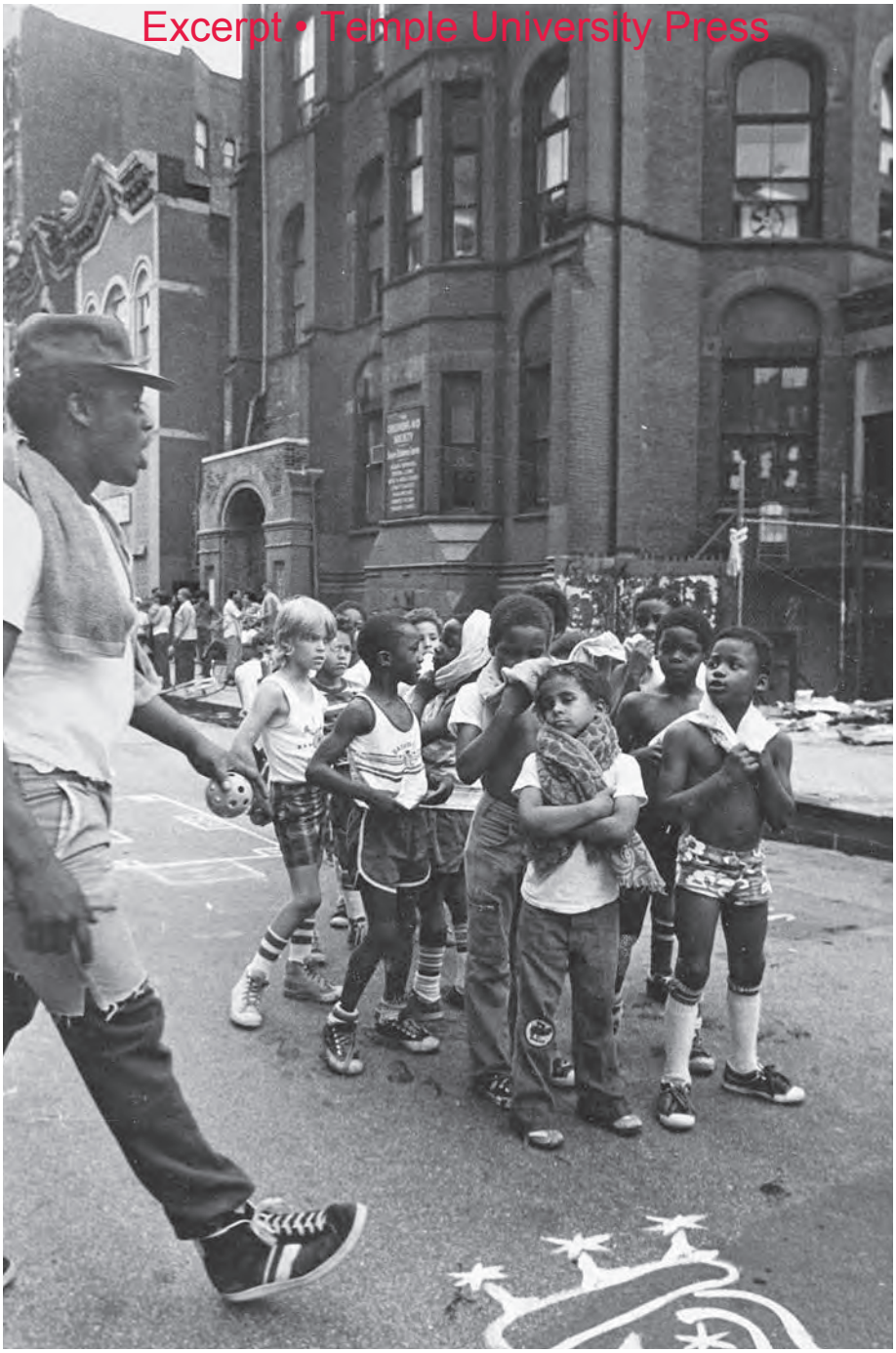
Pedro and His Cousin, 1978. *The young child is vulnerable but shows confidence because she knows she is protected and safe in his arms.*

Children in Playground, 1977. *I was enraged by the conditions the children were playing in, but they accepted their surroundings because they'd never known anything else. I saw the light of hope go out of many children's eyes when the injustice of their reality became clear to them.*

Children Playing in Hydrant Water, 1979. *I was always astonished at the freezing cold temperature of the hydrant water, even on the hottest days. I was lucky to last a minute when I put my bare foot in the water. No one else seemed to mind, but looking closely at this image I see that all the children had sneakers on. They knew.*

Neighborhood Friends, 1978.

Alberto, 1979. *I took many photographs of children that presented a striking contrast between people and environment, but Alberto's hunched posture and angry expression were a perfect reflection of the bleakness around him. As I drew closer, I was afraid he would notice me and move, but he remained engrossed in his thoughts and I was able to photograph him with ease.*



Children's Aid Society Day Camp, 1979. *The diversity and fashions of the day are on display in this image capturing the typical bustle of activity taking place at the Sloan Center, which functioned as the hub of the neighborhood.*

Burned-Out Tenement Apartment, 1980.

me. The natural ability of children to create play was a joy to see, often calling into mind memories of my own innocence.

There were several plans to improve conditions in the area. The one I remember best was Sweat Equity, a housing improvement organization that put residents to work repairing burned-out tenement buildings with the agreement that the workers would then be able to live there at an affordable rate. I photographed some of their renovations and was amazed at what Sweat Equity was able to do. It converted unlivable places into affordable and beautiful apartments. The organization sought financial support from the city government, but there never seemed to be enough money to allow Sweat Equity to live up to its full potential. Eventually it faded away.