**New York Journeying: A memorial**

I am telling you this because you are a stranger, sharing a wooden bench by chance. We will almost certainly never bump into each other again. You will carry the story away and, more than likely, it will fade and fade until you can no longer call it to mind. Meanwhile I will simply carry on with my journeyings.

Just for now you will do nicely. There are times, you see, when I need to let things overflow onto someone else if only to prevent it consuming me altogether. On those occasions I let people believe that they are listening to the ramblings of a lonely streetwalker. They sometimes believe what I say; they sometimes discount me. I know it is true and that is all that matters; that and occasionally reducing the pressure in my head.

I am telling you no more than I tell the others. That I have a route. That there are things I do because I have to. That New York streets are the key to it all. That if you could only rise above the city itself, looking down on the huddled masses, then (on a good day) you might glimpse what it is all about.

New York is my home. It is part of me, as I am part of it. We fit together neatly, snugly, one inside the other. I have a simple room somewhere in Harlem. I won’t be more precise than that. I am not wanting any stray visitors. Let’s just locate it down by the Harlem River somewhere between First Avenue and Lenox. It is the launchpad for my daily journey, my ritual, my routine.

I breakfast on pancakes, syrup, fruit and coffee (Just like the old days). When I am ready I make a brisk dash for Central Park and start working the places, making the streets work for me; letting New York inscribe itself on my day and making sure that I write myself on her.

I weave a pattern onto New York’s own, over and again to hold everything in place. To stop it all unravelling. I don’t want it sliding away, dripping away. I want to hold on to it. It is all I have got. This is my daily task; my day’s work. It is what I do. It is how I keep myself together. If I tell the truth, I do it for Mary. I do it with Mary. She’s not with me anymore but I take her with me round the places we used to share.

Let me tell you then, since you are the one sitting here next to me. Let me describe (before you get up and move cautiously away from me), just between the two of us, today’s daily journey. Let me recount to you (because you are here and you will do for now) today’s contribution to my little travels; to my travails.

As I was saying, I head out for Central Park. Sometimes I do a little detour along Lenox, just for the memories. Jazz in the Lounge. Jazz when it was jazz. The Lounge when it was a place where you rubbed shoulders with the world’s variety. The nights I have spent in there; the people I have met in there. The memories sometime keep me going for miles.

Most often, though, it is straight along Fifth Avenue and in at the corner of the park. The names of this place transport you back in time: the conservatory, the north and south meadows, the great hill. They are names of magic; names to conjure with; names that can produce something out of nothing. The glades, the copses, the tree-lined carriageways for some (when it was a playground for the rich) and the rough pathways for others (when it was an escape for the poor). You can get lost in its byways. You can lose yourself in here. You could, and many do, hide away from the world forever. It is a unique place in this fabulous city. There is New York’s normality (if such a thing exists) and there is Central Park.

I walk round the edges of the reservoir, watching the birds, seeing the low light catch the tips of ripples to set the whole sheet of water dancing. I love it all. I love the scents and the sights. I love the repetitions and the variations. I soak it all in every time but none of it distracts me. None of it stops the forward movement. I have my well-trodden path to tread once more. For me, on these travails, it is the Great Lawn, the castle, The Ramble, then the lake, ending up with a deep-breathing traverse of the Sheep Meadow to set me up for the breathlessness of the city proper; the city into which Fifth Avenue wants to take me. Being taken in is not for me though. I won’t be beguiled by the avenue stretching out as far as I can see, a siren luring me to stay on her historical, straightened path. For me it is all about going with the twists and turns of my set route, all about sticking to what I do.

What I do now, here, is to leave the park by the small gate, ease on past the Metropolitan Museum of Art and think of this as the end of the first part. There have been times in the past when I could simply end it all there and cut into the museum but not now, not these days, not since Mary died. MOMA was a place that we went to together. It’s not a place I am comfortable going to alone. Still, it is the first marker. The first place of meaning. A place that demands to be stopped and stared at. It is a pivotal point at which I make a right angle and press on.

This is not the time for coffee stops. This is not the time for lingering. It is onward and onward still further. Onward as far as the Port Authority Bus Terminal. Here I allow myself to stop. Here I have a coffee and watch the Greyhounds swing in. I sit and wonder about all the swarms getting off buses. Who? Where from? Where to? People heading out; people heading home. People coming back. People coming for the first time with a look of hope on their faces. New York will deal with them all, one way or another. I think of the look on Mary’s face. I feel her hugging me. I finish my coffee and leave.

I leave one transit camp and head through the austere glitterings of Times Square to another. The buses of here; the trains of there. Grand Central Station welcomes me with its best morning display of swirling humanity. 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).

Here I get the callings of trains, the noise of diners overpowering those whispering to each other in the gallery next door. Here I get the flow of people against the fixed certainty of their flag. Here is the second point on the journey. A place to stop and mark the spot. A time to recall certain things said or certain things that should have been said. It is my second way-station. All part of the pilgrimage. It is the point for taking a new line on things.

I avoid the taxi drivers with their noisy offers of a cab to anywhere. Over the years I have seen them change. Nowadays they all seem to be newcomers with degrees in stuff I’ve never heard of. My journey is not for yellow cabs; my journey is for walking. So walking it is. I angle southeast past the public library to reach one of my treasured places: Bryant Park. There was a time when you wouldn’t go in here, not unless you dealt drugs, but now it’s greatness has been reclaimed for the public. To my mind, this place is a wonderful layout of formal gardens, stone balustrades, alleys of plane trees and a fountain. It is a sheer joy to walk through. There is always something going on. Today it is a workman lovingly water-blasting away some small bit of graffiti. I am always reluctant to leave but leave I must, on past the bookstalls on outdoor tables, past the car drivers swapping insults with motorcyclists and on to the steps and colonnade of Farley General Post Office before swinging a wide arc to the Chelsea Hotel where I hold out my hand to test the late morning temperature of the ornate ironwork.

There was another day, ten years ago almost to the day, when the three of us stood before the frontage of the Chelsea Hotel. We were on that final road trip; that walk around key points of New York. We hadn’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 thought we might relax and open up a bit. Maybe we did, I don’t recall. It doesn’t even matter now.

In the bar that is now some kind of restaurant there were traces of writers that had sat there before us. We imagined sharing a beer with Tennessee Williams, or smiling across at Mark Twain, or shedding tears with Dylan Thomas. I remember thinking about a couple entwined up the tiled staircase, heading for an unmade bed and a memory that might sing out forever. There could have been Brendan Behan or even Nabokov: so much culture. It was all fancy. It was all wistfulness. It was all shadow. In reality, we sat alone in a bar that was overdue for a refurb but was still mightily better than a hundred other bars the three of us had drunk in over the years.

That is all so long ago. Maybe I remember it right, maybe I don’t. It is just a fleeting memory built up from somewhere. Such memories are what hold this journey together. Memories of Jack holding me to him for just a few seconds too long before his stooped shape was lost in the crowds making their way onto the late afternoon train that day. Mostly though the memories are of myself and of Mary.

I don’t dwell on them. They just are. They strengthen the journey and the journey reinforces them. I focus on the journey and the points still to be made. No stopping at the Chelsea on this trip. There is a way still to go.

This is one of the longer stages of the daily trek: circling wide of Pennsylvania Station and St John the Baptist’s, orbiting onwards to Herald Square metro station. Whatever the weather, no matter how cold, the temptation of a coffee and bagel is rejected. I can’t let anything sway me from the path at this stage. Even in the good times Macey’s was never an attraction. Even in the times we strolled here together there was never any point in going the couple of blocks to wait in line at the Empire State Building. Coffee and bagel at the metro, on the other hand, was hard for us to resist. We would grab something and eat it before ducking into the subway or strolling over to Madison. Not today, though. Not now I am on my own. Not on this stage of the journey.

This part of the daily trek is about temptation, about letting things pass by without falling into them. This stretch is about staying strong. This is about getting to the Flatiron Building without going to pieces and, from there, to surge on to Union Square and arrive all in one piece. Then I can relax. Then there can be bagels from a vendor’s cart. Then there can be coffee, or doughnuts, or maybe a waffle. Arriving at Union Square is the end of stage three of the journey. Union Square sets me up ready for the trickiness of the next bit.

I like this square. It is the heart of the city for me. It is a spot that, throughout the day, suits itself to returning clubbers, to early-morning commuters, to weary schoolkids, lunchtime office workers, and afternoon shoppers: New Yorkers crisscrossing each other on their daily routines. They on theirs; me on mine. Some people see the heart as being Times Square but I always remember that when it was run down: all porn theatres and pickpockets. That wasn’t the heart of New York; it was where New York had lost its soul. I couldn’t have that as a stopping point. No, it is Union Square for me any day and, as things have turned out, every day.

I start out afresh, sprightly now: schedules to keep, places to go, on as far as the next corner. Back on-grid. A city laid down. You could never say that New York was laid back but, set out before me, 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.

This is the tricky bit. Things need to be taken in order: The Village, Meat Packing, SoHo. This is where the legs get tired, where the energy flags. This is the part where desperation might creep in and I might give it all up for today. This is the Slough of Despond. This is my mire to be waded through. At the end of it all is the message’s final flourish. At the end of it all is Brooklyn Bridge.

Before all that, though, there is 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. It always was a warren of narrow streets; a breeding ground for all sorts of ills. Now it is café life running riot. There is a comfort about the place even if it feels different every time I come. Today it is a landscape of junctions, and patterns, and secret entrances onto factories, and burnt-out conversions into artists’ studios. Today, as every day, it is an area to be admired, passed through and left behind.

Edging through the outer layers of Meat Packing District the area holds a silent tension that is almost tangible. I walk through a quietness verging on surreal and cross the boundary under a sign that says Zone Ends; and maybe that’s it: lives zoned, redlined, demarcated, desiccated. Dried up; boxed up; packed up, ready for shipping out. The area once heaved and strained. Today there are bolts and shutters and closures, locking me on a direct line to the Hudson River shoreline by Pier 46. There are piers as far as the horizon. Imagine all the goods that have transited through here: centuries of tea and powders; 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.

Where debris once swirled with fast-flowing pride it now eddies more gently, round wharves and basins, washing up against a landing stage. For a while I let myself be entranced by the flow, the shifting patterns of water. Eventually enough is enough and, turning my back on all of that, I start back through the part of MeatPacking that is cobbles and boutiques. I pass old-time bars, famous for their lock-ins and shut-outs. I pass hidden nightclubs in a world of their own just off the main drag. I pass graffiti as ornate as any civic heritage. New York has me surrounded. Looking over my shoulder is the distant Manhattan skyline. Closer, churches are just about holding their own as buildings that come with a history; turreted and buttressed against time. An old man struggles past saddled with black garbage bags stuffed with bulk-buy toilet rolls. He is an example to us all. I leave it behind and retrace my steps a bit before veering off into Soho and onto Broadway.

I have often walked down these streets before…. I am not usually so derivative, the thought just struck me. Walked and walked: but no pavements moving, no people claiming that I am in love. Simply that I have been here before, done this before. Simply that I do it every day: walk the walk; love New York; be the cliché; but most of all simply that I remember and that walking this pattern helps me do so.

Downtown it is getting busier. These are nonstop streets. Even so, life can be lonely here. Here one starts to get channelled in between buildings that cast shadows on each other. In the distance are glints of high-rise, fragments reflecting each other. I slowly round City Hall anticipating that soon it is all about to end with the view along the rusty Brooklyn Bridge.

This is the journey’s final turning point, the far reach of my meanderings. It is almost as far as my memories take me. This is almost as long as it lasts; as long as it takes. All that remains now is one last swirl backwards into Chinatown. It’s barely a town; just a couple of blocks really but my senses enjoy the cluttered, crowded sidewalks, all remedies and foodstuffs. Sometimes I grab something to eat. More often I buy stuff to take home to cook. Then the final flourish, the thing that underscores all that has gone before, the thing that signs everything off: the Number Four Metro line back up towards home.

I always try to get back well before dark. I like to have an hour or so to sit on a waterside bench and watch the river traffic. I watch the few people heading home down local streets. I have spent the day watching people. I have observed people all the way round the journey. Has anyone noticed me – really noticed me? There have been looks. There have been stares. There were some smiles and some nods. Generally, though, it is easy to overlook people like me. I am not really there to most of the people hustling and bustling through New York’s noise, with their coffee in one hand, bag in the other and talking into a cell phone in the crook of their neck.

So here I am sitting next to you on this small bench. Here I am telling you this simply because you are a stranger, sharing this bench by chance. We will almost certainly never bump into each other again. You will carry the story away and it will fade. Meanwhile I will simply carry on with my journeyings. Tomorrow is another day, but tomorrow I shall repeat things all over again.