

Joyce Wilson's recollection of her time with her foster mother in Fells Point

A personal landmark for me was the Foot of Broadway, now known as Fells Point, that had then been decidedly ungentrified and where a general merchandise store called Shocket's sold everything from underwear and socks to spices and shoes, to buckets and mops, to humongous pots to steam crabs. It was the "department" store of southeast Baltimore, inhabited by immigrants from everywhere in the world, merchant marines, working class families who worked at Bethlehem Steel or for beer bottling plants on Brewer's Hill. Owned by Mr. George Shocket, the store sat in the middle of the block across from the Broadway Market and sold left over stock and inventory from fancy stores from overstuffed, jumbled shelves. Ruby bought her kids and me shoes and socks, underwear and pajamas and all sorts of other things from Shocket's. I lived in this neighborhood as Ruby's foster kid. Her husband Hector, a merchant marine, left us—Ruby, their two kids, and me-- home alone for long periods while he worked on a whatever ship he could get a billet. Their house contained all kinds of treasures from wherever Hector had docked: an elephant statue from Calcutta, India; a burnt orange dragon shaped tea set with a Geisha girl etched into the bottom of the each tea cup from Japan; a carved wooden wall hanging that featured elephants from Thailand.

Ruby did all sorts of odd jobs to make ends meet—she ironed other people's clothes, cleaned houses, worked as a short-order cook, or tended bar when she could get a sitter. It's where I learned that everyone, no matter how different, mattered and deserved dignity. Of all the places and families with whom I lived as a foster child, this neighborhood and family loved me the most, and I loved them back and probably would have stayed with them forever had Ruby not died unexpectedly, sending me to another family and her own kids to their aunt's house until Hector could return from wherever in the world he was. I fondly recalled cobble stone streets

that then and still dead-ended at the harbor. A bar or tavern occupied every corner, and on some nights, it seemed as if 10,000 drinkers held their bottles and glasses in hand outside the wooden doors of their favorite places, and despite all the activity, an array of characters bloomed and thrived in those streets, in that neighborhood where houses clung to each other in a row and everyone seemed to depend on everyone else. Neighbors knew me as Joyce, Ruby's kid. Not foster kid, but kid. The merchant marine and tugboat unions were headquartered one block south from Shockets closer to the water, and Ruby visited the merchant marine headquarters weekly for news from Hector.

In Shocket's, where I was allowed to go without an adult to run errands for Ruby, I often ran into neighborhood people: woman named Dirty Gertie, who played guitar and sang in the middle of the square on weekend nights; a transvestite named Edith who owned a sundries store and sent out-of-towners looking for the city's famous crab cakes to the 7-Eleven as a joke. Whenever I went into Shocket's for whatever Ruby wrote on her list, without fail, Mr. Shocket always asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. Then as now, I had no idea that I could be anything other than who I was, a parentless girl whose soldier father died in Vietnam and whose mother killed herself and tried to kill me at the same time by driving into a tree, an act that left me adrift in the foster care system. Ruby, Dirty Gertie, Mr. Shocket, Edith and the rest of the neighborhood people saw me as a girl with a future, a girl who possessed potential to achieve something bigger and brighter than just being me. They didn't care about my past or what I lacked. They looked ahead and envisioned a future brighter than I could see. They found the time to suggest possible things I could be after I grew up. "Are you good in math?" Edith asked. "Math heads can write their own tickets," she said, but she never told me what kind of tickets I could write. "God knows, I could use someone good in math to balance my books," Mr. Shocket

said, but I pictured Mr. Shocket with arms extended in front of him holding books in each hand and failed to understand how balancing books could help him. Dirty Gertie wanted to know if I was good at playing any kind of musical instrument, but no one had shown me how to play anything or had given me something I could learn to play. I hadn't thought about it. Ruby told me I could be anything I put my mind on, but I could never put my mind on any one thing.

None of the people who lived at the Foot of Broadway, then a gritty place where homes had not yet been rehabbed and updated, ever mentioned college to me or Ruby's kids either. We were expected to graduate high school, but no one mentioned anything other than getting a job at the steel plant, or joining the merchant marines or the military, or to us girls, getting married and having kids.

Now I remember those folks from the Foot of Broadway, long dead, asking me what I want to be when I grow up and or the first time ever, thinking about it seriously after quitting the nightmare of Bird's grocery store—a dead end job-- and walking away from Clarence trying to force me to sell his heroin and as I buy my bus ticket to Fort Bragg to catch up with Big Al.