Fall 2000

In New York

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I saw a church. I looked in, thinking there might be a Sunday service. The place was nearly empty; maybe it was too early. Two men prayed quietly in the back pews and I felt guilty for the echo I made walking down the aisles. I tried to muffle my steps: first I walked slowly then I walked on my heels then I walked forward on my toes. My right shoe squeaked. Halfway down the aisle I realized that I couldn’t be quiet so it might be better to go quickly. Is it better, I thought, to make maximum disturbance for minimal time or minimal disturbance for maximum time? I was trying to think of other parallel situations—tearing paper out of a pad during a meeting, opening a package of licorice during a movie. I reached the end of the aisle. From this side of the church I could see the altar and the organ. It wasn’t much to
look at. Pretty, but not too exciting. I wished I hadn't walked across the church to see it. I walked back to the exit after looking apologetically at the two men. At the door, I checked my watch.

I saw my wife’s lover die. It was just after nine o'clock— he was running about five minutes late from his usual Sunday schedule— and the streets were becoming more crowded. He looked, as always, like he would be ready to make a business interaction at any minute, with his pressed slacks and dress shirt. We were at Central Park West and 81st. There was some jostling among those of us standing at the corner, waiting for the light to change. I was right behind my wife’s lover and there was too much jostling and I bumped him in the way of a fast, impatient taxi. He was older than me. Maybe five years older. Maybe ten. He tripped on the curb— he’d been a little too eager to cross and was standing right on the edge— and toppled forward. He dropped his bag of bagels on the curb. He threw his arms forward out of instinct, to catch his balance, but it must be said that it made no difference. The taxi couldn't be stopped. It knocked him far into the intersection. A man next to me screamed when he saw my wife’s lover fall forward. Then people were clustering and calling for help and covering their eyes and crossing the street and ignoring the accident because they had places that they had to get to. I stooped down and picked up the bagels. Then I crossed the street.

I bought a newspaper. In Central Park I sat down to read it but I couldn't. I was distracted by three boys kneeling on the sidewalk over a game of marbles. Who plays marbles anymore? Do they still make marbles? Maybe marbles are yet another retro-fashion: disco, swing, bell bottoms, marbles. I never played marbles. Or rather, I never knew the proper rules to marbles. But I had a round tin— I think I remember a chipped painting of a cat on the lid— that was full of marbles, every size. None of my friends knew the proper rules of marbles, but we made up simple games. The joy came in the satisfying whack of two marbles colliding, not in rules.

It was like a game of pool. I love to play pool now. My wife
and I, on our third date, went to a pool hall and drank beers. We still play pool. I love pool because it seems so chaotic but somewhere in there is hidden perfect order. Every action causes another action. Every movement is attached to—predicted by—other actions. There is the possibility, even if the possibility is never realized, of controlling everything. It's not about skill, it's about knowledge of the order that underlies chaos.

I laughed because the streets of New York are full of people trying their hardest not to act like pool balls, walking on collision courses but veering at the last minute. They avoid all contact.

A man played the blues under a bridge in Central Park. Under that bridge, his sax sounded resonant and pure. Crisp. But what do I know about music? I could be fooled. I stood watching for long minutes and then when he looked at me and raised his eyebrows, I offered him a bagel. He looked at the bagel, then at me, then at the bagel, then he looked around. Because I was the only person there he stopped and took the bagel.

"Is that all you got?" he said.

"No," I said. I took out my wallet, found a dollar and put it in his sax case.

He took a bite of bagel. He looked at it.

"Any cream cheese?" he said, mouth full.

I looked in the bag.

"Yes," I said. "But no knife."

He shrugged.

I was just enjoying the sunlight and the people. I sat on one bench for almost two hours. That's what makes Central Park great: you can sit for hours and just look at everything. It's better than a movie.

I looked at my watch. It was after one; luckily I had the bagels for lunch. I'd told my wife, as usual, that I was going in to see museums and she, as usual, said she would rather putter around the house and relax. Who knows, maybe she was waiting for a call from her lover right now. Would she go to his funeral? I wonder. Would she say to me,  

"An old friend died, and would I put my hand on her arm and say, Oh. I'm sorry?"
I'd told her that I would be in the city until evening. So I had to keep myself busy until then.

The Conservatory Water was practically abandoned. One toy boat was bumping up against the side of the pond like a blind, insistent duckling. A man and a boy crouched on the opposite side. The boy was holding the remote control.

The boat was made to look like a fireman's boat. I don't know how I knew that; I'm pretty certain that I'd never seen a fire boat, not even a picture. And yet I knew. The boat was white and blue with silver stuff. It was spitting a stream of water a couple of feet long from a cannon.

I stood watching the boat for a while, until the boy managed to back it up and turn it. Then I walked along the edge of the pond, past the boat. I felt water on my ankles, cold and startling. The boat, in its turning, had sprayed me. I figured it was an accident until the boat caught up and tried to spray me again. I jumped out of the way, beyond the range of the water. The boat retreated to the middle of the pond. I looked to see if the man was doing anything about this, but he and the boy were still just crouched there.

Half of me was angry, because the man wasn't reacting to the boy's rudeness. That half of me would have done something. Like hit the boy. Or push him into the water. Let him know that actions have repercussions. But that was a double standard, because the other half of me was cheering the boy on. If I had been his age I'd want to spray people too.

I walked on. My right sock was wet.

Before I left the park I passed a gang of parents, maybe twenty of them, doing arm exercises while they pushed strollers. Stroller-aerobics. One man, at the head of the pack, was yelling instructions to the rest. The parents swung their arms, chatted, told jokes, laughed. Push with the left, exercise the right.

One woman, at the center of the pack, seemed to notice how silly she looked. She pushed her child and swung her arm, but she was also watching people as they passed. Our eyes met. I smiled. It could have been taken as a supportive smile or a mocking smile. I felt a bit of both. I held up the bagel I was eating, as
if in a toast to her health. She looked down with pulled-in shoulders, maybe because she couldn’t deny any longer that people were watching her. Mostly I had been smiling because she looked like my wife, Molly, when we first met. When we were college students and she had beautifully smooth brown hair looped back into the most beautiful ponytail. When she had a soccer-player’s body. This woman was pretty like Molly, but not as pretty. No one’s as pretty.

When the gang had passed I turned around and watched them crunching along the sidewalk. The air was getting misty: the thin drizzle that proceeds a rain. Who arranged these stroller-aerobics? How did they advertise? No time for taking care of the kids and getting exercise? Do we have a solution for you! Strollaerobics!

I was close to the Met so I thought I’d go redeem myself for being impatient at the church. They wanted me to pay eight dollars. I wouldn’t have minded, except that it was closing soon and I’d only have been there for thirty minutes. I can’t imagine spending eight dollars for thirty minutes at a museum. I won’t pay that much for my cultural redemption. There are very few things for which I would pay eight dollars every thirty minutes.

So I sat on the steps and watched the people, listened to the street musicians and tried to imagine the stories of people coming in and out. I gave them names, and I gave them professions, and I gave them lovers and families, and I decided whether they were happy, or content, or miserable.

I loved being alone in New York right then—I felt that I had it all to myself, like I owned all the city and all the people.

I invented stories about the couples I saw. How did they meet? What did they do together? Would they die together? I compared their love to my own love.

After I met my wife I had everything I wanted. Aphrodite’s job was done. How many of these couples could make a similar claim?

Molly and I met at a diner on a Sunday. She’d been playing soccer, and she and some teammates were there for lunch: loud, tired, ebullient (they’d won); dirty jerseys and socks to their knees, knees scraped up; Molly’s hair was out of place, strands sticking to her forehead or falling across her face, her soccer shorts were
riding low and loose, the outline of her sports bra was evident under a jersey stretched out at the neck, her laugh was the loudest in the diner. I was enthralled by her physicality. She was rough and sharp and sexy.

I just happened to be there. I was just sitting there, having lunch alone with my newspaper. I tend to think Fate brought me there.

Of course I talked to her; I couldn't let her leave because then I might not have found her again. Of course she told her teammates to go on without her and stayed talking to me in and out of hours, over endless coffees. She explained soccer to me; she kept clenching her hands, as if she were trying to grab hold of her excitement and show it to me. That was it for me. Of course we got married.

I'm always happy when she's at my side. I plan to die before she dies. She is my anima.

I had to walk from 83rd to Grand Central Station on 42nd and I started, on that long walk, to think about that woman doing stroller-aerobics, who looked so much like my wife. I began to wonder about her private life.

She seemed young to have a child. Twenty or so. She must have lived near the Park. I wondered whether she had a husband. Or a boyfriend. Where was the father of the child?

This is what I wondered, looking into her pretty, somewhat frightened eyes: Was there anyone who loved her above everything else in the world? Anyone who thought about her during his lunch hour, during his breakfast hour, while he fell asleep, after he fell asleep? Did she inhabit every hour of some man's thoughts? Was there someone who couldn't imagine sharing her with anyone else? Who needed to have her for himself?

The clock in Grand Central Station read quarter after six. This is the time—after work—when Molly and her lover would sometimes meet at a bar. This is about the time when I first saw her sitting with him, having drinks, trading kisses, but not looking especially happy. I could tell from her face that she didn't really want to be with him. I called it a phase.
I arrived at home. Because she knew I was going to be out all day, my wife had prepared dinner. The dining room table was set, soup bowls and all. She had a thing for chilled, summer-time soups. If you wanted something from my wife, you only had to offer to make gazpacho. She was wearing a white, sunny dress and her hair was down, falling behind her shoulders. She was so beautiful.

She laughed when I came in and she circled her arm around me, pulled me close, kissed me. I held up the bag of bagels.

“Bagels,” I said.

“Great,” she said.

At that moment, I was perfectly content. We were happy together.