



My New York

A Romance in Eight Parts

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Painting by Peter Selgin

And with the awful realization that New York was a city after all and not a universe, the whole shining edifice that he had reared in his imagination came crashing to the ground.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, “My Lost City”

Not long ago, while lurching through cyberspace, I chanced upon a luncheon menu from Schrafft’s, circa 1962. Especially among the city’s working women, Schrafft’s was once New York City’s most popular restaurant chain. The menu is an arresting artifact, one that might have been concocted to certify an era’s lost innocence—how else account for Jellied Tomato Bouillon, Browned Lamb Hash with Wax Beans, Deviled Tongue and Swiss Cheese Sandwich, Corn Soufflé, Minute Tapioca Pudding, Fresh Banana Stuffed with Fruit Salad, Green Apple Pie and Grape-juice Lemonade? Top center on the menu: “May We Suggest Bacardi Cocktail 70¢.”

My eyes misted over. Here was the New York City I once fell hard for, the city of my childhood and young dreams. And though the menu belonged to a vanished time, still, it was real—as the Hotel Paris had been real, as the passenger ships lined up in their berths had been real. As my innocence, my ambitions, my disappointments, my failures and a host of betrayals—mine, my father’s, the city’s—all had been real.

I. LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

GAS HEATS BEST. They loomed: black, blocky letters on a yellow field painted on the side of a gargantuan corrugated hatbox. An ad for home heating fuel. But to my six-year-old eyes, it might have been God creating Adam in the firmament of the Sistine Chapel.

It was my first trip to New York with my father. His “business trips,” he called them, though someday I would learn there was more to them than that. My twin brother, George, and I took turns, each of us going with him every other Friday. The trip took just a little over an hour, but as far as I was concerned, we might have been blasting off to Venus or Mars.

We rode in my father’s Simca, an ivory wagon with whitewalls and a split tailgate. I watched him work the gearshift, a thin chrome rod with a pear-shaped knob—an object of fascination that I would secretly commandeer whenever Papa went into the post office or the bank, my vocal cords imitating the engine’s winding RPMs, ignorant of such things as clutches. As Papa backed the Simca past the dying birch tree in the turnaround, I’d see my brother and my mother standing there, my mother waving, my twin crying—as I would cry a week later when it would be George’s turn. Why our father took us separately I’m not sure. Maybe because we fought so much.

At the end of the driveway we’d take a right onto Wooster Street and head to Danbury, where we drove past the war memorial and the fairgrounds. On Old Route 6 we’d pass by the Dinosaur Gift & Mineral Shoppe with its pink stucco tyrannosaurus, headed toward Brewster. Interstate 684 had yet to be built, so we rode on what would today qualify as “back roads,” past apple orchards, nurseries and reservoirs, then down the Saw Mill River Parkway through exotically named places—Croton Falls, Katonah, Armonk, Chappaqua—tallying bridges and groundhogs.

While driving, my father hummed: “The Blue Danube,” a Maurice Chevalier ditty, his cigarette dangling. He drove with an elbow out the window, preferring his arm to the car’s turn signal. The Simca’s glove

compartment burst with road maps, but my father never consulted them. The city's outskirts were a tangle of parkways, thruways, expressways and turnpikes. That my father could untangle them amazed me, but then they seemed to belong to him, all those highways, as did everything to do with the city.

We crossed over the Henry Hudson Bridge. At the tollbooth, Papa tossed a nickel into the yellow basket. We glided under the girders of the George Washington Bridge. Here the city began in earnest. We passed the Cloisters and Grant's Tomb. Among drab shapes in the distance I saw patches of bright color, the funnels of passenger ships in their berths. To our left as we drove on a skyscraper garden flourished, the Empire State Building sprouting like a deco fountain at its center. Amid this profusion of architecture rose the fuel storage tank, the one proclaiming GAS HEATS BEST. This utilitarian structure was no less awe-inspiring to me then than the *Queen Elizabeth* or the Empire State Building, subjects I'd sketch again and again in Mrs. Decker's kindergarten class.

The elevated ended; the Simca descended into a shadowy jungle of bumpy cobblestone streets. Somewhere along Canal Street we parked. Gripping my hand, Papa led me from one industrial surplus store to another, foraging for plastic and other parts for his inventions, his rotary motors, his color coders, his thickness gauges and mercury switches. The sidewalks were crowded, yet somehow to me the people weren't real. They reminded me of the baubles on a Christmas tree, each with its particular charms and quirks but, unlike the buildings, insubstantial. There were no dogs and few children. New York City was a place for grown-ups.

From Canal Street we walked to Chinatown, where we ducked into shops packed with lacquered trays and jade carvings. Here the streets smelled of fish. In one of those shops, my father bought me a wooden box (I still have it; it sits on top of the bookcase by the desk where I write). In Chinatown the plethora of street signs, their messages transformed into adornments by virtue of being illegible, impressed me even more. The enigmatic characters clung to the air, butterflies caught in a web of utility lines and fire escapes.

Then to Greenwich Village, where we entered boutiques lush with beads and trinkets and suffused with the smell of incense, and where one shop window confronted us with a panoply of chessboards and pieces carved from rare woods and exotic minerals. Already I had begun to see the city as a colossal museum, with objects displayed in various galleries according to periods and styles. Beyond displaying its holdings,

the city had no discernible purpose. It existed for roughly the same reason as the town park on Lake Candlewood or the Danbury State Fair: to amuse the likes of me.

We lunched at Shrafft's, then drove back uptown toward our hotel, stopping on the way at Manganaro's Italian import store, where my father bought a pound of Parmesan cheese—a jagged hunk broken off a great golden wheel. By then the air had dimmed, the better to display the lights of Times Square, where flashing neon signs advertised everything from *Pepsi-Cola* to *Castro Convertibles* and a giant man in a fedora exhaled smoke rings from a cigarette into the electrified dusk. Then up West End Avenue to the Hotel Paris.

Of all parts of the city, that hotel was my favorite, a wedding-cake-shaped fortress of garnet-colored bricks topped by a crenellated water tower, with a flagpole reaching even further toward the sky. I recall a lobby of pink marble walls with a mirrored dining room adjacent and a caged, old-fashioned elevator attended by a colored lady (I use the term in keeping with the times) whose beehive of fire-engine-red hair was as imposing as she was diminutive. She let me man the controls, a courtesy for which I will never forget her. You had to pull back on the lever just so, or the elevator and the floors wouldn't line up properly. She put her brown hand on top of mine, her warm grip guiding me. At each floor the doors opened to different hallway carpeting, arabesques of blazing bright color that, in their inscrutable intricacies, mimicked the metropolis outdoors.

Like all the rooms in the Hotel Paris, ours was small. It stank of the last occupant's cigarettes, which was okay by me. I accepted the odor as part of the city—my father's city, it came to seem to me, as if he had laid every brick and cobblestone and erected every skyscraper. As he unpacked his suitcase on the bed, I watched, engrossed. A suit jacket, a pair of socks, two pairs of underwear, a can of athlete's-foot powder, his safety razor and battered shaving brush, a shoehorn and a necktie.

The necktie fascinated me most. Though I'd seen it often before, hanging in his closet back home, here it took on a new aspect. With its yellow paisley drops against a maroon background, it was no longer just my papa's necktie; it was his New York City tie. At that moment, that necktie became the city for me, as the stale cigarette smell in that hotel room became the city, and the gaudy hallway carpeting, and the red-haired elevator operator, and the hunk of Parmesan cheese, and the passenger ships in their berths, and the GAS HEATS BEST sign and the

groundhogs digging holes in the lawns along the Saw Mill Parkway. It was all my New York back then, courtesy of my father, who had invented it just for me.

II. PUPPY LOVE

At fifteen, my friend Chris Rowland and I used to visit his neighbor, Clara. A spry, matronly woman in her eighties, she lived across the street from the Rowlands in a white shingled cottage by the brook. Chris would bring a casserole his mother had made. Clara would thank him and put it away. Then we'd sit in her parlor, Clara in a throne-like wicker chair, eating cookies with cider while she sipped tea from a china cup. We thought it was tea.

New York City was Clara's favorite subject. She still kept her apartment there. She spoke of how, in her younger days, she and a friend had opened a tea shop in Chelsea, and of the Broadway actors and actresses who had patronized it. "Oh, we had quite a time of it, quite a time," said Clara, fanning herself with a Japanese fan.

One day Clara gave us the keys to her apartment. Chris's father drove us to the station in Brewster. Through the green-tinted window—to the rhythmic clacking of train wheels—we watched the familiar world of houses, church steeples and trees morph into a landscape of buildings, viaducts and bridges. Then we plunged underground. For a while everything turned black. We stepped out of the train car to find ourselves in a grimy marble cathedral vaulted with sallow stars.

At the newspaper kiosk, Chris bought a box of Good & Plenty; I got a Bit-O-Honey bar. We both chipped in for the *Daily News* and a folding map of the city. We couldn't decide whether to walk to Clara's place or take the subway. Walking, we would see a lot more, but a subway ride would be thrilling. We took the subway.

It was late September, but the subway platform still hoarded the summer's heat. The station's dim lighting gleamed off the edges of its innumerable tiles. A man in a gray suit leaned against an iron pillar; others stooped impatiently over the tracks. None said a word. My friend and I obeyed the unwritten law by which New Yorkers pretend to ignore each other. A muffled roar and a fusty breeze heralded the subway train's arrival. The roar grew deafening as it squealed to a stop and its doors slid open.

We careened under the city, each of us clinging to a strap as the subterranean world rushed by, a murky blur punctuated by lustrous stations

whose waiting passengers could only watch in envy as we roared past on express tracks: 34th Street . . . 28th Street . . . 23rd Street . . . At the place called Union Square, we jumped a set of iron teeth that stretched to fill the gap between subway and platform. Then up we bounded through a maze of latticed stairways and catwalks into a world of blinding sunshine.

To judge by our map, Clara's apartment was five blocks east on 18th Street. We passed a Chock Full o' Nuts and a corner fruit stand. We carried our suitcases and walked fast, as if our arrival were not already accomplished—as if by walking any slower we'd dispel the magic of this dream, like those dreams in which you will yourself to fly. Now and then we faced each other to share a grin that said we'd gotten away with something, or were about to.

Clara's apartment was on the top floor of a tenement. We bounded up the three flights. An elaborate series of keys was required for entry. The apartment smelled of mothballs and musk. Should we open a window? Was that allowed? The walls were covered with framed photographs, theatrical posters and quaint watercolors of Parisian street scenes. A bronze Laocoön graced the fireplace mantel. Even up there with the windows closed, we heard the traffic below, the impatient horns of trucks and taxis. While Chris unpacked, I studied the photographs, mostly of Clara and a friend, presumably the one with whom she had run the tea shop. In one they both wore fur coats; in another they showed off identical plumed hats. It had never dawned on either of us that Clara might be lesbian. "Oh, I've had many, *many* beaux," she'd said to us more than once while sipping from her china cup. Even seeing the photographs, the thought didn't occur to me, as it didn't occur to me that someday I would live in the city, that I would engage my ambitions, inflame my desires, commit various acts of ignominy and treachery and experience a multitude of triumphs, disappointments, sins, failures and betrayals there.

By noon Chris and I were back out in the street, burdened no longer by our luggage, carrying only the folding map and an eagerness to see everything. Uptown or down? We went down. To the tip of the Battery we walked, passing the still unfinished towers of the World Trade Center. We stood by a railing watching seagulls wheel over the decks of a ferryboat taking tourists to the Statue of Liberty. From there we walked uptown through the Chinatown I first came to know with my father; its cagey streets seemed less magical without him guiding me through them. Then up to Little Italy, with its green-and-red pennants and flags,

past the iron-fronted buildings of the Bowery to the East Village, where, at the crowded counter of a Ukrainian café, we slurped twin bowls of blood-red borscht. As we were leaving, I gave a quarter to a panhandler.

“Don’t spend it all in one place,” I said, earning a disapproving look from Chris.

Midtown. Rockefeller Center. Radio City. Central Park. The Met. The names arrested me with their authority. At the Guggenheim we balked at the price of admission: three dollars and fifty cents to penetrate a colossal Carvel ice-cream cone. To hell with it! In the district known as Harlem, the streets were in every sense browner, its buildings slung low to accommodate a sky brought to its knees by dense, ponderous clouds. We walked faster, the gusts flapping the lapels of our windbreakers, passing a building shaped like the parabolas we’d learned to draw in algebra class. At every other block, a sudden whirlwind whipped grit into our eyes and made us grip our jackets at our throats and hunch like old men.

We’d started across town, hungry for Broadway and humanity, eager to arrive at the colossal pinball machine known as Times Square, when the rain caught us. We carried no umbrellas. We’d bought extra tokens, but there were no subways in sight. Taxicabs were prohibitively expensive. Headlong and purblind, we plunged into the monsoon. By the time a subway entrance arose out of the tempest, we were soaked. We clutched our knees, laughing and coughing as we caught our breath. The subway zoomed us to Times Square, where we emerged into a sea of black umbrellas backlit by blurred neon signs. At an establishment called Nedick’s we ordered two “frankfurters” apiece and large cups of orange drink and ate while watching people hurry by in the rain. Even soaking wet, New York was a great place, a wonderful, lewd, sexy, forbidden place. Those trips with my papa had been mere flirtations, as chaste as my grandmother’s kisses. Now I was a man, and the city was mine to embrace less innocently.

By the time we left Nedick’s, the rain had softened to a drizzle. We passed under a succession of marquees featuring slasher and porn films and peep shows for twenty-five cents, a Coney Island Boardwalk of X-rated sex. Had Chris, whose parents were of New England puritan stock, not been there to shame me, I’d have ducked into one of those seedy theaters. I’d have paid a quarter for a peep show—or two. Or three. Two women in leopard-skin miniskirts and high heels emerged from the shadows to offer us a good time. I showed interest; my friend didn’t. I

had started a conversation with them when, saying, “We’re already having a good time, thank you,” Chris took my arm and kept us walking.

We got “home” after dark. What a strange feeling, having those apartment keys. “The keys to the city!” one of us joked as the door to Clara’s apartment swung open. The musty smell was still there. So was the Laocoön. It wasn’t even half past seven, but we were both beat. Though the rain had stopped, still, the city seemed less inviting by night, consisting only of bars and other forbidden and overpriced venues.

Instead we brewed a pot of tea and sat there, in Clara’s living room, talking in hushed, tired voices to the murmurs of traffic until our eyelids grew heavy and we slouched to bed, proud of ourselves for having passed, to our own satisfaction, the city’s audition. It was the first of many such trials, but I didn’t know that then.

III. ROMANCE

The rat was as big as a squirrel. It twitched in a trap next to the walk-in fridge. My boss, a retired New York City cop, kept his old service revolver in his office. He took aim, told me to stand back and blew the thing to furry pink bits, which afterward I scooped into a metal dustpan and carried to the dumpster.

It was my first job in New York. I’d hoped to be a bartender or a cook, but the owner of the Rozinante Tavern had different plans for me, so I spent most of my time there in the basement, peeling potatoes and cementing cracks in the concrete floor.

It wasn’t long before I got a better job just two blocks south, in the oldest building in Soho, a former brothel with shuttered windows and a pitched roof. To work at the Broome Street Bar you had to be an artist: a painter, writer, architect, dancer, photographer—it didn’t matter what kind. I told the owners that I was a Pratt student, but that failed to satisfy them. I had to show them some sketches before they hired me as a dishwasher.

The bar’s owners were two diametrically opposed brothers named Kenn (two *n*’s) and Bob. Short, bow-legged, cigar-smoking Kenn wore blue jeans, cowboy shirts and belts with enormous buckles. He saw himself as the rough-and-ready type. Bob, on the other hand, was a slender, soft-spoken, effete man with pale skin. Their love of artists was the one thing the two brothers shared. While Kenn held forth with the patrons upstairs, Bob spent most of his time at a desk he’d arranged by the prep kitchen, keying numbers into an adding machine and chain-smoking

Parliaments. He'd take four puffs of a cigarette before snuffing it out, having read somewhere that the first four puffs contained less nicotine. The floor under his desk squirmed with partially smoked cigarettes.

The bar had an open kitchen, with the dishwasher's station facing one end of the bar. I liked washing dishes. I liked the hot, soapy water on my hands and the sense that I was doing something useful. Dishwashing is honorable work, I told myself as the busboys dumped their greasy loads and I flirted with any decent-looking woman who sat on the last stool at the bar.

The other workers in the kitchen slung omelets and burgers, sliced sandwiches and cracked jokes. Jimmy, the salad chef, was an architect. Francis, the prep cook, wrote show tunes. Joe Hinkle was writing a novel. The waitresses were mostly actresses and dancers. The griddle chef, a guy in his forties named Bentley, a painter in the manner of Kandinsky, was the funniest and most cynical of the bunch, with a mop of sandy hair that covered his eyes and that he would toss back while flipping his burgers. Somehow, despite his talking a mile a minute in a flat, nasal voice with which he cut to the quick anyone he disliked, the ash from Bentley's cigarette never fell onto his grill.

The bar was a magnet for artists. John and Yoko were patrons; so were Jasper Johns and John Rauschenberg. Among regulars was a sculptor named Bob Bolles. He had a job there, doing what I'm not sure: something to do with plumbing or the beer taps. Mostly he hung out at the bar. Bolles's artistic claim to fame was on permanent (so we thought then) display at the "motorcycle triangle," an open space at the intersection of Broome and Watts, where bikers parked their crotch-rockets and where, without permission from municipal authorities, Bolles's jagged iron creations sprouted like rusty weeds, providing windblown papers and coffee cups with crannies to wedge themselves into and neighborhood children with objects to skin knees on. A short guy with an Edgar Allen Poe forehead, Bolles wore hoop earrings and red bandannas and was as much of a fixture in Soho as its loading docks, its bay doors, its freight elevators, as the trucks that barreled over cobblestones to and from the Holland Tunnel. When Bolles died of AIDS in the '80s, the sculptures fell into ruin. Eventually, under the auspices of a zealous borough parks commissioner, the "dangerous, dilapidated, rusting, falling-apart litter magnets" were carted off to a storage facility on Randall's Island, making way for a public greenspace called Sunshine Park—pleas to rename it after the sculptor having fallen on deaf ears.

Looming over the motorcycle triangle, across the expanse of a windowless building, the words *I AM THE BEST ARTIST* were spray-painted and signed by “René.” This early example of guerrilla art was, as far as I know, that artist’s only creation, but for me it did the trick. To be the best artist—that was the main thing. It was why I had come to the city: to practice my own art but also to breathe in the atmosphere of artists, to size up and learn from the competition.

What sort of artist I wanted to be, I wasn’t sure. I had a grandiosity of purpose but no clear vision to go with it. I knew only that I wanted to touch and impress others with my work so they would someday say of me, “He’s the best artist.”

It was an imperative, an obligation—as inevitable as that *GAS HEATS BEST* sign I’d first seem with my papa as a child. To impress myself on the city as it had impressed itself on me, that was what I wanted, what I yearned for.

Meanwhile, I washed dishes.

IV. PROMISCUITY

The Pratt dorm was in a high-rise on Willoughby Avenue, lording it over a neighborhood of tenements and gnarly trees. From there I took a share with a retired church organist named Fletcher on Washington Avenue—or was it Clinton? After that came the sublet on DeKalb and another off Flatbush, down the street from Junior’s, where, for the price of a cup of coffee, I’d fill my belly with specimens from the sour-pickle dispenser. From there I took a one-year sublet in the East Village, on 7th Street, where the avenues are alphabetized and the women wore orthopedic shoes and drab scarves around their heads. Next came the loft on Broome Street, the summer the lights went out throughout the city. By candlelight at the corner tavern they dispensed free lukewarm beer and half-melted ice cream. Then back to Brooklyn, a fifth-floor walkup two blocks south of the Heights, one of those jobs with a claw-foot tub squatting in the kitchen and cracked, sticky linoleum. Followed by another share, this one in Stuyvesant Town, where they didn’t permit air conditioners (fans only) in the casement windows and where, during the holidays, they strung colored lights around the lampposts. Was this before or after I lived with that crazy woman on Cornelia Street, the one who nicknamed me “Leonardo” and vowed to make a star out of me? Through her I auditioned for the singing waiter job on Third Avenue and the talent manager in Hell’s Kitchen—the one who, wearing

a velvet robe in his living room, by means of an exercise called “The Boy on the Mountaintop,” tried to get me over his knees. After the crazy lady threw my things out the window, I moved into the office of the literary agent for whom I’d been working and who, for a cut in my \$100 a week salary, let me sleep on his sofa. After that, for a while I left the city, returning to house sit for a lady whose dog mauled me. Then the railroad flat in the area adjoining Soho north of East Houston that my songwriting partner (I was writing songs then) and I dubbed “So What.” The greasy exhaust fumes from the diner downstairs made my partner sick, so he left the city and me. That was when I broke my leg and moved into the Gramercy Hotel. There, lying prone in bed, I could reach out and touch both walls while listening to bottles breaking in the airshaft. Then the Greek woman who taught me typography offered to share her Astoria apartment, a shag-carpeted, plastic-slipcovered efficiency over a garage a few blocks from Ditmars Boulevard, where the cafes featured excessive chrome and glistening mounds of baklava. After Ourania and I split, I moved to Sunnyside, to a one-bedroom near Calvary Cemetery, in a neighborhood of dismal pubs with shamrocks on their awnings. Shortly after this I met, proposed to and moved into a two-bedroom with Tara. The apartment had French doors. I’d step out of the bathroom or the kitchen and see Tara there, through the grid of glass panes, bent over her watercolor block, smoking. Tara’s smoking put the kibosh on our engagement, so I told myself, when in truth I’d been ambivalent from the start. For a while I hung on in Queens until, with a journalist named Steven, I went in on a rental on 1st Avenue, off 14th. It was a one-bedroom; we put up a makeshift wall. We spent a lot of time on the roof there, Steven and I, drinking a brand of cheap red wine called Gato Negro and having aggressive philosophical conversations. I stayed there until Paulette, my new girlfriend, and I got tired of squeezing into my captain’s bed. She and I rented a floor-through in a brownstone on 101st near West End. In its living room, in the presence of two witnesses, a gay Episcopal priest married us. Six months later we bought our own place, a foreclosure on 94th and Columbus in an art deco building with a sunken living room and built-in sconces. Though on the ground floor and dark, it had a nice view of the dogwood tree in the courtyard. I set up my studio in the master bedroom and decked the walls with paintings of passenger ships and the Empire State Building at night. In spite of the rap deejay living downstairs, we were happy there until one morning I woke up from a dream in which, instead of a dogwood tree, our

window faced the wide, gray-green expanse of the Hudson River. That same morning I boarded a train from Grand Central to the Bronx. At a place called Spuyten Duyvil I got off. Nothing but weeds, trees, water. Water! How I'd missed it! We lived on an island but rarely saw the stuff. Overhead loomed the blue arc of the Henry Hudson Bridge—the same bridge my father and I had crossed into Manhattan in his Simca. Six months later, my wife and I bought a co-op there. We called it home for the next twelve years, until we divorced. I was fifty years old.

V. DISSOLUTION

The dreams of my youth, where had they gone? At the midcentury mark, one is entitled to such inquiries. I'd struggled, worked hard, produced, yet there was the nagging sense that I'd wasted myself, that I'd poured my essence into the city only to see it washed away like so much scum down its storm grates and sewage drains. Another part of me wondered, was it my own damn fault? In abandoning the city (and as any New Yorker will tell you, when you say "the city" you most assuredly do not mean the outer boroughs), had I forsaken my dreams? Had I been as fickle with them as with apartments and women? Had my quest for artistic glory been nothing but one long flirtation—as feeble and hopeless as the flirtations I had engaged in from my dishwashing station at the Broome Street Bar? Had my romance with New York, NY, been no more than a prolonged, fruitless act of mutual seduction?

The city was a vast repository of passageways and doors, any one of which might lead me to my destiny. To choose one door was to slam all the others shut. I remember one day, back when I was still in my thirties, coming home from one of a series of assignations with a woman who lived in a basement apartment on the Lower East Side. As I walked, the streets seemed to stretch out ahead of me like a cartoon stretched on Silly Putty, growing longer and narrower. Four-thirty in the afternoon. Ruddy, low-pitched sunlight spilled over the tops of buildings that frowned down at me, their cornices furrowed like brows. It might have been my imagination, but the doors of all the buildings seemed to have big padlocks on them and red-and-yellow signs shouting KEEP OUT and SECURITY ZONE. The gates were down on the bodegas. I had to resist the urge to run—a flight toward, or away from, innocence? The woman's name was Greta. Her lobby buzzer didn't work. To gain entry I had to phone from the corner or stand there on the sidewalk, hoping she'd see me through the bars of her window. We'd met at a loft party, a gallery opening, a play or poetry

reading, somewhere where bad wine and cheese cubes were served. With a pocket full of toothpicks I'd left with her for her place in a taxicab. Her pet cockatoo squawked in its gilded cage. A pachinko machine hung by a mandala poster over her bed. All this is grasping at the past. There was no Greta, or there were dozens of Gretas, each as insubstantial as photographs in someone else's album, one for every address where I'd lived and for every woman I had loved and ought to have been faithful to. But I was never faithful. I was too circumspect, too terrified of anything binding, to be faithful. By choosing not to choose, I expunged all choices.

There were times when, on a busy street corner, I'd stand there, frozen, unable to make up my mind which way to cross, other pedestrians jostling me, casting me annoyed looks, cursing me under their breaths though still loud enough for me to hear. I'd learned my way around the city only to find myself directionless there. This lack of impetus led to awkward situations, like the time when the English actor intercepted me on the corner of Eighth and University. He was with the Ol' Vic, he said, in town to do a production of *Macbeth*. He looked like Richard Basehart, so I believed him. I had no hair; I'd shaved it off down to the skull. This attracted homosexual men. Macbeth wondered where "a bloke from out of town could get a good drink." I was still living in Brooklyn at the time and said so. This didn't dissuade him. We went to Chumley's and from there to his place, the borrowed "flat" of some other actor. Having mixed us each a screwdriver, Richard Basehart lay on the floor fondling himself while reciting apt passages of one of Henry Miller's more explicit books. He didn't seem to notice or care as I stepped over him and out the door.

Another time, during a blizzard that fell on my twenty-third birthday, a former priest who'd taken me to dinner for my birthday invited me to spend the night with him, which I did, gladly, having always resented those midnight subway expeditions back to whichever miserable borough I happened to be living in at the time. When the ex-priest took me in his mouth, I pretended to be elsewhere, with someone else, enjoying the dim ministrations of an altogether different set of tongue and lips. In the morning my host was beside himself with shame. Me, I couldn't have cared less. What did it matter? Why should I have cared?

Back then I was subject to a recurrent dream, a nightmare that parachuted me into the combat zone amid its vaporous lights and alleyways. Always in the dream I'd end up in a movie theater, one of those sordid theaters near Times Square, attached to an undeployed regiment of hunched men in Burberry coats, and where the naked bodies

projected on the screen were always teasingly out of focus, looking more like Cézanne's peaches than like figures engaged in carnal Olympics. However, the soundtrack was always clear: a moan is a moan is a moan. As if by my own tumescence, I'd be lifted out of my seat and led toward a red sign glowing over the door to the men's room, behind which ultimate depravities lay in wait, tinted with ultraviolet light, perfumed with stale urine. Debased by my own dreams.

VI. FALLING OUT

The City of New York had become my illicit lover—a woman of the night whose sordid charms I could not resist but to whom I could never entirely give myself. I thought of my papa and of his “business trips.” Decades passed before I finally accepted that he'd kept a mistress in the city, maybe more than one, though a single name, Berenice (*Beh-reh-nee-chay*) stood out for me, having surfaced time and again in my parents' frequent fights, so those four syllables still send their chill up my spine. According to my mother, I once nearly drowned in the Hotel Paris swimming pool, my treacherous papa having left me there to attend to his courtesan upstairs. I refused to believe it. Anyway I never saw this woman, this *Berenice*, who to this day exists for me on roughly the same plane as Cleopatra or Attila the Hun. My father, too, was unfaithful. The city was his lure, his temptress, his domestic and moral undoing. For her sake he betrayed his own family. Though when all was said and done, my father chose us.

But then—as scorned mistresses will—the city avenged itself.

I remember one of the last times Papa visited me there, a year or so before the first of a series of strokes felled him. Paulette and I were still living on the Upper West Side, in the 94th Street deco apartment. My father and I lunched at a diner, where he ordered a bowl of vegetable soup. When I asked him how it was, he looked down at the soup spoon trembling in his fist and said, in a voice heavy with sorrow, “Not so hot.” He had come to the city to see me but also to gain an audience with the literary agent to whom he had sent his latest opus, a book titled *Beyond Pragmatism* by which he hoped to advance William James's psychological theories into the twenty-first century—a hope against hope for this obdurate eccentric inventor who rarely read books published after the Hague Peace Conference and whose own manifestos were riddled with hyphenated *to-days* and plastered with Ko-Rec-Type. The agent had not returned his calls. Having paid for our disappointing lunch, my father

repaired to a telephone booth across the street, where, for the tenth time that day, he tried to reach her, only to lose a quarter to the out-of-service phone. With uncharacteristic fury he slammed the receiver down. A few blocks uptown we found another phone booth, this one occupied by a young African American man, prompting my father, until then the least bigoted person I'd known, to combine one garden-variety epithet with one racial slur. "Papa, take it easy," I said (or something to that effect). "What's the *matter*?" But I knew perfectly well. It was no longer my father's city, the one he'd invented for me, his son. It had become an unfamiliar, hostile place. As I led us away from that phone booth, in my father's murky pupils I read an accusation of betrayal, as if I'd let him down, and not the city or his agent.

Now here I was, a few years later, with my papa dead and I, his son, suffering from his ailments, his insomnia and indigestion, not to mention a hefty slice of his egocentricity and more than a few of his eccentricities, feeling no less betrayed by the city that had been our mistress. By then Paulette and I had completed our migration to the Bronx. Though our window faced the northern tip of Manhattan, and though Grand Central Terminal was but a twenty-two-minute train ride away, we'd turned our backs on the real city. In the shallows across the turbid waters we watched a snowy egret—a feathered vase—do its slow-motion dance for fish. We kept a pair of binoculars handy. Like having one foot in the country, we told ourselves and the friends we had ditched downtown. They assumed that the move had been voluntary, but I knew better: I knew that the city had already forsaken me, that I had failed to live up to its promises. Not that we never enjoyed ourselves, my wife and I. We took regular trips to Europe, ate good meals, threw parties packed with Manhattanites who risked nosebleeds and blown eardrums to venture north of 14th Street. But an undercurrent of distress ran through my contentment. It was this undercurrent that often woke me in the middle of the night. I felt bloated with regrets, thinking we should never have left Manhattan, that we might as well have buried ourselves alive. I tried to reassure myself. I told myself I'd wanted light, air, sunshine, fewer car alarms and idling, poisonous-fume-spewing buses. If I never saw Upper Broadway—that ragtag tunnel of produce stands and baby strollers—again, it would be too soon. Besides, the city wasn't the city anymore. It had been co-opted by the sitcom crowd. The popularity of television shows like *Seinfeld* was commensurate with its cultural decline. How I missed seedy Times Square! How I longed for the days before the peep

shows succumbed to Walt Disney! Such had been my logic, my excuse, for abandoning the city and the dreams of my youth, a move that would prompt me, on those sleepless nights, to stumble into the bathroom and demand of my no-longer-quite-so-young reflection in the medicine cabinet mirror, *What have you done to my dreams, fucker?*

From the bedroom my wife asks, “Peter, what are you doing?”

I'm a poor underdog / But to-night I will bark / With the great Overdog / That romps through the dark. “Brooding,” I respond.

“For god’s sake, come back to bed!”

Then I say to myself, Wait, it’s not over. There’s still time, you’re still young, you can still do it. You know the meaning and worthiness of art, that it makes life bearable by translating experience, letting us see universals and particularities in a kind of flickering way, that every artist holds the potential to delight and heal others by touching them with something genuine and of deliberate beauty. New York hasn’t forsaken you, I assure my reflection in the mirror. That’s your sense of gloom talking. And you haven’t forsaken it. You just needed some peace and quiet in which to create.

Here was hope springing eternal; here was my childhood innocence shining its bright, dim-witted light again—the same innocence that forty-four years prior had turned an ad slogan on the side of a fuel storage tank into a divine revelation. Despite my grown-up sense of gloom, I was still a child, still besotted, still as prone to bad judgment in hope as ever, still as wide-eyed with curiosity, expectation and optimism as a six-year-old. Still as eager and willing as ever to march headlong into the arms of the enemy, *Berenice*, my father’s ex-mistress. As if by conquering her I might atone for his sins.

VII. ASHES & ECHOES

I’d meant to spend that September at a writer’s retreat but came home early to attend a gala at Lincoln Center (and to pick up some warmer clothes; I hadn’t realized how cold it gets in the Adirondacks). That morning I tried on my tuxedo to discover it no longer fit. I was about to head downtown to rent one when the telephone rang. It was the woman who had invited me to the gala, calling to say it had been called off. I asked her why.

“Have you got a TV?” she said.

Like half of the country, I spent the next five hours sitting with my hand to my lips in front of a TV. The city that I’d loved, resented, felt

challenged and betrayed by, whose slushy sidewalks and ovenlike summer subways I had cursed—this place where I had been loved, mugged, produced, embarrassed, paid, exhibited, that had made me proud and angry and excited and bitter and tired and joyous and hungry and regretful, that had been the setting of so many youthful enthusiasms, where I'd walked arm-in-arm with and courted and made love with women, where I had suffered, celebrated, laughed, cried, whose myriad streets I could navigate blindfolded or by smell, whose subway turnstiles I'd jumped, whose taxi drivers and waiters and shoeblacks I'd tipped, whose cafés and galleries and atriums I'd haunted, whose streets I'd jaywalked, whose muffins and bagels I had ingested by the score, whose store windows had sampled my evolving reflection, whose landlords had charged me rent, whose employers had paid my wages, whose supermarkets and delis had supplied me with milk and pickled herring, whose water supply had kept me hydrated and hygienic, whose sewage system had eliminated four decades' worth of my excretions, whose thrift stores and flea markets had provided me with furniture and clothing and whose populace had endowed me with friends, lovers, acquaintances, clients and occasional enemies—that this setting that had graced a hundred charming *New Yorker* covers could be changed so suddenly into a tragic place, a grim war memorial, a Pearl Harbor, a Waterloo, the Alamo, a place to feel reflective and sad, made me wonder: What would future six-year-olds make of that blazing skyline? Would they look upon it with wonder and joy as I once had? Would they see a city of dreams? Or would they see only the memory of a single disastrous day, twin columns of air where a pair of skyscrapers had once stood?

Was I feeling sorry for the city or for myself? Was there a difference?

Sometimes it takes a disaster to put us in touch with our innocence, to remind us of just how romantic our delusions have been. Seeing her ravaged made me fall in love with the city all over again, made me embrace her with fierce, protective pride. Even the city's past calamities—the Black Tom explosion, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, the Fraunces Tavern bombing, the Kew Gardens train crash, tragedies quaint by comparison, were caught in my embrace, as were the rumble of the El, tuberculosis windows, horse walks, Horn & Hardart, those stately clocks along 5th Avenue, the sunken treasures under the swirling waters of Hell's Gate. In a fervor of indignation, I reclaimed my city, the one I'd inherited from my father. Nothing—not even an army of terrorists—would take her from me again.

VIII. SEPARATION & DIVORCE & RECONCILIATION

In the end it wasn't terrorists or my own sense of failure that took me from New York, but a tenure-track position at a good university.

It's been four years since I left the city. And though New York has never entirely left my thoughts, this is the first occasion I've really had to look back. I live in an A-frame on a lake in central Georgia. Two paintings hang on the wall behind the desk where I write. The top painting is an interior of a subway car rendered in muted grays and browns, with passengers asleep or reading books or gripping subway straps, as my friend Chris and I did when we were fifteen. The painting underneath it is of the Empire State Building at night, its rows of windows represented by daubs of yellow paint, a full moon burning alongside its glowing blimp tower. From that painting I only have to turn my head a few degrees clockwise to see the lake through the slats of the venetian blinds of the doors that open out to my deck, with the weather-beaten dock from which I swim reaching out over it. As places go, none could seem farther from New York.

From my dock I count two hundred strokes to the other side of the inlet and as many coming back. These days, that and a three-three university teaching load is all the ambition I need. Thanks to the lake, I have plenty of water to supply it. Between stretches of work at my computer I swim sometimes as often as three times a day. With every stroke I push the past farther away, and with it my memories of New York City.

Who am I kidding? I'll carry the city with me forever. It's in my bones, my flesh, my DNA, my genes. It's the egg that my father fertilized and that gave birth to me. With every stroke I swim deeper and deeper into the teeming metropolis of my dreams.



Peter Selgin

Peter Selgin's *Drowning Lessons* won the 2007 Flannery O'Connor Award. He has also written a novel and two books on fiction craft. His memoir, *Confessions of a Left-Handed Man*, was short-listed for the William Saroyan Prize. He teaches at Antioch University and is Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Georgia College & State University.