**New York: One Final Road Trip**

The three of us met up again in New York. It was after my wife and I had split up. Jack was getting through a bout of illness that he refused to talk about. Mary lived way upstate and I had arranged to meet her off the Greyhound. She was easy to recognise. More lines round her face but it was her face sure enough, watchful through the window as the bus swung to a halt. She looked twice at me before waving.

We said hello; we hugged. I held her hand and smiled at her. We could easily have walked to the meeting point but there was more than enough of a walk dangling out before us. In the taxi I wanted to ask her all sorts of questions but, in the way of New York cabbies, the driver overrode all that. It was a relief to see Jack waiting outside the Museum of Contemporary Art.

We were determined to do one last road trip together. For old times’ sake and all that. Jack had been banned forever from driving so it had to be on foot and it had to be New York. It could only be New York.

We breakfasted on pancakes, syrup, blueberries with fill-ups of coffee. Just like before. We talked about the last trip and the years in between. We talked about ourselves and where life had taken us. There were things we didn’t talk about.

Hunched round a small outside table we talked about the day and where we might go. We marked places on the street map. We joined the dots and had a route of sorts. Enough distance to be able to think of it as a trip. Enough time to be able to get Jack back for his late afternoon train. Enough of New York to be able to look back on it all as a great adventure. We had it sorted. Hell, we could always shoot off sideways if that’s how we felt. The important thing was that the three of us were together again, on the road again; one final road trip.

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We ease out onto Broadway in a weak autumn morning sun. We edge round barriers close to the Police Headquarters where some demonstration or other is happening and straggle together down the tree-lined boulevard, past sidewalk tables where single drinkers sit with oversize mugs and stares that look right through you.

Bits of New York tease in the gaps between buildings. To one side Brooklyn Bridge; to the other the Statue of Liberty. This feels a good place to have started our exploration. Behind us, crowning curves and fancy edging mark an attempt at building grandeur. We stand in front of the blankness that is City Hall with its civic flag draped and lifeless in the breezeless, breathless, limp air.

We move along, past Eastern Europeans with accordians; past streetmen with a box, three cups and a ball: as old as the hills. We don’t cross: We wait. We cross on Don’t Cross and giggle about it. We swirl. We arc back on ourselves. We drop down into a silence of clashing gongs and a stillness of frozen dragons. Too early in the day for Chinatown to show us its best. It’s barely a town, anyway; just a couple of blocks really but we were adamant to have it on the chart. We swing left onto an acreage of selling. Stretches of stalls, each with its mounds of junk or pounds of pleasure: Shrunken skateboards; hats as souvenirs; cell phones with ‘genuine GPS leather casing’. Bling and tackiness strewn everywhere to a background of reggae and hopeful looking faces. People press us to buy bits of lives set out for sale at a dollar an item. An old man struggles past us saddled with black garbage bags stuffed with bulkbuy toilet rolls. He is an example to us all. We leave it behind and get back on route.

We dawdle as we walk; time doesn’t matter at this stage. We take in the geometries of the skyline behind us – all circles and squares, triangulating a path, pointing us in one direction. We sweep across the traffic lanes and cut the corners to skirt the outer edge of Soho. There is space now to split into twos and ones, to shape and reshape the conversations as we amble slowly over the griddle of the Meat Packing District. The area once heaved and strained. Today there are bolts and locks and shutters and closures. As we cross the boundary the sign says Zone Ends and maybe that’s it: lives zoned, redlined, demarcated, dessicated. Dried up; boxed up; packed up, ready for shipping out. The area holds a silent tension that is almost tangible. We walk through a quietness verging on surreal.

We pass oldtime bars, famous for their lock-ins and shut-outs. We pass hidden nightclubs in a world of their own just off the main drag. We pass graffiti as ornate as any civic heritage. New York has us surrounded. Looking over our shoulder is the distant Manhattan skyline. Closer to us, churches are just about holding their own as buildings that come with a history; turreted and buttressed against time.

We check our watches. Time for a beer. We head uphill towards the frontage of the Chelsea Hotel. We haven’t been saying very much. Maybe in the comfy chairs; maybe under the folds of curtains that tumble down the windows releasing the smell of all the people who have ever sat in that bar; maybe we might relax and open up a bit. Maybe.

There are traces of writers that have sat here before us. We imagine sharing a beer with Tennessee Williams, or smiling across at Mark Twain, or shedding tears with Dylan Thomas. I think of a couple entwined up the tiled staircase, heading for an unmade bed and a memory that might sing out forever. It is all fancy. It is all wistfulness. It is all shadow. We sit alone in a bar that is overdue for a refurb but is still mightily better than a hundred other bars the three of us have drunk in over the years.

We sit and chat and head for the washrooms. We start out afresh, sprightly now: schedules to keep, places to go, on as far as the next corner. We are back on-grid. A city laid down. You could never say that New York was laid back but, set out before us, it is laid out, spread out, a banquet there for the picking. It is a city simply forever laid. A hussy of a city. A cheap one night stand of a city. A brazen place that lures me in time and again. You would think that I know every cranny by now but every time I come downtown the area has changed again. Roads have shifted sideways. Landmarks have gone missing. It is exciting and unsettling. You never know what might be round the next corner. One corner at a time, then, down roads that, at one time, had a bar in every doorway. Now a man could die for a single drink.

We want to take in the mighty Hudson River. We could push on further; Ninth and West 23rd, Tenth and West 25th, 11th and West 28th to reach the waterfront at Twelfth Avenue – but we also want to take in The Village so it is straight to the riverfront to break out onto the shoreline. The Hudson: Piers as far as the horizon. Imagine all the goods that have transited through here: Centuries of tea and custard powder; arms and ammunition; Jews and Gentiles; comings and goings. A history of liftings and shiftings, of bawlings and maulings. The Gangs of New York woz ’ere. But no more. Not today. Not for us. Where its debris once swirled with fast-flowing pride it now eddies more gently, round wharves and basins, washing up against a landing stage turned into a communal garden.

For a while we are entranced by the flow, the shifting patterns of water. Eventually enough is enough and, turning our back on all of that, we set to zigzagging down into The Village: A multilevel place of viaducts and bridges; of highlife and lowlife. A place of people looking up; people looking down. A place where different worlds look in and out at each other through half-cleaned windows; looking back on a world that once knew better. The Village. This is a place that never quite knew its place. We feel comfortable here.

Greenwich feels different every time I come. For us today it is a landscape of junctions, and patterns, and secret entrances onto firearms factories, and burnt-out conversions into artists’ studios.

We stumble unexpectedly on a tiny gallery that just happens to be in our way. There is stuff there but is it Art? Maybe not today; not for us. Maybe for some younger others setting out on their own journeys. Others on the lookout for something without knowing what it might be. It is Art we finally decide. It’s not Warhol that’s for sure but there are colours that dance and trance, and maybe that’s enough for us. Enough for today because today is about other things. Today is about letting the past catch up with us so that we might make some sense of it. Today is about taking things unawares.

Finally we get to talking. We talk about poetry. We talk about books. We discuss life and what we still might do with it (knowing full well that we won’t).

Mary was always the sharpest of the three of us. She always seemed to hang back, to lie in the background, but I do believe that she was the motivating force for all that happened. We never really knew her and she was happy to have it that way. Jack and I were young, we were men. We swaggered and swigged from bottles. We pulled on joints on long highways. We loved life; we loved Mary; but most of all we loved ourselves.

We walk in the shadow of the university. Mary wanders off to look at some detail, leaving Jack and I to walk side by side and quietly reminisce. When Jack falls behind, it is Mary and I, and we talk at speed about anything that comes into our heads. We finally get round to what ifs and maybes.

We could go further. We could always have gone further but we don’t press fully down that line today. Today we veer off, up by Union Square, under the shadowed angle of Flatiron and off into the late afternoon display of Grand Central Station. If ever a railway station stood for the whole of a city this is it. Sunlight streaming into the concourse, lighting up the flow of the masses. In other cities you might find the disappointment of a concrete box, the long Oyster Bar replaced by a huddled café. Give me Grand Central any day. Give me New York any time. I♥NY (even though there are times when I think she barely knows that I even exist).

Almost time for Jack’s train. I grip his shoulder and he holds me to him for just a few seconds too long before breaking off, hugging Mary and turning away. We watch until his stooped shape is lost in the crowd. There is still plenty of time before the Buffalo Greyhound leaves. We take Mid-Town slowly, arm in arm. We have the sidewalk to ourselves. We are in a world of our own, up by the side of Bryant Park, under the austere neon of Times Square, and on to the Port Authority bus terminal.

We stand looking at each other for some time. As her bus pulls in we smile and know what comes next.