

DID YOU HAVE THE LIFE YOU WANTED?

by Andrea Simon

CHAPTER ONE: Trip to the Field

Late June 1968

The dress had raised multicolored horizontal stripes. Rainbow ribs. It flared a bit on the bottom, brushing my knees, and the sleeves puffed out with elastic around my barely muscled upper arms. It was uncharacteristic of me to wear anything so fluffy and loud; I was a hippie who favored black and jeans or dungarees, as we called them. But on this humid June day, a dress was the coolest thing to wear, and I wanted to look female and professional.

I expected to see many people on the streets because as a caseworker for the Department of Social Services (DSS), my designated “field” neighborhood of Ocean Hill-Brownsville was in turmoil due to racially explosive city-wide teachers’ strikes emanating from the newly created Black/Latino school board’s dismissal of nineteen predominantly white, and mostly Jewish, teachers and administrators from Junior High School 271. The action pitted the teachers’ union against the community, and Blacks against whites, particularly Jews. The neighborhood swarmed with police officers, including those in plainclothes, parents, teachers, and protesters. Many local students who attended the still operational school loitered around the streets, avoiding the hotbed building. Nearly two-thirds of the parents stopped sending their children to school.

One of my Puerto Rican clients, who lived above a deli across from the controversial epicenter, had called me two weeks ago to report that she kept her twelve-year-old daughter, Amelia, home from J.H.S. 271 because her son had been hit in the back with a two by four.

When I had visited the family a few days later, Amelia said that at first she had enjoyed the teachers' new emphasis on the culture of Africa and the Caribbean, yet she was terrified of going into the building when the Black protesters came because her light skin made her a target. According to Amelia, when the troubles intensified, the teachers formed in conspiratorial clots and whispered to each other. Armed police patrolled the halls. To get inside the building, she was squashed by crowds and crawled under police barricades erected to separate the picketing teachers from community activists, some of them Black Panthers. Photographers and reporters jostled among the picketers. By the end of June, the governing board dismissed another 350 UFT strikers, adding to the tumult. When Amelia's brother came home unable to stand straight, school was no longer an option.

On this visit a week after my last, I navigated through the street throng to get to Amelia's apartment. Although I was usually uneasy once I got off the subway, super-conscious of my whiteness and role as an official "snooper," now my heartbeat sped up and my eyes blinked and crisscrossed as if they were bumblebees trapped in a hexagonal hive. It was like a war zone. Dozens of helmeted police officers held nightsticks, trying to control barking German Shepherds. Police snipers with rifles posed on the rooftops. Helicopters buzzed overhead. A Black man held a sign, "Black People Control Your Schools," another's said, "Stop Teaching Race Hatred," and a woman's read, "Power to the People," A white teacher lifted his banner, "End Racism in Our Schools." Over a megaphone, a Black leader yelled, "We are going to take what belongs to us."

I avoided the school's block on Herkimer Street and walked toward another client's past Ralph Avenue down Fulton Street. I was desperately trying to recapture the sense of uneasy calmness, if not desertion, that I had experienced in my "field" whose housing projects intersected with garbage-strewn, overgrown weedy lots and deserted boarded-up tenements. In

the beginning of May, before the strikes, I had rushed through the blocks of Brownsville, catching the chatter of teenage girls clutching their bookbags and passing around cigarettes, and boys standing atop the rusted rubble of landlord-burned buildings and car parts, and occasional older women gossiping on a stoop.

The “field” was a strange word for this expanse of humanity amidst decay. But I was diligent; this was my first real, full-time job, and it required home visits. Though I had been a caseworker for six months, I had absorbed the utter uselessness of the system. When I had been on the job for only a month, a single mother and three small children came to my office after a horrendous fire destroyed their apartment. During the multiple roadblocks involved in obtaining them emergency housing, my case supervisor detained the entire process for hours, insisting that the mother fill out three separate forms to locate the putative fathers.

Unbelievably, caseworkers were required to send absentee clients a form letter stating that since we couldn’t locate them, they would no longer receive public assistance. I assumed this also applied to those who died. I never told my supervisor that I ripped up those forms, replacing them with handmade greeting cards with the words, “So Long,” in bold letters. To continue my job, I adopted the mantra, “Do no harm.”

And this was the way it was on that hot day. I was off to the “field,” supposedly, to do as my supervisor wanted: locate “putative” fathers or record hidden televisions, in other words, to spy for the enemy. I memorized the list of minimum standards for special grants issued by the Department of Welfare. A family was entitled to one sofa and one drop-leaf table. An “adequate basic supply” of clothing for an adult woman included one hat, two cotton dresses, one “dressy dress,” three pairs of panties, one girdle, and two pairs of stockings. Beyond these specified standards, it was up to caseworkers and our supervisors to issue more funds, with good reason, of

course. I made sure that I didn't see extras, and when I could apply for more, I did. I had learned to lie to my superiors and visited the people I had grown to care about, hoping to help them circumvent city bureaucracy without reinvigorating liberal Jewish superiority. Although I never discussed religion with my clients, they must have guessed that I was Jewish from my last name, Rappaport. That day, aside from checking on Amelia, I had planned on helping one tubercular man get to a clinic, tutor a teenager in math, and guide the paperwork for an elderly woman whose oven had dangerous wiring.

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Leafing through my casebook, I didn't see them coming, but heard the rumble of running feet, a stampede of herding noise and movement. I took a large intake of breath, forgetting to exhale until the air expelled in a gigantic whoosh. I felt a whip to my side and a sharp pain. *What was happening to me?* Terror arose in my throat like a fistful of vomit. I felt a tug to my shoulder, and my pocketbook disappeared. *No, no, not my pocketbook!* Arms and heads converged, yanking and dragging me. *I have to escape; I have to escape!* My heels scraped the sidewalk, and my dress rode up as my nylon panties swept the concrete pebbles. *My dress. Oh no!* It happened so quickly that I wasn't afraid for my life; instead, crazy thoughts overtook me: *My dress will be ruined. My money will be gone. How will I pay for the subway home?*

Arms dragged me further down a broken concrete pathway, my pounded body creating a smokescreen of dust, then bouncing up newsprint-strewn stairs inside a plywood-boarded, three-story tenement, and landing with a thud. The back of my head hit a sharp object and I blanked out. What could have been seconds later, I opened my caked eyelids and saw above the

vestibule's silver mailboxes, some half-open stuffed with supermarket circulars, others with doors hanging haphazardly on rusty hinges.

Hovering over me was a gang, maybe six or seven, Black teens, yelling and screaming, seemingly high. There were hands pawing over me, under my dress, snapping the elastic on my garter belt. An unrecognizable voice eked out from my parched lips, "Stop, please stop." *Who was that speaking?* That same voice told me to keep still, that soon it would be over.

"No, no," I screamed as prodding fingers inched under my panties. "Go away, please." I tried to move my arms to swat him away, but they were pinned down. It suddenly came to me like a shard of glass through my eyes that this was how my life was going to end.

There was tapping and knocking from behind the shattered glass door leading inside the building, and I maneuvered my back upward and twisted to view the source of the noise. The face of a gray-haired Black man with a straggly beard appeared behind the glass.

"What are you doing?" he shouted through a large crack.

One boy said, "Why do you care? She's white."

The man said, "You better leave her be. There are cops around."

All I could think about were the photos of my six-year-old niece in my wallet. I said to the boys above me, "Take my money, but let me have my wallet."

The boys pressed tighter on top of me, pushing me again flat on the ground, when the man burst through the door. "Get the hell out of here," he yelled and plucked them off me as if they were leaches.

Then two middle-aged men and a woman appeared from the street side and chased away the boys, screaming at them to run away as fast as they could. The men lifted me up and led me out of the building. I crossed the sidewalk into the street. I felt safer amid traffic.

I ran down two blocks, looking over my shoulder, certain that the boys would catch up and pounce on me. Turning left, I spotted a police car and flailed my arms, uncertain if it was a mirage or the boys returning in a sedan, this time with their older, fiercer brothers. The car stopped in front of me and two officers got out.

“I was attacked,” I groaned, pointing behind me. “Attacked.”

“Where?” a lean officer said. He had a thick brown mustache and blue eyes and looked too young to be in a position of authority.

“There,” I pointed again, “around the corner, further down, in a tenement, boys.” My head pounded, and I ran my fingers over my hair to discover an egglike lump. “Oh,” I said, suddenly feeling as if I was going to faint.

“You’d better get in the car,” the other officer said. “We’ll drive there.” This one was heavysset and balding, with gray temples.

I got in the backseat and directed the police to the street. Most of the storefronts and apartment buildings were boarded up except for two brownstones, where the helping neighbors now sat on the stoops. On the corner was an empty parking lot surrounded by a bent chain-link fence. It was easy to find the scene of the crime, as it was the only building with an open door.

“There,” I said, sniffing back the snot accumulating in my nostrils. It was then that I allowed myself to sit back and the terror of what just happened overflowed me like an umbrella of wet sticky air. I opened the window and stuck out my head.

“Close it and wait in the car,” the younger officer ordered. I saw his name tag, and it said Brian O’Hara. “And lock the doors.”

Both men took their guns from their holsters and raised them.

I reopened the window and screamed, “No, no, don’t use your guns. Don’t shoot them. They’re only kids.”

“Just roll up your window.”

The officers disappeared into the building, and my heart thumped so rapidly I could barely catch my breath. I leaned into the front seat and examined my face in the rear-view mirror and gasped. My eyes were smeared black with mascara, and gray streaks ran down my cheeks. My hairband was missing, and my long hair bunched in clumps, wildly crisscrossing my forehead. Lifting my neck, I saw red welts and scratch lines traversing my neck like a monochromatic painting. I leaned further back and found darker and thicker patterns on my thighs, which were also wet with whitish-gray liquid. I lifted my ripped dress and noticed the elastic waist of my panties was torn and the crotch was wet and shredded. I smelled ammonia and the gassy vinyl of a new car. I must have blacked out.

The car door opened, and both officers returned with guns tucked in their holsters. Brian’s partner was speaking into his walkie talkie.

Brian turned around.

“Did you catch them?” I asked, knowing the answer was “no.”

“They were long gone,” Brian said. “I don’t think they’ll be back. They had been hanging out on the roof.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“We found used tubes of glue all over. They must have been high as kites. Who knows when the last time they was at school. You are one lucky girl.”

How did Brian know I had been lucky? He never asked me what they did to me.

At the police station, I sat at Brian's desk while he asked me to describe the incident in detail. His right-hand fingers pecked on an upright typewriter.

"Can I ask you something?" Brian said.

I nodded.

"What's a nice girl like you doing in this hellhole?"

"*A nice girl?*" I swallowed my initial insult at this description and answered, "I'm a caseworker. This is my field."

"What a field! I don't see no flowers."

I pulled out a tissue from a box on Brian's desk and blew my nose. I could only imagine what he thought of my smudged and tear-stained face.

"How does your boyfriend feel about you coming here?"

"*What the fuck is he asking about my boyfriend?*" I don't see the relevance of that question," I said, swallowing my anger.

"I guess I'm asking if you have a boyfriend."

"I've just been attacked, and that's what you want to know?"

"Sorry," Brian said. "I know it's been an ordeal for you. It's just that we don't often get girls like you in here."

"And I hope I am the last to come to the police station."

Another officer waved papers in our direction and Brian nodded. "Miss Rappaport, Anita," Brian said, sounding formal for the first time, "the sergeant will be here in a few minutes with money for your subway ride home. Do you need to use the phone?"

"No, thanks." There was no one I wanted to call. I didn't trust my voice.

Brian yanked out the form from the typewriter carriage and pushed it in front of me. It said, New York State Incident Report.

“Can you sign?” Brian asked, pointing at the bottom where it said, “Complainant Signature.” As I scrawled my name, I skimmed the narrative section and toward the top of the form under Incident Type. In broken typewriter letters, it read, “Attempted gang rape.”

I groaned at the words there in print before me. Up to then, I had been immersed in the car ride back to the tenement, watching the officers draw their guns. I worried that there would be violence, the losing of my pocketbook and not having money to get home. Now, I wanted to say to Brian, “No, this is not true. I am fine, just an innocent bystander during a terrible time in the city when the students are undergoing stress.” But I remembered the hands pulling at my underwear, the feral eyes of the boys, the searching fingers.

Yes, if the homeless man hadn’t appeared by the glass door of the vestibule, it would have been “gang rape.” Yes, that’s what it must have been. But it was still a shock to see the words in writing.

Suddenly, the words in front of me blurred and dizziness crept down my face like an unfurling, gauzy window shade. Possibly, I fainted, but I lost real time and was shocked into reality when I noticed a glass of water in my hand. I gulped it down even though it was lukewarm and tasted like rotten eggs.

Brian drove me to the subway and handed me, five dollars from the sergeant and a business card as I got out of the car.

“Take this,” he said. “It has my number in case you want to call.”

“Well, I know the number of the station. I have a copy of the police report.” I held up the manilla envelope as if to show him my proof.

“This is personal,” he said, winking.

I took the card, opened the clasp on the envelope, and dropped it inside.