A Girl's Youngstown

By Jacqueline Marino

I used to be afraid of the mills, or what was left of them, in the late 1970s. Although I grew up in Boardman, my family often went to visit my grandparents on the east side. As soon as we got to the Market Street bridge, my sister and I would hit the floor of our mother's white Oldsmobile, clasping our hands over our noses and mouths. We would hold our breath until our lungs burned, until the structures we passed turned from smokestacks to skyscrapers.

My mother, a nurse, said the pollution the mills belched into the air made people sick and turned their lungs black. We didn't doubt her. All the old people we knew died of cancer. We weren't going to let that happen to us, though. When we saw the mills, we just wouldn't *breathe*.

Youngstown residents had been passing over that bridge — most of them much more happily — since 1899. Its construction, though bitterly fought by farmers who didn't want to pay to develop the city and "big interests" who thought the bridge would hurt them, turned the south side into the most rapidly developing part of the city.

"One need not be an 'old resident' to recall that sunny afternoon in May when the first car came swiftly over the viaduct," read a 1914 article in *The Sunday Vindicator*. "Its bright yellow sides glistened in the light and its bell emitted a clang the like of which had never been heard here before."

The opening of that bridge was "the climax of one of the most romantic chapters in the history of Youngstown." The number of homes on the south side increased from a few hundred in 1899 to several thousand fifteen years later. The number of schools more than doubled, and the number of churches increased from two to ten. Toward the twentieth century's end, however, many journeys from the south side to downtown began reluctantly in the suburbs, whose residents, like us, were drawn not for business or fun but family obligation.

My sister and I continued holding our breath over that bridge throughout the 1980s, long after the mills closed. To us, the air was toxic and would always be. Those ugly structures were like sirens warning us to get to the air raid shelter. Mom would drive fast. We'd be blue, but safe.

As we got older, not breathing as we crossed into downtown became a form of protest. Going to grandma's red brick house on South Pearl Street seemed like a form of punishment. In the house, we did little besides play poker for pennies and watch network television. Outside, my grandpa's garden took up most of the backyard, and we weren't allowed to climb the cherry tree.

Our grandparents' neighborhood was nothing like ours in Boardman. We rode our bikes everywhere, sometimes even crossing Route 224 on our own. We explored the woods with our neighborhood friends, playing hide-and-seek and climbing trees until someone was thirsty or bleeding. Our lives were full and free. Cancer, black lungs, stinky mills. None of that Youngstown would touch us. We wouldn't let it.

I didn't realize then that you don't get to choose what parts of your hometown you get to claim any more than you can choose your grandmother's green eyes or your grandfather's musical talent. You can't take the homemade cavatelli and leave the corrupt politicians, or notice the Butler but not the ruins. The Youngstown of my past is two cities: One safe, leafy, and full of promise, the other scary, dirty, and stifling. In my memories, in me, both remain.

I have lived in a half-dozen cities over the past twenty years. I have appreciated and criticized them all for different reasons, but only Youngstown feels complicated. Perhaps it is complicated in the way all hometowns are. They are the places where we learn to feel love and hate and the spectrum of other meaningful emotions. But I think it's different for those of us from Youngstown. Everything about our city is heavy — steel, corruption, racial and class division and, most distinctively, the weight of others' condemnation.

Everyone carries it, even those of us without direct ties to steel or organized crime. Neither Steeltown nor Crimetown had much claim on me. My parents were professionals, and my closest relatives to toil near the blast furnace were great uncles. As a girl, I didn't see myself in the history of Youngstown everyone else seemed to know. Where was my Youngstown? It would be many years before I would realize no one had written it yet.

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At grandma's house, there was no thrill of discovery in exploring the trappings of my mother's past. Almost nothing from my mother's girlhood remained — perhaps because she had so little as a girl. Her tiny bedroom, at the top of a flight of steep, narrow stairs, held only a single bed and a dresser. I knew kids whose bedroom closets were bigger. There was so little room, in fact, that the door only opened about halfway before hitting the bed. I didn't know how she survived in that room. I practically lived in my bedroom as a kid; it was my refuge, the place where I read and dreamed and wrote in a household where no one except for my father ever wanted to be alone.

To write fiction, Virginia Woolf said a woman needed money and a room of her own. I think that's good advice for anyone wishing to write anything, though I would add another requirement: The room should be big enough for a desk.

Growing up, my mother did not have money or a desk, and she was rarely alone. Her one-bathroom, 1,000-square-foot house was shared with two younger brothers. My

grandparents were very social and their neighbors were close. My mother remembers their community fondly. She walked everywhere, waving at the neighbors sitting on their front porches, engaged in the traditional Youngstown pastime of street-watching. She even walked to her school, Sacred Heart, with its giant crucifix that towered over the mills. In the early 1980s, however, we weren't allowed to leave grandma's brick driveway. When we went to Sacred Heart for spaghetti dinners, we drove. Its school was closed by then and its crucifix had lost some of its majesty, overlooking the ruins of the mills we used to hide from in the Oldsmobile.

One by one, my grandparents' neighbors moved away from Pearl Street. There were break-ins and drugs. Empty liquor bottles and garbage littered the street. We rarely saw other children there, only our cousins when they were visiting from other cities.

My grandparents left for Boardman in 1982, and I didn't return to Pearl Street until nearly two decades later. I went back because Youngstown was haunting me. Once again, the city was at the center of something very bad on a national stage. By 2000, after a four-year investigation, the FBI had convicted dozens of people, including judges and other public officials, on corruption charges. Even its Congressman, James Traficant, was being investigated. It was like the worker uprisings of the 1910s, the mob wars of the 1960s, or the economic devastation of the 1970s. It didn't matter if you had nothing to do with any of that personally. If you were from Youngstown, you felt the heat.

Corruption in Youngstown wasn't just a one-time thing. It was "institutional," woven into the fabric of its culture. Or that's what everyone was saying, anyway. As a graduate student, I wanted to learn why. I went back to Youngstown to research the places where the city's history and my family's history intersected. I spent many hours over several months interviewing my relatives, including my grandparents. Even though I found no close relatives among the scores of Youngstown politicians, organized criminals, and lackeys who have been convicted over the years, I was amazed by the few degrees of separation between my family members and those who have given the city its disrepute.

These connections were often brief but memorable. My great-grandmother was shaken down for a gold pocket watch — the only thing of value belonging to her late husband — by a member of the Black Hand. Mobster Joseph "Fats" Aiellio, whose wife was one of my paternal grandmother's dearest friends, once gave my father a toy gun. (His mother, mortified, made him give it back.) My Great Uncle Joe worked at the Calla Mar, a restaurant owned by Pittsburgh "godfather" Jimmy Prato, who threw a luncheon in honor of that grandmother when she died. At one time, almost everyone played the bug, the illegal gambling racket that perpetuated organized crime in Youngstown.

"Every day a guy would come to the house," my maternal grandmother, Betty D'Onofrio, told me. "You'd play three cents or five cents on a number."

Even I have a connection to a Youngstown criminal. Briefly in 1992, I interned for Congressman Traficant on Capitol Hill. After a full day of opening mail, answering phones, and greeting visitors, I asked one of his female aides when it would be my turn to shadow the chief of staff and attend receptions and other events, like the only other intern — a man — had been doing all day. Her answer? Never.

"The Congressman always wants a woman at the front desk," she said, with a contempt I hadn't expected. If I wanted to do anything else over the next three months, she strongly advised me to find another unpaid internship.

That was my last day.

The next week, I walked into the office of the National Women's Political Caucus, a nonpartisan group that works to get women elected to public office, and asked the communications director to hire me.

She did, but only after a closed-door meeting where she told me to strike the Traficant internship from my resume.

"He's a laughingstock," she told me. "This will follow you."

Nearly a decade later, while I was doing my graduate research, I found myself interviewing mostly women, simply because they tend to outlive the men in my family. I tried to get them to tell me more about the people they knew who factored into Youngstown's criminal past, but they wanted to tell me about what their lives were like instead in the 1940s, 50s and 60s. They told me about baking pizzas in outside brick ovens and the dangers of hanging your clothes out to dry on the clothesline in Brier Hill. (If the ash got on them, you'd have to wash them all over again.) My grandmother's family was so poor they lived off fried potatoes and whatever they could grow in the garden. Still, they prided themselves on raising good kids. Once, when my great uncle stole a chicken, my great-grandmother said nothing.

"She just looked at him in a way that made him feel so guilty that he took it back," Grandma told me.

These family stories were entertaining, but what about the mob? The corrupt politicians? The thugs that wired car bombs and shot people? I inched the recorder closer.

"They never bothered us," she told me. "They knew we didn't have nothing."

I understand why Youngstown's wives, sisters, and daughters would want to forget the city's criminal past. It isn't really theirs; few women have emerged as perpetrators of the Crimetown USA image. In newspaper articles, they have been

inconsequential characters, lightly sketched into the background, cooking or grieving. That's not to say they didn't know what was going on in backrooms and boardrooms, but you don't take too much ownership of the power structure when you're just greeting people at the front desk.

Here were those two Youngstowns again. Instead of the free and the scary, I saw distinct male and female views emerge in our much-maligned city. The male one resided in the realms of collapsed industry and crime. It is the one known and maligned by the rest of the world. The female one centered on family. Though loosely referred to in references to the city's ethnic roots, its strong loyalties, and family values, that is not the story of Youngstown everyone else knows.

Despite the shame and defeatism many of us from Youngstown have felt, there is no badness in the blood here, no moral inferiority. There has been a historic lack of opportunity for half of us to speak for ourselves. Money and a room of their own? Few women in working-class Youngstown had either.

To write a creative work, according to Woolf, writers should strive for "incandescence," the state of mind in which "there is no obstacle in it, no foreign matter unconsumed." You can only get to it if you're free, even temporarily, of the emotions spawned of dependent relationships, "grudges and spites and antipathies." We don't have to let our families in our rooms where we write, but we must let them into our writing. Otherwise, no one will know our past. Steel and crime do not reflect our experience. The things we want to talk about in our eighties, those are real.

As much as I disliked going to my grandparents' house, it always smelled good. When I finally stopped complaining and looking for things to do, I often ended up in the kitchen, where there were always hard Italian cookies that never seemed to get stale and pots of sauce or wedding soup on the stove with my grandparents bustling around them, dropping handfuls of this or that into the pots, stopping only to let us kiss their pudgy cheeks and urge us to have something to eat. My grandparents' kitchen was as loving, happy, and gender-equal as any place I have ever been, definitely worth crossing the bridge for, I realize now. I am sure it was just one of many oases in a turbulent city, but not recorded or celebrated as the special thing it was.

It's a small memory, but it feels good to write about it. Finally, I can breathe.