

Homecoming

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It was a bright but cold Saturday morning in May, the Long Island Expressway empty except for a few scattered cars, racing along, ignoring the speed limit. I reached the city, the skyline reflected in the morning light. This was the longest time I had been away in years, sixty-one days since I had been in our apartment. I turned down my street and the trees on either side created a cathedral of green leaves. The sidewalks were empty a little after twelve noon, unheard of at any other time. I looked for a parking space and laughed— even in a pandemic you couldn't find parking on the Upper West Side.

I parked a few blocks away and walked to my apartment building. I saw five or six masked pedestrians scattered down most of Amsterdam Avenue. I turned and walked down my street, peering up at sun-dappled trees. Birdsong filled the silence, occasionally broken by the distant wail of an ambulance siren. I entered my building and stood, taking in the hallway, the stairway leading up to apartments abandoned. The building felt empty, hollowed out. I walked through my door and gazed for a time at my apartment. The curtains drawn, shuttering the bright sunlight, it seemed the same, except covered in more dust. There was a stale, vinegar smell, no doubt coming from something left in the refrigerator. I pulled back the curtains, opened a few windows to let in the air.

I slowly stepped around my comfortably small abode, everything in its place, but still there was an unfamiliarity about it. The rooms had a feeling of not being lived in, something was removed and distant from me. I looked into the bedroom, bathroom and closets, looking for damage; a water leak, a crack in a wall. I realized how much I missed my home, my sanctuary in the metropolis of New York.

I pulled out my list and went to work, retrieving items I'd forgotten in the rush to leave the city. A hearing aid for my wife, extra cardiac medications for me, some books we missed, my unused journals for note taking, an extra pair of shoes, some flip flops for the summer months. I found everything and collected it quickly, parceled everything in canvas beach bags,

as though for a summer outing. This was not the main reason for my return. I had come to see her.

Our relationship, spread over three decades, defied an easy description—more than family, more than family friend, I had agreed when she asked me to be her medical health care proxy, power of attorney and general problem solver. The problems in her life had magnified as her health diminished, and my day to day became resolving one crisis after another. Despite making my daily calls and checking in, I was uneasy about meeting, unsure of the state of her apartment and the state of her mind. I put together the food I had brought her and stepped outside.

Amsterdam Avenue was a study in incongruities, the empty restaurants and streets on a Saturday afternoon, the bright sunlit sidewalks and the wintry, bitter cold wind in May. I passed one shuttered storefront after another, the rusted shutter in front of the salon that cuts my hair sealed like a tomb, dead flowers in the planter by the door. As I made my way, I was struck by how clean the streets were then, garbage cans empty, sidewalks immaculate. I wondered to myself, *does it take fear of death and a virus to keep the city clean?*

I saw her standing at the top of her stoop, looking for me down the street. She looked thinner, her hair turning white, with blotches of auburn fading down her straight, thinning tresses, touching her shoulders. Her head seemed dwarfed by her surgical mask, covering most of her face. “Hello, Stranger,” I said, my voice muffled by my own mask. She nodded but made no comment, as if unsure what to say. She turned and opened the building door and gestured for me to come in.

The darkened apartment, lit only by the one window facing the street, smelled of onions and cigarette smoke. Magazines and old newspapers piled in every corner and chair gave the small, narrow apartment a sense of being constricted, like the room was pressing into you. Walking like a tightrope walker, I navigated my way to the kitchen, carefully stepping so as not to knock over the piles of papers and boxes stacked symmetrically like a maze. I unpacked the food I had brought her, placing each item in easy reach. As I moved food in her refrigerator, my nostrils filled with the smell of cigarette smoke. Struggling to keep the irritation out of my voice, I looked back at her, her mask on her forehead, the tip of her cigarette glowing in the darkened

room. “Seriously?” gesturing with my chin. She shrugged, took another drag and put it out in a ceramic Turkish ashtray, half littered with butts.

We stood awkwardly looking at each other, like estranged family meeting at a reunion. She hates small talk but broke the silence. “Are you going to teach me how to do the thing?” This was the new code we shared, *the thing, the guy, the stuff*, cryptic short words, dropped like breadcrumbs that she hoped would lead me to the door of understanding her and what she wanted. She had spent her life as a book editor, and now words had abandoned her.

“You mean the scanner?”

“Yes, that’s it, yes.”

I took out a step-by-step list I had made up and printed, and we squeezed into her narrow office space. She stood behind me; our closeness made me both ill at ease and a little sad. I could sense she wanted to hug me, to have me hold her. I slowly repeated each step, then had her do it. “Okay, now press ‘Scan to File.’” I saw her hand, blue-veined, skin like crepe wrapped around bone. It hovered over the screen and I knew she was trying to translate what I had said into what she saw, afraid to embarrass herself by pushing the wrong button. I told her funny stories, making quick jokes to ease the strain. We practiced a few more times, but I knew by the next day, she would forget everything except my visit.

She handed me a letter, asking me to decipher it. I went through her mail, all lined up in order, her bills marked with how much she owed for each. I moved to the couch, placing a stack of *New Yorker* magazines on the floor, and she sat on a cushioned stool facing me. We read the cartoons, talked about the neighborhood and stories of shared friends. She talked about the pigeons living in her window box, the neighbor playing her piano at three in the morning. We ran out of things to say, and sat still, holding the quiet between us, the silence of the city outside her first-floor window.

“So I’ve been thinking.”

“That’s always a bad sign.”

I ignored her comment. “Actually, Ann and I have been thinking that, maybe you want to move in with us for a while.”

“That woman is a saint, she saved your bacon, bad boy.”

“No doubt about it, but you didn't answer my question.”

She started to hum and moved to the table, picked up a cigarette, put it down. We both knew this dance, moving around the same question, over and over. She asked me if I wanted some lentil soup, I said no. I felt the sweat around my nose and mouth under the mask and a knot of tension, the chafing of the mask matching the irritation and unease I felt in my body.

“What would I do there? I'd just be in your way.”

“You could relax, read on the beach, enjoy the sun.”

“Sun in the fun, fun in the sun,” she started to sing. I asked her to stop. She paused, taking me in, a look of something like pity in her eyes. “I guess I'm not making this easy on you, but you're such a worrier. I'm fine, what's the big deal?”

“Oh, I don't know, what about living alone with lung cancer and dementia during a pandemic?”

She stared straight ahead, her body still. The familiar pang of regret mixed with resentment rang through my chest, moving up to my tensed shoulders and neck. Suddenly I felt very tired and drained. I had been with her for three hours and I felt a pressing urge to get away, to escape. I didn't want to stand witness to her life, her choices. I wasn't looking forward to the two-hour drive back home, and I knew I was going back alone.

She sensed this, and without a word began to help me collect her trash, old newspapers and empty bottles of rum to throw out. I took out the garbage, brought in her mail. It was time for me to leave and she walked me out her door, both of us standing on her stoop, looking down the empty street. I told her I loved her; she asked when I could return, I told her I didn't know, that everything was day to day. She clutched me to her, and I held her for a minute. Some risks are worth taking.

I packed my car and left New York. As I drove over the bridge it began to snow. Crystal flakes, almost like small diamonds, blowing horizontally and catching the fading light. Snow in May, who would've thought such a thing was possible? I turned and looked at the passing skyline.

The jagged break in the clouds illuminated the tall buildings, made them almost incandescent, magical. A city filled with people in small rooms, waiting for love to return.