Returning to Kings County Hospital

By Arthur Ginsberg M.D.

The compassionate gaze on Sir William Osler’s face follows me from the cupola of his library. In these sprawling wards, on beds sheathed in coarse linen, I learned to interrogate the heart, to know the opening and closing valves, hold an ear to the lungs for rales and rhonchi, sound of a drowning chest, to palpate with my fingertip, a knobby liver beneath the ribs, hard as a hickory gall.

To spelunk the body’s caves by headlamp and touch, to see beyond the eye’s pinhole, serpentine rivers running and the ivory cable carrying the world into the brain’s rutted ridges.

On that journey I became a warrior armed with Asclepius’ staff, bound by Hippocrates’ oath, the serpent growing new skin entwined around my feet. I took with me to New York: the prying ear of a stethoscope, a white jacket and name tag, the child inside me who died on the fever’s bed.

Kings County Hospital that stands in Brooklyn’s blazing desert. Graffiti crawls its walls like kelp, and the wagons arrive screaming with their cargo of wounded men. On Flatbush Avenue the sick pile up on steel gurneys stacked like boxcars in a stockyard. We are cattle, they cry. Help us to die. And I press against the nursery glass, drinking in the puckered, red faces, the bubbling on tiny lips.

Each night, more babies with cigarette burns, the elderly, gaunt and cold. The Lindens’ leaves on the boulevard have turned from gold to red.

My mother arrived in a hard snow where I lived, and brought freshly laundered clothes. In this wasteland she shone like a beacon, left a spotless windowsill, this tidied room, the orchestral bedsprings, anatomy books, a goose necked lamp and vitamin pills.

No sleek, black monument honors the dead on Flatbush Avenue where the old men in the park are fed by the pigeons. You forget you work in a place come here bright as dimes, and die disheveled and soft. In the autumn I wander Kings County’s corridors again, searching for Miss Sardi, the Sicilian nurse who tested my mettle, blocked my exit from intensive care, and dose of a drug for Pedro Martinez, a dying man assigned to me on my first day. I relive a chorus of respirators sucking air, red diaphragms rising and falling in glass cylinders. The usual, I blurted out, bolting through the door.

An orderly informs me that she passed away. From the deck of the Staten Island ferry, my life leans toward a kinder season, Ellis Island fading in the mist.