

Out of the Blue, She Received a Helping Hand

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In the Horatio Alger myth, nobility of character runs, unfailingly, into good luck. Alger wrote hundreds of stories that followed that path. At the center is a boy who is poor but honest, brave and hard-working — attributes that eventually attract the attention of an older, well-off and benevolent stranger

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BIG CITY

who, accustomed to greedy jerks, is moved by the strength of his character and helps to lift him from indigence. Alger, who wrote for young adults, died in 1899, just as the clock on America's infatuation with the Protestant work ethic was starting to wear thin. If the books fell out of favor, it was as much for their hoary language as the fantasy capitalism they advertised. Children growing up amid the inequities of the Gilded Age were presumably beginning to know better.

Today the folklore we create around mobility doesn't even bother much with the fantasy because we romanticize the con itself: every origin story out of Silicon Valley with an already-privileged kid sitting on a sofa somewhere on the Stanford University campus, tugging billions out of his hoodie strings.

And yet sometimes the narrative follows a more graceful justice. It did in the case of Alicia Baksh-Ousman.

Alicia spent her early life in Trinidad; 17 years ago her mother, who had been married to an alcoholic, left for New York, where she would settle down and find work as a nanny. Alicia was 16 then and stayed behind with her grandmother to finish high school. When she

graduated a year later she joined her mother.

Alicia arrived as an undocumented immigrant, and at 17 she became pregnant. She lived with her mother in Queens and got a job at a deli in the financial district. In 2005, she left for another deli, this one in Midtown, on Lexington Avenue and 52nd Street. Alicia was a strong student in Trinidad and came to the United States with the aspiration of going to college, but with a baby and the demands of a full-time

Heads up, Horatio Alger: This unlikely meeting, and ensuing happy ending, actually occurred.

job, it all seemed too hard. For her first eight years at the deli, she worked behind the counter as a cashier, but as time went on she started to take on other responsibilities: overseeing outgoing orders and deliveries to the many surrounding offices, computerizing systems, managing accounts receivable.

As the demands of parenthood began to ease a bit, she enrolled at Hunter, one of the oldest public colleges in the country, in her 20s. She continued to work full time; she met a man and fell in love; they married. Five years ago, though, her husband became sick. He was given a diagnosis of liver cancer. Her days were spent toggling between school and work and caring for him in the hospital. That went on for a few



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John Doyle, customer and benefactor, surprised Alicia Baksh-Ousman.

months until he died, three days before she was scheduled to appear before immigration officials for her citizenship interview. She was exhausted and took two weeks off from her job at the deli.

One of her regular customers was concerned about her absence and missed her. His name was John Doyle, and for about three years he had come in every morning and ordered the same thing: a breakfast sandwich and a

peach Snapple. Mr. Doyle worked as a lobbyist at the Real Estate Board of New York, commonly known as Rebnyc, the powerful trade association founded in 1896 and not typically a magnet for affection. "He was so sad for me when I returned," Alicia told me recently.

Moved, he put her in touch with a human resources manager at the organization, who was also familiar with Alicia from the deli, and she was

quickly offered a job as a receptionist at the front desk. I asked Mr. Doyle, now retired, if he had ever done anything like this before. He hadn't.

From reception, Alicia moved to I.T. and then to the accounts receivable division as she continued to go to Hunter, where she majored in accounting and volunteered through a program at school to help the poor file their taxes. Before she met Mr. Doyle, she had tried to get other jobs but she was never successful, even after receiving her citizenship. "There is such a bias against people who work in food services," she told me. "It wasn't just that I couldn't get any interviews, no one even called me back. People see only one set of skills." But Mr. Doyle saw beyond the counter. Occasionally contemporary New York works as it should, within the outlines of the Jane Jacobs dreamscape, advantage passing down by means of collision.

On Wednesday, Alicia graduated from Hunter at age 33. Her daughter, now a teenager, attended the ceremony, at Radio City Music Hall. One of the six valedictorians this year with 4.0

G.P.A.s, Rochel Hecht, is a young woman who fled a deeply Hasidic family that had objected to her desire to educate herself. She will go on to medical school. Another young woman, Tamara Jean, the daughter of a Haitian janitor living in Brooklyn, became the first Hunter graduate to receive a Rhodes scholarship, the school's president, Jennifer Raab, told me. Alicia will begin work at CohnReznick, a prominent accounting firm.

At graduation, Mr. Doyle showed up to surprise her. In one hand, he carried a bottle of peach Snapple.