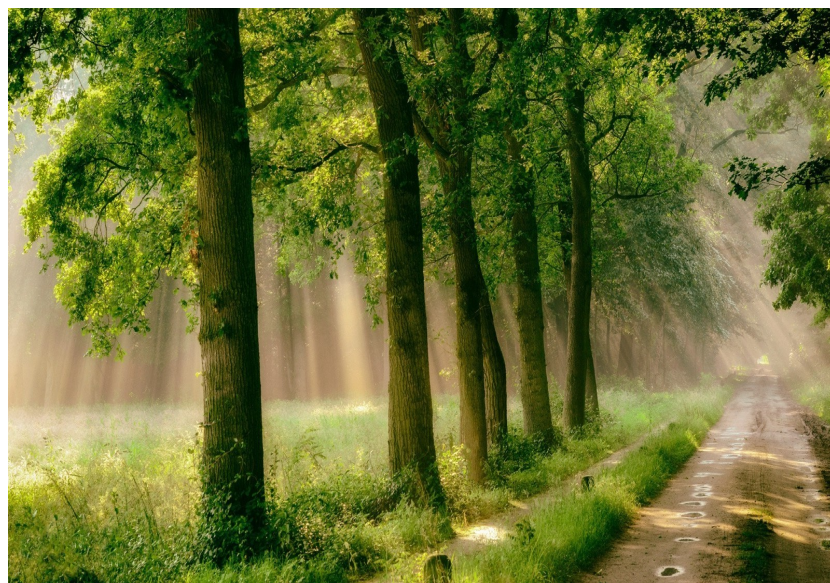


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P R E S S R E V I E W
FOR ADVANCED EFL LEARNERS

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Taking a Walk

by Mark Kingwell

Solvitur ambulando, scholars and scientists have long been advised when faced with a tricky passage from the *Summa contra gentiles* or one of Zeno's mind-bending paradoxes: It is solved by walking. A stroll is handy therapy for any number of afflictions, great and small – good for the digestion, distracting of worries, refreshing of spirit, and maybe even the preferred way to do philosophy. Aristotle thought so, popular legend says, which is why we call the school he founded Peripatetic. In truth the name may be derived instead from the colonnades of the ancient Athenian Lyceum, where his followers met to argue – *peripatoi* rather than *peripatetikos*, if you're keeping score – but let's not ruin the image of donnish conversation carried on by a couple of ambling brainiacs. Centuries later, Heinrich Heine would gently mock Kant for the regularity of his afternoon constitutional, always taken “with his gray coat and the Spanish stick in his hand,” as a sign of intellectual rigidity – one by which the rationalist philosopher's neighbors allegedly set their clocks.

Nietzsche and the Lake School poets were driven to wilder, more romantic wanderings.

But there has also been a long-standing disdain of those who must trudge, rather than ride, from place to place. In North American life, lacking a vehicle is among the clearest markers of social deficiency, especially if it means resorting to public transit. (Loelia Lindsay, a former duchess of Westminster, memorably quipped that “Anybody seen in a bus over the age of thirty has been a failure in life.”) “Pedestrian” in its adjectival mode comes to mark the feckless, the trite, the dull of mind – thinking that shuffles when it should fly. Even jaywalkers, those dashing minor-league anarchists, came by their name via insult: *jay* originally meant “simpleton,” “softhead,” “rube.” (In some places, the value is reversed: New Yorkers think anybody who *doesn't* jaywalk is a rube.) Jaywalking remains illegal in most places, punishable by fines and even detention. I once gave a lecture celebrating the liberatory potential of jaywalking; the town's police commissioner, a member of the audience, gave me his card afterward. “You'll need that to get out of jail,” he told me.

Urban walking is a special kind of activity, a modern democratic art form. On sidewalks and in public squares, across terminal concourses and through lobbies, walking is how we most commonly, and closely, encounter our fellow citizens. If you live in a large city,

learning how to walk the streets is something you must master as a physical expression of belonging. “I grew up in the South,” the humorist Roy Blount Jr. notes in an essay on how to walk in New York.

I can do the traipse, I can do the gallivant, I can do the lollygag, and I can do the slow lope. I can hotfoot it, I can waltz right in and waltz right out, or I can just be poking or dragging or plowing along. As a youngster I skedaddled. I believe that if called upon, for the sake of some all-in-good-fun theatrical, I could sashay. But I know that these gaits have their places, and on the other hand there is New York walking. You think you know how to walk in New York? No you don’t, *unless* you know you know how to walk in New York. Otherwise you just impede the flow.

Tom Wolfe was the first to note the characteristic hip hitch of the pimp roll, that defiant sidewalk strut, but the walking signals of class and race have been with us always, from the *flâneur’s* saunter, an expression of aesthetic leisure, to the motions of P. G. Wodehouse’s antic London idiots, who ooze, oil, filter, trickle, shimmer, breeze, stream, and sidle. It’s a close thing, but in the Wooster lexicon there are hardly more words for drunkenness.

Neither Blount nor Wolfe nor Wodehouse is deemed worthy of mention in the array of recent books about cities and walking, but that’s no rap against them: we each have favorite literary pals, just as we each have

favorite routes and destinations in the same city. Nor do any of the books sufficiently discuss today’s gravest threat to enjoyable city walking, namely all those people not looking where they’re going because they’re paying obeisance to their *fucking phones*.

Of the writers and thinkers who dwell on city walking, the architect and urban theorist Michael Sorkin acknowledges this threat most directly. *Twenty Minutes in Manhattan*, his recently rereleased tour de force of pedestrian appreciation, is a detailed defense of why walking in cities is not only a pleasant pastime and a fine form of low-impact exercise but also an essential feature of democracy – an enactment of citizenship that contrasts vividly with the isolation of driving.

As Sorkin’s title suggests, his book is structured around the daily walk he takes from home, a rent-controlled apartment in Greenwich Village, to his firm’s office in TriBeCa. He takes a long time to get out the door, what with detailing the building’s stairwells and corridors, plus the tussles with neighbors over noise and garbage, but once off the stoop and away, it’s an exhilarating journey, delivered in montage and digression, mirroring on the page the experience of navigating the sidewalk in a great, busy, diverse modern city. We pass through Washington Square Park, down LaGuardia Place, and across Houston and Canal, then end up playing sly elevator games at the

office, betting on how clusters of three, four, or five riders will arrange themselves in the car. Sorkin digresses frequently into history, philosophy, and politics, making reference to everyone from Plato and Baudelaire to Téa Leoni and Will Smith. He is the ultimate cicerone – opinionated, well informed, committed, and sometimes funny.

The book's best chapter, "The Block," is a graceful survey of thinkers who understand and celebrate the public good of public space: Walter Benjamin, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, Guy Debord, and of course Jane Jacobs. "The key to a democratic urban citizenship is that cooperative behavior is elective," Sorkin writes – which is why even small defections from the implicit norms of shared space (I'm looking at you not looking at me, phone guy) are significant.

By the time we reach our destination in Sorkin's walk to work, the larger defections of the modern city – runaway property values and rents, corporate retail districts – are revealed as enemies of a functioning urban democracy. This is a walk with a purpose, one of the finest meditations on the politics of the built environment since, yes, Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

At one point in *Twenty Minutes*, after Sorkin is bumped by two yakking moms in SoHo, he resorts to calling them assholes, albeit under his breath. It is the only discreditable note in the book – provided one

disregards an off-key sentence in which Sorkin, seeking to demonstrate the growing annexation of SoHo by showbiz darlings, mentions that he once sat on a toilet seat "still warm from the impress of Calista Flockhart's bum." (I mean, really.) Sorkin can be, in general, a trifle red-faced in his denunciations, hating equally on Trumped-up towers and film-crew production assistants who shoo him off his route. You begin to worry about him. "My bile rises when I pass the unshaded sidewalks of the corporate skyscrapers of midtown because even these entities – worth billions of dollars – are as indifferent as my landlord to the public realm," he snarls. "I feel my blood pressure rise as I pass the ranks of mobile dressing rooms and supply trucks, all with their exhausts belching and their noisy generators running to keep overpaid stars cool or warm," he splutters. "I was now screaming with rage," he says of the height of one battle with his landlord. For the initiatives known as "public-private partnerships," which routinely devolve the former into the latter, Sorkin harbors Nazi-inflected hostility: "Whenever I hear the phrase, I reach for my revolver." Later on, contemplating a Subaru SUV inanelly named the Tribeca, he reports, "I look forward to spitting on the first one I see and yelling 'asshole' at the driver."

In addition to general animus toward whole categories of people – yuppies and bobos (remember them?) – Sorkin nurses some personal grievances. His

gallery of rogues includes the cynical billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg, the craven apostle of power Herbert Muschamp, the fey Nazi poseur Philip Johnson, the sadly trendy Daniel Libeskind, the slippery hypocrite Rem Koolhaas, and the bullying city-hater Robert Moses. On the other hand, Jane Jacobs was a genius. Sorkin's recent collection of essays, *All Over the Map*, is indeed that, an album of loosely connected short pieces that are fired by these various dislikes but that, in the absence of their original context, mostly shrivel on the page. This is especially apparent in his commentary on the World Trade Center reconstruction, which has just about exhausted its interest even for dedicated urbanists. More successful are longer essays about the ends of urbanism and the value of utopianism in architectural thought, as well as some flights of writerly fancy that are both entertaining and informative: a Philip Roth-style counterfactual essay entitled "The Plot Against Architecture," a "Last Philippic" that condemns Philip Johnson alongside the notorious B-movie exploitationist Russ Meyer, and a tongue-in-cheek piece called "How I Invented Asia." These, along with perhaps half a dozen others, form the short book that is trapped inside this one, struggling to get out.

Alexandra Horowitz has no large political agenda, and her name-dropping tends toward Thoreau and Santayana rather than Debord and Benjamin, but her

book *On Looking* belongs with Sorkin's anyway, as a sort of creamy dessert course with an emphasis on the aesthetic pleasures of walking. Written in the breezy, accessible style Horowitz brought to her last effort, a study of her dog's perceptual universe, it focuses on eleven walks that the author, a cognitive psychologist, took in New York, Philadelphia, and Springfield, Massachusetts. In each case, she has a companion able to illuminate some aspect of the urban condition: an architect and sociologist of sidewalk behavior, but also a geologist and a graphic designer (finally, someone who defends the almost-observed distinction between font and typeface). A sound engineer teaches her to hear the subtle gradations of the soundscape; a blind woman shows her how to appreciate walking without all the senses in play. Horowitz is a connoisseur of detail. Of the first walk, taken with her nineteen-month-old son, she writes:

A walk is exploring surfaces and textures with finger, toe, and – yuck – tongue; standing still and seeing who or what comes by; trying out different forms of locomotion (among them running, marching, high-kicking, galloping, scooting, projectile falling, spinning, and noisy shuffling). It is archeology: exploring the bits of discarded candy wrapper; collecting a fistful of pebbles and a twig and a torn corner of a paperback; swishing dirt back and forth along the ground.

It strikes the reader, traipsing through this chatty,

charming work, that Horowitz may be the New World reverse of the Oulipo eminence Georges Perec, who sat for days in a Paris café observing the same unremarkable streetscape and recording everything that happened – which wasn't much. (The resulting book, *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, published in 1975, is itself exhausting in a manner that only Perec, author of a novel entirely devoid of the letter *e*, could manage. "Buses pass by," he notes at one point. "I've lost all interest in them.") Horowitz's most enjoyable chapter describes the journey she shares with the illustrator Maira Kalman. Being around Kalman sounds a bit like living within the pages of John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* twenty-four hours a day. Even sidewalk detritus instantly transports her to glee. "The subject of Kalman's excitement," Horowitz tells us, "was a long wooden couch set ungloriously near a mound of trash in front of an apartment building." Kalman "loved it for the boldness of its naked arrival on the curb."

If Rousseau is the more obvious source for the modernist fixation on the restoration of an Edenic environment," Michael Sorkin remarks in *Twenty Minutes*, "Hobbes functions as its thinly concealed unconscious." We may dream of a shared urban paradise, in other words, but the real rules of interaction are governed by self-interest and competition. Hobbesian games are everywhere afoot in

Jeff Speck's *Walkable City*, which might be conceived of as the return of the reality principle in urban affairs; or one might say that, like Machiavelli, Speck chooses to take people as they are and laws – or policy levers – as they might be. His general premise is that people won't give up cars for walking unless and until the price is right; it is the business of good urban planning and municipal politics to find the right mix of carrots and sticks to draw people onto the sidewalk. Walking is of course good for you, enjoyable, and sustainable; but just saying so won't make people do it. For that, you need behavior-altering tricks like "congestion pricing" (raising the opportunity costs of driving downtown, whether with actual fees or heightened frustration) and "road diets" (avoiding induced traffic demand by removing, rather than adding, lanes).

Speck likes walking as much as do Horowitz and Sorkin, in short, but he also knows that Manhattanites are the blessed and few. In his professional practice, Speck advises mayors and planners on how to make existing cities more pedestrian-friendly. Much of his advice, collected and framed in *Walkable City*, runs counter to received ideas, a fact that gives Speck endless pleasure. Some of the background here is psychological, as in the notion of "risk homeostasis," which dictates that humans will act recklessly just to the level of their comfort. This means, for example, that widening roads in an attempt to make them safer has

the unintended effect of making it easier for people to drive faster – and so returns the road to its previous level of danger. “Widening a city’s streets in the name of safety,” Speck writes, “is like distributing handguns to deter crime.”

Risk homeostasis also accounts for the fact that adding bike lanes to streets, unless the lanes are separated from the roadway by a curb, can make biking more hazardous. Speck, like both Sorkin and Horowitz, cites the experiments of the Dutch urban planner Hans Monderman, who designed so-called naked streets: road interchanges almost entirely devoid of signage. These proved demonstrably safer than signed interchanges, because drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians had to slow down and think in order to assess the risk and then negotiate it. In Monderman’s terms, “Chaos equals cooperation.”

Speck’s analyses are diverting in the counterintuitive manner we have come to expect from a certain sort of popular non-fiction. They are delivered with certainty, bad pun-driven jokes, and a penchant for grandiose labels for commonsense ideas: “The General Theory of Walkability explains how, to be favored, a walk has to satisfy four main conditions: it must be useful, safe, comfortable, and interesting.” The general thesis of Speck’s books is that walking is civic, as we all know it to be, and that it saves money by, among other things, offsetting health-care costs and

increasing productivity (by reducing commute times and traffic-induced stress).

Unfortunately, Speck seems to have ingested with enthusiasm the almost instantly dated “creative class” rhetoric that crept into urban theory a decade ago. He talks excitedly of the “millennials” and “creatives,” raised on *Friends* rather than *The Brady Bunch*, who will inhabit the pedestrian-welcoming hipster downtowns of the future, if only we plan it right. These people will be the ones to reinvigorate the moribund city centers with such features as tree-lined sidewalks, buskers, and food trucks. Though he shows, with compelling statistical evidence, that walkable districts typically become more expensive, he doesn’t seem to notice the obvious irony that the very same desire for walkability that attracts these younger residents is just what drives the property values past the level they can afford. This is what happened in Jane Jacobs’s beloved West Village, which beginning in the 1960s morphed from a rough-and-tumble neighborhood into a theme park for actors and bankers. That the same thing did not happen in her other model district, Boston’s North End, owes to the fact that it was already a theme park, offering cannoli and gelato alongside manufactured street parades for the Virgin Mary.

Like so many people who place faith in market mechanisms to generate good results, Speck is at times blithe to the point of insult about uneven distribution

of urban amenities. “In most American cities, everyone still drives, traffic is relatively light, and parking is cheap. What is the role of transit in these places?” he wonders.

In some of these locations, the bus is destined to remain the “loser cruiser,” the mode of choice for those who have no choice: the elderly, poor, and infirm. As such, it will always be underfunded and struggling for survival, like any social service.

Well, sure – so long as we continue to regard the disadvantaged and disabled as losers. “If it is to become widely used, transit has to be ruthlessly reconceptualized as a convenience, not just a rescue vehicle,” he adds. Do not tarry for rescue, O ye poor and infirm, for ye shall be left waiting at the bus stop!

Though he mentions Europe, Australia, and Canada now and then, Speck’s theory of walkability really applies only to those American cities that experienced urban flight in the twentieth century. But wealthy suburbs surrounding defunct downtowns are not necessarily the norm. Many North American near suburbs offer the only place where lower- to middle-income families can even imagine owning a house, meaning that many of these places increasingly accommodate recent arrivals to the country. The cultural identities of these suburbs are shifting and, sometimes, in conflict, leading to violent gang activity. Modern suburban life is often defined by just the sort

of implicit exclusions – and the explicit vertical gated communities of downtown condo towers – that Michael Sorkin feared would result from gentrification. Research by my University of Toronto colleague David Hulchansky has shown that there are three distinct socioeconomic “cities” within the Greater Toronto Area. The smallest, wealthiest city is concentrated downtown and in traditionally upper-class neighborhoods; it is clustered around the main subway lines, the financial core, and many prominent sites of entertainment and shopping. The poorest city is in near suburbs on the northwest and northeast edges of the city area, often far from subway access. A middle-income city is squeezed between the two.

This is a pattern likely to exist elsewhere in Canada and the United States. And yet even by Speck’s own analysis, Toronto ranks high as a walkable city. I can walk or bike to work nearly every day and have never owned a car (though, in common with Speck, I like to drive). I enjoy this luxury because I live in what Hulchansky calls City 1, rather than 2 or 3 – in the same neighborhood, not coincidentally, that includes the last residence of Jane Jacobs. The trend of stratification within the city has developed over the past four decades, almost precisely paralleling the growing income disparities of North American society during the same period. It would be no exaggeration to say that the three-cities condition – growing outer-city

slums and privileged walkable downtowns – is the physical embodiment of wealth concentration.

Speck has smart and useful things to say in favor of working public spaces such as small parks and greenbelts (“only as good as their edges”) and in favor of inclusionary zoning, which allows for affordable-housing renovations within formerly single-family structures. And he has sharp words for those quietly destructive civil engineers who mistakenly think that facilitating traffic flow is the *ne plus ultra* of urban intervention, and for the bombast of celebrity architects like Frank Gehry who wave away criticism of user-unfriendly buildings with the haughty disdain of demigods. “Evidence would suggest that, among the leading starchitects, *creating street life* still ranks low on the list of priorities, somewhere down there with *staying on budget* and *keeping the rain out*.” If Speck seems a little too accommodating of the automobile, that is because he knows it is not going anywhere soon. “Most American cities are driving cities and will remain so for years to come,” he concedes. “And that’s OK.”

That probably seems a bit too sanguine to some, but Speck’s conciliatory attitude might have an upside: if many city dwellers are willing to spend for the privilege of driving, we can tax driving and use the funds to promote walking. On just one aspect of this dynamic, he notes: “Parking is a public good, and it must be

managed for the public good.” Given his assessment of parking as the “single largest land use in every American city” – on its own an astonishing fact – it “is very much that city’s business” to ensure that parking costs generate benefits (transit, public housing, walkable downtowns) for the entire city.

Walking occupies a curious double place in the modern world: it can mark a declension on the social scale – remember the “loser cruiser” – or it can be a sign of luxury, an activity enjoyed by those who can walk to work or a restaurant. One of the saddest things to observe about our urbanized landscape is how little thought has gone into its creation, especially relative to the amount of speculation and argument put out by urbanists, architects, and philosophers. Most of the planet’s largest cities can now be found in Asia, Africa, and South America. Commuters in these cities daily witness traffic jams that would gladden the hearts of congestion pricers everywhere. At the same time, these places support massive nondriving populations who manage to thrive, despite sometimes lacking access to basic amenities such as water and electricity. From this global urban perspective, it is itself a luxury to worry about whether your city can indulge the luxury of walking.

In at least some parts of Asia the urban future really has arrived: in addition to poverty and crowding that would shock the residents of Dallas or Vancouver, there

is also citywide Wi-Fi, eco-friendly infrastructure, and architecture on an ambitious scale. As Daniel Brook shows in *A History of Future Cities*, his inspired tour of the postmodern city, the East is deeply entwined with Western money, history, and ambition. The Art Deco buildings that adorn the Bund, a stretch of waterfront on the Puxi side of Shanghai, were constructed by the buccaneering English and French capitalists who created the basis, almost without thinking, of one of the most eclectic architectural clusters in the world. The city of Dubai was, by contrast, planned and executed as a series of design experiments; but because the emirs' money drew submissions from the world's leading architects and planners, it seems to transcend region.

"Where are we?" Brook asks in his book's opening line.

Walking through the cityscapes of St. Petersburg, Shanghai, Mumbai, and Dubai provokes this same question. Built to look as if they were not where they are – in Russia, China, India, and the Arab world, respectively – each metropolis conjures the same captivating yet discomfiting sense of disorientation.

The oceanfront of Mumbai displays evidence of the Portuguese and the British even as the city – the fourth most populous in the world – remains distinctly Indian in culture. St. Petersburg's proposed modernist skyscrapers are set against a bulbous skyline of

Russian Orthodox Church architecture, just as the post-Soviet culture still retains vestiges of the French style that influenced elite social and intellectual circles of centuries past.

Architecturally and culturally, these cities are richly postmodern in a way that even New York, let alone other American cities, simply is not. Strolling the sidewalks of these jangly urban landscapes, measuring on foot the shifting contours of the future city, demands a constant review of settled ideas. As Brook suggests throughout his invigorating survey of the future by way of the past, this is a journey that can only really take place on foot. ♦

Leaving Cuba

by *Leila Segal*

I am woken by Suci, the village postman, knocking at our door.

‘Pavel,’ he calls, coming round to tap the shutters of my room. ‘I’ve got a letter for you – from Havana!’

It’s not often that we get letters at my house – just once or twice a year. I jump out of bed and pull on my trousers, hitting my foot against the chair in my excitement. This will be the letter I have been awaiting for almost two months now – everyone in the village knows.

Suci is fanning himself with a papaya leaf that has fallen onto the porch. His face gleams with sweat but his blue post of ce shirt is neatly pressed, as if he’s just put it on. In one hand he holds a white envelope, which bears a black embossed crest.

‘Well, Pavel,’ he says. ‘I think you’ve got your answer right here.’

I tear open the envelope and pull out the letter. Suci leans against the doorpost and watches me read.

‘L’Ambassade de la Republique Francaise, La

Havane, Cube’ it says. This is printed in large black letters at the top of the page, then underneath, in Spanish, it says: ‘Dear Mr Martinez, I am pleased to advise you that your application for a French tourist visa has been successful. You will nd enclosed your passport, endorsed with a visa valid for six months from the date of your passport entry to France. I would remind you of your signed statement that you will undertake no employment during your stay, and that you will not marry whilst in the French Republic. Please accept my best wishes for a pleasant trip. Yours etc. Mme Fournet on behalf of M. Beaulieu, French Ambassador to Cuba.’

I tremble slightly as I read and it takes me some time. For a good minute after I have nished I do not raise my eyes because I am struggling to stop a tear from running down my cheek. When I regain my composure, I look at Suci, whom I have known since primary school, and a wide grin breaks across my face.

‘Congratulations my friend,’ he says.

Inside the house, my grandmother, Soledad, is standing by the kitchen door. She is looking at me with an expression I have never seen on her face before – there is defeat in her eyes. But as I get closer, she pulls herself up. ‘What were you thinking, Pavel, leaving the pigs thirsty for so long? Go – fetch some water from the

tank and let them drink. Then, please, buy me two pounds of rice from the village store.' Even though it's nearly 11 o'clock, her kerchief is still tied around her head, which means she's not yet combed her hair, and she seems nervous, wiping her hands repeatedly on her apron.

I do not think of Soledad for long, though. There are only seven days to go before I take the aeroplane from Havana to Paris, and much to do. I hurry to fetch water for the pigs.

I am a baker by trade, but the village bakery closed some time ago because of our shortages, so I work as a porter at the tourist hotel, I won't pretend it's interesting, but I like to watch the ocean, and the companeros are pleasant enough.

The hotel is where I met Mariannne. She came, like many others, for a holiday – but unlike the others – Marianne came back. We've been novios for nearly a year now, and she says it's time I visited her home. If you'd told me before I met her that I'd see another country one day, I would have laughed. I think I'd have been forever content to sit beside the ocean, watching the waves and shing, or playing dominoes in the shade.

Tito is still snoring on the sofa as I pull on my boots and leave for the village store. Sun through the shutter lights his dark brown cheek. He is at college in M-, the nearest town, but as it's summer, they are on holiday. Tito is my cousin, but I have lived with him, my aunty

Lali and Soledad ever since my parents died. Last night, which belongs now to another time, we sat, Tito and I, on the porch and watched the stars. I asked him if they would look the same from Paris, but he said he did not know.

I make my way up the dirt track to the main road, and the village store.

Our neighbour is out on the porch with her husband. 'Buen viaje!' she shouts with a wink – it seems Suci has delivered the news. Under the eaves of the neighbours' house, which leans precariously towards the bedroom that I share with Soledad, their son Adelmo is skinning a pig. I helped them kill it yesterday – Adelmo felt too much pity to draw the knife. He will do the same for me when it's time to slaughter our herd.

When I return home with the rice, Soledad is nowhere to be seen. The house is neat and tidy, today's washing on the line, and Tito is awake. He grins at me from his seat in the yard. The sun is high now; he squints through the light, a cafecito in one hand.

'Hermano,' he says. 'So – your journey begins.' I sit down next to him. We watch the hens as they pluck grain from the dirt. 'The peppers have done well since we planted them last month,' I say.

'They have.' Tito looks into his cup, which is empty now. 'When are you going to tell Neta about your trip?' Tito is ten years younger and shouldn't tell me what to do. He doesn't catch my eye but gazes out at the glossy

green banana forest in the yard. 'Neta must not be the last to know.'

'Leave that to me,' I say. A hen squawks and jumps into the guava tree.

'How could I forget Neta? She's my sister – all I have.'

I say goodbye to Tito and go to the road to hitch a lift to Neta's village, S -. One or two people are waiting there already. We nod, say nothing and wait. Sometimes the trucks come, sometimes they don't. The road is dusty, and very quiet, the little bar is closed. I swat a y from my forehead and stare up into the sky.

Three hours later, I ride into S- on the back of a logging truck. Osbel, my brother-in-law, is waiting in his trap by the side of the road.

'Tito called the post of ce,' he says. 'Told them you were coming – let's go.'

His horse whinnies and scratches at the ground. I jump in and we drive off, waving to friends along the street. It seems everyone knows I'm going away – everyone but Neta, that is: the farm is outside S – and doesn't have a phone.

'My friend, you've drawn the trump card, have you not?' Osbel's blue eyes glitter. 'What will you do out there with your woman? Make a fortune and bring her back?'

I don't know exactly what I'll do in France but I've formed a kind of picture, so I hazard a guess. 'I'll be

working,' I say. 'Any kind of thing – repay Marianne the money she's spent.'

'Plenty of work out there for the likes of you, I should think.' Osbel whips the horse. 'A strong fellow, not afraid of hard labour. What do they do in Paris to earn a crust? Not till the soil, that's for sure.' He whips the horse again. 'A few months of luxury and you won't want to come back home. No rations – all the food you can eat, I hear. And you earn what you need by working, no rules on what you keep.'

'You don't know me, hermano, if you think I'll be tempted by those things.'

I look straight ahead at the road.

Osbel is silent

'I, Pavel, will be coming back. Ours is the only free country in the world – Cuba libre – nothing can compare.'

In truth, I am lled with curiosity for this new place but these are thoughts I can no longer share. It's not like talking with Osbel about the birds we'll catch when we hunt, or when he teases me, predicting that I'll shoot fewer than he does. Nor is it like when we imagine my future wife and child, living in a house as sweet as his, which he'll help me build. I have entered a place where I must walk alone.

We draw up to the farm. Neta is in front of the house, treading about in the manure. There's a shout and scuf ing behind us as we get down from the trap;

Tomas, Neta's son, rushes up with a little friend. They stop short when they see me with Osbel, and Tomas runs to Neta, hiding behind her legs.

'Brother.' Neta kisses my cheek. She pulls Tomas forward. 'Say hello to your uncle. Come on, don't be rude.' He steps towards me, staring with his mother's eyes, which are also mine, and reaches up for a kiss. Then he darts off to play.

'They're setting snares for the rabbits,' she says. 'I've told them it's no good with all the dogs around here but they want to catch us dinner – so Papi can take a rest.' she smiles with her mouth but not her eyes and brushes at her overalls, which are splashed with mud. 'Come, brother, sit with us and talk.'

The whiteboard house that Osbel has built is so new I can still smell damp in the palm leaves that make up the roof. Neta serves us cold coconut milk and slices of bread with margarine. When she's done, she pulls up a chair next to her husband and looks at me hard – she knows that something's up. Osbel is scraping at his plate to get the last crumbs into his mouth and for a while no one else says a thing.

'It's some time since breakfast,' Osbel says at last.

'He's up every dawn to work on the tobacco.' Neta rubs a hand over her eyes. 'It's more than one man's work, but the committee's sent everyone else to cut cane.'

Osbel is looking at me – I have to tell her.

'Neta...' I begin, but don't know how to put it. I start again. 'Suci came this morning, with some news – I'm going to see Marianne.'

Neta looked up from her cup. 'What, Marianne's back in Havana?'

'No, Neta. It's not that.'

She pulls her overalls around her as if it's cold. 'You're going away?' Neta has never believed my trip will happen. 'Finally, the visa came through?' Her eyes do not move from a point slightly left of my face, where they have come to rest. They are slow and very large, she looks like Tomas, about eight years old.

I reach for her hand. 'It's not what you think, it's not for good.'

Neta gets up to clear the table. 'What happy news for Marianne.' Her voice is faint and plates rattle against the sink as she puts them down. Then she wheels around and looks me in the eye. 'What about Lucia's husband? Twenty years of a three-week husband once a year – from what I hear he made those promises to his family when he left. Who knows whether he's got a mistress in Florida – whatever it is that keeps him there, there's plenty of money to buy poor Lucia gadgets, televisions and the like, toys for the grandchildren from their once-a-year grandpa. And don't forget, they won't let you back for a long while after you leave –'

' – Neta, that's enough.' Osbel lifts a harness from

the wall and strides outside.

I look at the agstones because I can't bear to see my sister cry. 'Neta, listen. Thirty-two years I've lived content with what I have. They could pile beef onto my plate, ll my wallet with dollars – it wouldn't change a thing.'

Neta stands at the sink, head pressed into her palms. I put my arm around her shoulders.

She turns to look up at me, quiet now. 'I hope to God you're right.'

It is night; the family is asleep. My bonita Marianne looks out from the photograph I hold in my hand.

When she last came to visit, she showed me pictures of her apartment. 'Right in the centre of Paris,' she said. 'Near all my friends, everything – we'll have such a good time.'

She promised to show me many things: shops that sold all you could want under one roof – shoes and food and clothes, towers that stretched up to the sky, trains that travelled beneath the sea.

The floors of her apartment were covered in carpet; paper with roses adorned the wall. In my house the floors are stone, and there are no flowers – just yellow paint.

'Are you afraid of going on the plane?' she asked.

Now in the darkness, her words echo in my room.

'Of course not, Marianne,' I said.

It wasn't quite the truth. I have never been on a

plane before – when I thought of ying up there among the stars I felt a little scared, but she would never know.

She was reassured and rested her head on my shoulder. 'You look after me, Pavel ... Like no one ever has.'

My arm wrapped tighter round her. 'Wherever we go, nena, at least I can do that.'

Tonight the memory of her voice lls my ears; I can still smell her skin. As the first strands of dawn creep over the mountains. I nally get some sleep.

The cockerel crows and I open my eyes. I am in my bed. It's my last day in the village; tomorrow, I leave for Havana.

Neta arrives with Tomas and the family gathers in the front room to help me pack. All that I will need ts into the blue sports bag I take to the beach: my best black trousers and shirt, khakis – good for everyday, underwear, vest and two pairs of socks. My shoes, of course, will be on my feet.

Lali says: 'Aren't you going to pack your jeans?'

I frown, and answer more grumpily than I mean to: 'You don't wear jeans in the city – they're for hunting with Osbel.'

Lali looks at Soledad and rolls her eyes. 'Do as Lali tells you,' my grandmother says.

I go to the closer and pull them out. 'Well, I suppose they might be good for work.;

Neta is silent. She's holding Tomas to her and he's straining to break free. Standing, he ts under her arm; his bright brown eyes watch my every move. Then he pulls away and runs outside. Neta watches him go.

'Be careful of the cold,' she says to me.

'Yes, be careful – their weather's not like ours.' Soledad looks worried.

'Here, take these' – she hands me three at packages wrapped in greaseproof paper – 'so you won't go hungry on the plane.' It's tounon: she spent all yesterday afternoon grinding sesame seeds to make me this.

'And don't go out on the streets,' adds Neta. 'The people are violent, it's very dangerous – you might get picked on by a criminal if you go outside.'

Lali's quiet, but then she pipes up: 'If you get lonely come back straight away. I've heard the people there are very mean – take your money but won't be your friend – old people sleeping on the streets.'

'Of course I won't be lonely.' I zip the bag shut. 'It's not difficult – you want friends, just be friendly. If I find myself alone, I'll stop an agreeable looking fellow and explain I'm new in town.'

One part of me believes this, another is not so sure. The lms we get from abroad show things that never happen here; foreigners seem to solve all their problems using guns, and while I know how to use a gun, it's not the kind the movies show.

Early the next morning, before the sun is up, I walk

to the cemetery to say goodbye to my parents. The dawn crickets are chirping as I go to the grave. When I return, Neta, Soledad, Tito and Lali are waiting on the porch. Soledad presents a ve-dollar bill into my hand.

'Take it,' she says. 'Something to help you on your way.' A single tear is lodged in the corner of her eye.

With the bag slung over my shoulder I set off for the road. I can't look back. The last thing I hear is Tomas shouting: 'Goodbye, uncle, goodbye! Don't forget you promise to bring me a boat.' When a water truck rolls past, I stop it and jump on. As we reach the edge of the village my house shrinks, with my family waving on the porch, bumping up and down in time to the wheels of the truck.

When we draw into Havana eight hours later, my cousin Frank is waiting in his Chevrolet to take me to the tower block where he lives. I have a shower and we walk over to his mother's house to eat.

Frank pulls a photograph from a drawer after dinner. 'Her name was Annie. We met in a London bar.'

Frank has been abroad – he worked on ships and stopped in ports around the world. The girl in the picture is grinning and has long red hair. Frank is by her side, slimmer than now, one arm around her waist.

'She was fun. The people there were kind.' Frank puts the picture back into the drawer and shuts it. He looks sad. 'Make the most of your chance, cousin – don't let opportunity pass you by.'

Today is my last day in Cuba. I spend it helping Frank x his car, which has suddenly refused to start. We're not talking much – the work's too hot – but if I wanted to, Frank would listen. We connect a temporary petrol tank to the engine with a runner tube – it should be good for tonight's run to the airport and back.

Afterwards, we sit on the balcony, sixteen floors up with a bottle of rum.

'Taking a nal look?' Frank asks, as I lean over the rusty balustrade. My back is sweaty and there's engine oil under my nails but I want to stand here for a while before I wash. The city is orange now, sky a burning red, huge globe of sun sinking to the sea. It is strangely quiet. From up here the people look like ants, and the smells of decomposing rubbish are gone.

'Marianne will be waiting for you at the other end.' Frank puts a hand on my shoulder. 'Six months isn't long.'

I say nothing. The longest I have been away from home is a week.

Frank half-smiles as he pours the rum; the slanting sun catches his spectacles.

'Salud,' he says.

'Salud.' I raise my glass.

Only Frank comes with me to the airport. I wanted it like this. Half-way there the car grumbles to a halt, but with some minor tinkering we get it started again. As we step into the departure hall I can still smell petrol

on Frank's shirt. The only other Cubans there are guards.

A line of foreign tourists winds back towards the door. We join it. The sign at the door says Air France – this must be my plane. The official behind the desk looks closely at my papers. Sweat pricks my armpits. She takes a full minute to check each page: visa, exit stamp, ID. But then she raises her head and smiles: 'Your rst time out?'

I nod.

'Well – enjoy the trip. Passport control is to your left and down the stairs.'

In front of us is a line of booths. You step inside and shut the door. If they let you through, a buzzer sounds, the light goes green, and you push open a door to the other side.

The official in my booth looks at me for a long time; I look back. He rustles my documents and sighs, then picks up a stamp and brings it down on my passport, which he pushes back to me under the glass.

The buzzer is so loud that it shuts out everything else. I see Frank mouthing goodbye. In front of me is the door, behind me Frank. I pause for seconds, minutes almost, looking back. The official taps on the glass and the buzzer sounds again.

Frank's face is frozen. I am looking at his face and he is smiling, but the smile is very small. It is printed onto my mind as I reach the other side because the lights

there are so bright I have to stop for a minute and close my eyes. When I open them I see a bank of shops. Neon ashes off diamond and steel, sickly perfume lls the air. I cannot breathe.

I make for some benches where people are sitting, and take a plastic bottle lled with orange drink from my bag. I sip on it to settle my stomach. Crushed into a corner at the bottom of the bag I and the touron that Soledad made; the greaseproof paper has torn and it's gathered bits of uff.

People start to move. I follow them towards the gate.

Inside, the plane is like the bowel of an enormous boat – so many seats I cannot see the end. Everyone else is already sitting; I look at the number on my ticket and nd my place.

As we take off, there is a roar and my body glues heavy to the seat. I close my eyes and see only darkness. When I open them again, a map of stars hangs beneath me – then I realise the stars are the city lights.

Nothing has been this beautiful before: Havana, like magic, all in one. ♦

Arabian Days

by *Philip Hall*

The Arab teachers were shouting when I arrived. They were gathered around a screen, reading about how Gadhafi had just been caught and killed.

'He deserved it. He was ruthless,' one of them said in English. Morsi was the new president and a few members of the Muslim Brotherhood felt emboldened.

Karim looked at me challengingly. 'In the final days sperm will rain from the sky and people will grow from the Earth.' He looked at me to calculate the effect he was having. 'Those who are don't believe will suffer terribly.'

Peter, an older teacher, sitting behind Karim, stuck his tongue out as if trying to catch snowflakes. Mahmoud, like Karim, also from Egypt, said nothing. He looked embarrassed.

Later on he gave me a heavy book.

'Read this, Phil.' His warm hand held my wrist and he smiled at me. It was an authorised history of Islam.

That night I read how Abraham left Raquel and Ishmael in the desert on the orders of God. How Raquel

ran backwards and forwards looking for water. How she prayed to God until a giant rock flew down from the sky and pecked a hole in the ground with its giant beak. Water came pouring out and the Zam Zam well was born.

I put the book down. I could actually buy Zam Zam water from my local shop. I did. It tasted flat. Perhaps a little mineraline, too.

A colleague came in one day with a plaster on the back of his neck.

‘Why?’ I asked

‘It’s the Hijama. Cupping. At first the blood is slow and black and then it runs faster, clear and bright. It is very healthy. It’s recommended in the Koran.’

I was feeling exhausted, so, as an experiment, I went to the hospital and did the Hijama. A Filipino nurse came in. He attached eight vacuum cups to my back. They were each connected to a hose and the hoses joined at a header and attached to a pump that was plugged into the wall. He turned it on and I felt my skin stretch upwards as the vacuum pressure sucked at it. He turned it off after two or three minutes and removed the cups. Then he took a scalpel and slashed at my skin lightly eight times. It felt wet. Blood was trickling down my back into my trousers.

The nurse began to panic.

‘Calm down! What’s the matter?’

‘You are a bleeder, Sir.’ He showed me a wodge of cotton-wool with a jelly of blood wobbling on it.

‘It’s alright,’ I reassured him. ‘Just do what you have to do.’

‘I trained as a nurse and I now I am doing this’, he said sadly. ‘Please, Sir. Next time donate your blood, it has the same effect.’ The bleeding stopped. I was left with eight plasters in two rows along my back and two rows on my neck.

In the doughnut shop two men in long white robes were waiting for the cakes they had ordered for their families.

‘What’s that?’ They knew what it was, but couldn’t quite believe it.

‘I did the Hijama,’ I said.

They both smiled. ‘How do you feel now? Do you feel better? You will sleep so well.’

‘I do feel tired,’ I answered, smiling back.

‘Have you ever done the Hijama?’ I asked Karim.

‘No,’ he said, laughing.

‘It’s recommended in the Koran,’ I told him. ‘You should do it.’

A different time when I had flu I tried eating Black Seed, another Koranic medicine: a tonic. It is considered to be something of a panacea. It did give me some relief, but the taste was frighteningly bitter. I realized later that I had been mixing Black Seed *hair*

oil into my yoghurt. I had not understood the label on the bottle in Arabic.

At the Yemeni café, with the adjacent Afghan bakery next door connected by a small window in the wall, we were sitting together eating: *foul*, *kibda*, *adz*, *Shakshouka dejaj* and *lahm* (beans, liver, lentils, eggs, chicken and meat) and drinking sweet tea served in paper cups. The subject of depression came up. Dunstan is depressed.

‘Who wouldn’t be in a place like this? There’s nothing to do.’

‘You are too flippant. Don’t you realise I suffer from clinical depression?’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

Peter ignored Dunstan’s grab for attention and remarked, ‘I have clinical depression too. It is so bad sometimes, I close the curtains and stay in bed for days in the dark.’

‘When I was young,’ I say, adding to the general feeling of gloom, ‘I was so depressed that I used to wear a long black coat and run through the streets all night’.

Dunstan looks confused.

‘Any bastard who isn’t depressed with so much suffering about is probably a psychopath,’ I add.

At work the next day, Dunstan had a proposal. He wanted to go on a road trip to Meda’in Saleh. Quickly,

Peter invited me to go along too.

‘Meda’in Saleh means the City of Saleh.’

‘Giants built it,’ said Karim.

‘Giants?’

‘Yes.’

‘The doors are much too big for normal people.’

I decided to ignore Karim and turned instead to Mahmoud.

‘Why is it called Meda’in Saleh?’

‘Saleh, a prophet who was here in Arabia long before the prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, commanded the people in that place to abandon their false idols and follow Allah. They called them “the ones who worshipped the Gods they made themselves”. When they refused to worship Allah, he made a living camel appear from the rock. They still would not believe in Allah, so Saleh cursed them. The town where they lived is now named after Saleh.’

We obtained special passes to enter the town, hired a big van and set off the following weekend. In the front of the vehicle, Dunstan and Peter talked about the hypocrisy of religion, the stupidity of religious people, and the wonders of science. This lasted for about forty minutes until I decided to interrupt.

‘Religion does not oppose science. It’s a way of understanding our lived experience. If I were a poet you wouldn’t take me to task because I wasn’t peer reviewed. Instead, you would examine your feelings

concerning the poem; whether it moved you or not, whether it felt authentic, its' originality and expressiveness.'

'And yet religion makes such strong claims regarding the real world,' Dunstan said and Peter nodded in agreement.

'The only real world you will ever see, feel or know is the one you experience,' I replied. 'And so much of that is subjective and emotional. We use religion, among other things, to understand our lives and give them meaning. It's essential.'

Neither Peter, nor Dunstan agreed. Dunstan looked irritated.

By eleven o'clock that evening we were in Riyadh and I was driving in a funk; moving through the traffic like a turtle through a school of tuna. Cars overtook on both sides at high speeds, weaving and changing lanes. I cruised along steadily, staring straight ahead. After Riyadh I was exhausted. Peter and Dunstan finished the night drive without my help.

Dawn was breaking when I woke up. There was nothing but desert all around us. By early morning the dunes had given way to a level plain strewn with small grey shards. And then, after another hour, we saw a few outcrops of glowing yellow sandstone. There were more and more of them and they grew higher and larger, to the height of cliffs, and by the time it felt as if we were driving through a canyon, we had arrived at

the hotel.

Al 'Ula has a sandstone escarpment on either side. From the top of the southern escarpment the valley of Al 'Ula looks like a broad strip of green. It follows the path of an underground river. The dramatic rock formations continue on up to and across the horizon to the north until they reach Petra. Al 'Ula has enough water to grow all of its own vegetables and cereal crops.

The hotel was quite empty. The plan was to spend the whole day looking at the ruins, to sleep there that night, and then go back to the Eastern Province the following morning. Our guide, Ahmed Jaber, came for breakfast. He was a handsome man in his early thirties. He told us he was about to get married after his family had made two unsuccessful arrangements on his behalf.

'The first time she liked me and I didn't like her. The second time I liked her and she didn't like me. I am thirty-three now. I thought I would never get married, but then I decided I could afford a dowry for a beautiful Pakistani wife. Her family agreed. She agreed. Now, I am looking forward to being a husband and a father.'

Ahmed had been working with the archaeologists. They had discovered a small town near the tombs and were excavating it.

'They are digging up a house at the moment.' He said. 'They have found a body. It's a woman, they think.'

‘What about Saleh and the camel?’

‘Pah! This is not science. Science shows us what was really here. People tell stories, but they aren’t always true.’

After breakfast Dunstan decided to continue the argument we started in the car. He was niggled by what I had said.

‘Why do you defend religion? You are not religious. You should be rational.’

‘Better minds than yours, or mine, have taken religious ideas seriously, Dunstan. I could ask you the same thing. Why is it so important to you that religion be false? Can’t you credit it with the obvious usefulness it has? It gives people a framework within which they can live their lives. Science doesn’t do that. It is far too cruel.’

Dunstan’s eyes widened. ‘How dare you,’ he said, raising his voice. He started trembling. ‘I’ve had it with you.’

In the car park Peter said, ‘He’s a sensitive man. Once he felt slighted when I told him not to be silly because I thought he was worrying about something unnecessarily. He didn’t speak to me for a week.’

The tombs had a resinous, musky smell that came from gummy traces on the walls – the cocoons of rock beetles. These had been brushed off and swept away when the tombs were opened. The rock everywhere was eroded by the wind into protruding, curving shapes.

They were so complex that with the changing light and shifting shadows you could imagine you saw many things. You could project your imagination onto the rock and see different creatures, even a camel. The Nabateans had seen a great bird with a human head in the rock and they carved this image above many of the tomb entrances.

The lines of the entrances were cleanly geometric. But around them the rock was unworked; left alone, as if its natural form were precious. The tombs were roughly hollowed out inside, and looked like caves. There were chisel marks everywhere. There were long body sized holes in each wall, often one cavity was positioned directly above another – like the bunks on a train. Rectangular holes in the floor were for servants. Peter measured himself out next to one of the cavities in the wall, but he was too long for it.

‘They spoke and wrote a mixture of languages,’ said Ahmed Jaber. ‘The writing you see above looks like Arabic, but it’s not Arabic. It’s a combination of Greek, Aramaic and the local dialect.’

After visiting many tombs, we went to the main temple. This was inside a big crevice between two huge stone hillocks. They had carved a channel for the water between the stone hills.

‘It ran through here,’ Ahmed Jaber said, ‘and when it rained a lot the flow was fierce. They worshipped like this. First they went to the water to wash,’ he mimed

the action. 'Then they prayed to their gods here,' he spread his arms and legs against the wall, as if preparing for a police search. 'Then they went there,' he pointed at the large square room, cut out of the rock, lined with stone benches.

Like the Nabateans themselves, I suddenly had a vision of the rock.

'Yes, I see now,' I said. 'In a desert the most important thing is fertility and fertility comes from liquid, from water. The tunnel between the rock hillocks leads to a crevice. The hillocks are round and feminine. These are female shapes. The room is analogous to the womb, a place of conception and nurturing. They must have adored a fertility goddess here.'

It made sense.

Ahmed Jaber laughed. 'The people here controlled trade because there was water here and because everyone going south had to pass through the narrow valley. The Romans came as far as this place in search of frankincense. They killed and dispersed the people.'

'About 100 AD,' interjected Peter.

'Can you see the water channel?' he asked. We couldn't.

'You see that thin curving line coming down the side? It's disguised as a natural feature.'

Now that he had carefully pointed it out, we could see it.

'They collected the water whenever it rained and streamed it into secret aquifers cut out of the rock. They hid their water from everyone.'

We climbed to the top of the highest sandstone hill. There were steps that cut ergonomically into the stone.

'There are more than one hundred and thirty tombs,' said Ahmed, as we looked out across.

That night we walked through the town that was held so close between canyon walls. We saw a group of men sat on sofas outside a café.

'Do you know the way to a good restaurant?' I called to them.

'There is a good restaurant around the corner called Al Mat'aam Buhary,' they answered. 'Enjoy yourselves.'

'Thanks. We will!' I shouted back.

We found it, went inside, and sat at a Formica table in a corner where we relaxed after the interesting day we had spent together. I felt it was possible now to make peace with Dunstan and find out what was making him angry.

'Why are you so sensitive about religion?' I asked him.

'My father was a drunk. He behaved as if he hated me. I used to pray to God to protect me from his abusive words and occasional beatings, but he never did. In the end my mother left him, then he got married

again. He became a born-again Christian. He never apologized for his behaviour. Instead, whenever I saw him when older he would preach religion at me. The hypocrisy of it made me sick.'

'I see,' I said. 'I see why you react the way you do.'

Karim was fired a month after we got back. He had refused to go to work for three days because he claimed his students had cast a spell on him.

There were no more cries of 'Zenga! Zenga!' from the supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood because the organization had been banned.

I looked up the old gods of the Nabateans. There were three important female ones: a trinity. There was a young woman, a middle aged woman and an older woman. The most important was the youngest: Alia. The internet told me The Kabbah, before it was rededicated to Allah, was the place where they worshipped Alia, the Goddess of fertility. Perhaps the temple in Meda'in Saleh had been hers.

I opened the book my colleague had given me and turned to the pages where it described how Mohammed destroyed all the idols in Mecca:

As he was leaving, the prophet, peace be upon him, stopped and called to one of his companions, 'Go back! There is one more idol that needs to be destroyed!'

The companion set out for Mecca but after only a day,

he came back. 'What happened?' asked Mohammed, 'why did you come back so soon?'

'On the way back I saw a beautiful Ethiopian woman who came towards me,' was the reply.

'What did you do?'

'I cut her in two with my sword.'

'Good,' said Mohammed, 'you have destroyed the last idol.' ♦

The Luckiest Generation

by Daniel Asa Rose

One December evening in 1987, on assignment for a glossy travel magazine to write about island resorts in the wintertime, I took cover from a sleet storm in a Nantucket tavern. Lit by fake candles, the place smelled of lemons and wet wool; bar towels sizzled on the radiators. After a period of watching water droplets connect and reconnect on the varnished surface of the bar, I noticed that the guy on my left was wearing a brown leather jacket as weathered as my own, and I remarked to him that he looked about my age.

“Born in ’49,” he said.

“No kidding,” I said. “I’m a ’49er, too.”

“Which day?”

“November twentieth.”

“Holy shit,” he said, clapping me on the back. “I was born the same day.”

This called for a toast, and we raised our glasses.

“Whereabouts?” he asked.

“New York.”

“Well, there the coincidence ends,” he said. “I was born in Brooklyn.”

“Actually,” I confessed, “that’s just my shortcut answer. I was born in Brooklyn, too.”

The drinkers around us, clearly off-season regulars, pressed in to hear more. With the wind rattling the windowpanes, we established that out of the three dozen or so hospitals operating in Brooklyn in 1949, this hippie carpenter and I had been born an hour apart at the same one: Brooklyn Jewish, which no longer even existed, having gone bankrupt in 1979. Improbably enough, we had shared the same neonatal nursery, bawling and fussing within earshot of each other, enjoyed our far-flung adventures, then reconvened nearly four decades later on this island thirty miles out in the Atlantic, both drinking the house red.

The bartender stood drinks all around. For everyone in the place, it was as if a spotlight had pierced the gloom, illuminating us as birth mates, our origins joined in a kind of double horoscope of time and place. Everyone grasped at once that it wasn’t the fluke itself that was so amazing; it was that we had *discovered* the fluke, instead of merely continuing to rub elbows in the dark. And the similarities kept on coming. Within a few minutes, the carpenter and I discovered that we had married and divorced within a few months of each other, had our first children within five days of each

other, and both had one son named Jeremy.

Hey, coincidences happen. I let it slide. I left the bar and the island, published my travel piece, and allowed the incident to fade from my mind. Grass grew, leaves fell, it sleeted anew. It wasn't until a decade and a half later, middle-aged and sobered up, that I found myself thinking about that night in Nantucket, wondering exactly how many degrees of separation there were between that hippie carpenter and me. It gave me an idea. Why not track down the other kids from my nursery? Who were they, and what had this interestingly randomized group been up to for the past, oh, half century?

Imagine, if you dare, a world before fast food. An era when Americans labored for forty cents an hour, and it was common for restaurants in the nation's capital to refuse service to black people. When nearly one quarter of all U.S. farms still lacked electricity, a loaf of bread cost fourteen cents, women were not yet admitted to Harvard Law School, and the last of the Confederate veterans were assembling in Arkansas for one of their final reunions.

This was the United States in 1949. Stupefying as it may sound, the McDonald's empire consisted of a single outlet in San Bernardino, California. The phrase "under God" had not been inserted into the Pledge of Allegiance. There were no hydrogen bombs, human organ transplants, or panty hose. The polio vaccine had

yet to be developed, and M&Ms were still naked. (They weren't stamped with letters until the following year.)

As for New York City, it was a place "filled with river light," as John Cheever wrote, where "you heard the Benny Goodman quartet from a radio in the corner stationery store, and [where] almost everybody wore a hat." By the East River, the gleaming slab of the United Nations headquarters rose floor by floor, designed to ease the international birth pangs of Israel, Vietnam, Jordan, and Communist China. Automated elevators were a rarity, and Ellis Island still had a Contagious and Infectious Disease Hospital to screen questionable immigrants. The metropolis glowed from within, a kind of postwar sunburst, even as it released its middle class like rays of light, thanks to a Brooklyn boy named William Levitt, who more or less invented the idea of suburbs by stamping out tract houses at a rate of one every sixteen minutes.

On one particular day – November 20 – the city was girding itself for three events. There was the Carnegie Hall singing debut of the president's daughter, Margaret Truman; an impending visit by the thirty-year-old shah of Iran (deemed an "attractive young man" with a "real grasp of public affairs" by that morning's *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*); and the opening, the next day, of a show by a rising Abstract Expressionist named Jackson Pollock. The air was breezy and mild. Indeed, the weather had been so dry that before the

winter was over, city administrators would take the unprecedented step of hiring, for \$100 a day, an official rainmaker.

In one particular corner of the city – the middle-class enclave of Crown Heights – a group of babies was being born at the Jewish Hospital of Brooklyn. (Despite the name, the word NON-SECTARIAN appeared above the door at 713 Classon Avenue.) It was a good hospital. Albert Einstein had chosen to have an exploratory laparotomy performed there one year earlier. Still, there was no way to know whether any of the newborns lying within wailing distance of one another that day would be extraordinary or accomplished in any way.

As it happened, the horoscope in the *Daily Eagle* suggested otherwise. “Your own originality is often subservient to the wishes of others,” it warned the newborns. Chances were, then, that they would exemplify the miracle of ordinariness. They would be bottle-fed rather than breast-fed, vaccinated with resharpened needles (disposables had yet to be invented), placed in adjacent steel bassinets for a standard hospital stay of seven days (at a daily cost of around ten dollars), then inserted into the midcentury to begin their commonplace lives.

I began my first round of investigations in 2003. Guardedly optimistic, I planned a trip to Interfaith Medical Center, which had swallowed both Brooklyn Jewish and another hospital in a 1982 merger, to

examine the old records. I visited the microfilm section of the Brooklyn Public Library to pore over the *Daily Eagle*. I placed ads in numerous periodicals and on websites and, having heard that the Mormons kept meticulous birth records, I contacted their Family History Centers as well. I ran down retired hospital officials to see if they had kept files, examined libraries of various medical societies to get names of old obstetricians, and flipped through faded nursing magazines.

Nothing worked.

The records of Brooklyn Jewish were mostly destroyed following the 1982 merger. (“When we closed the building, our effort was to get rid of unnecessary papers,” former Interfaith CEO Michael Kaminski told me.) Strict new privacy laws, enacted just a month before my search began, guaranteed that any records that did survive would be kept under lock and key. The *Daily Eagle* of 1949 published nearly everything – death notices, marriage licenses, bowling scores, sermon topics, dates of upcoming mothers’-club teas, dog-show results – but not a single birth announcement. The Mormons got so tired of my emails that they stopped responding. I received exactly one response to all my ads, from a lawyer who wanted to know if I was spearheading a class-action suit.

Getting nowhere, I figured it was time to sift through the raw data. At the Office of Vital Records, on

Worth Street in Manhattan, I lugged down two volumes of a 1949 logbook: more than two thousand double-column pages of births, undifferentiated by hospital. I spent long, boring days running my index finger down all 156,932 entries, separating out the estimated 54,946 babies born in Brooklyn. From these I culled a smaller set born on the date in question, then culled some more through serendipitous online research, until I had narrowed it down to just a couple hundred phone numbers. It was time to start cold-calling.

Dozens of false leads and tantalizing near misses followed. Because they turned out to have been born on the wrong date or in another Brooklyn hospital, I was forced to discard the scion of a family that owned the Coney Island Wonder Wheel, a denizen of the Las Vegas underworld whose brother advised me to stay clear, the dean of a Connecticut prep school, an actuary who turned out to live five minutes away from my Massachusetts farm town, and a Special Forces operative whose entire personal history had been expunged so thoroughly that even his ex-wife didn't know his real birthday.

At last I hit pay dirt. Over the course of several months, I made contact with five birth mates. We emailed, talked on the phone, had some preliminary visits – and then, to my own surprise, I let it drop. Despite my initial eagerness to pursue the project, it felt like the timing was wrong. They were in the middle

of stuff, I was in the middle of stuff, and an air of incompleteness hung over our conversations: it was too early to see our lives whole. The investigation went onto the back burner for more than a decade.

Then came the winter of 2014, when we all turned sixty-five. We had reached the traditional entry point to senior citizenship, and although financial uncertainty and Viagra had rejiggered the definition of old age for many Americans, I felt we had advanced far enough for some deeper perspective. We were also at the end of our life expectancy, which was just a hair over sixty-eight – according to actuarial science, we were more or less done. I found myself wondering anew about my birth mates, and about my generation itself. Ten thousand of my contemporaries were reaching retirement age every day. The moment had arrived. And so, the following summer, I went to see them for real.

My drive up the Maine shoreline in June 2015 was uneventful. I got a speeding ticket that cost me \$219, and chided myself for still being a reckless driver at my age. Halfway up the coast, I turned off the highway at Searsport and proceeded down a gravel road to a tidy little castle fronting upper Penobscot Bay.

This was the summer house of David Italiaander. When I had visited him in New Jersey in 2003, he had been a bit standoffish, wondering whether there was some private agenda behind my quest. This time,

however, he greeted me with open arms the moment I stepped out of my car.

“You couldn’t find something a little closer to the water?” I said.

He laughed, comfortable with his prosperity. As an osprey flew overhead with a fish in its claws, Italiaander guided me inside to an enclosed sun porch with wicker chairs. There we sat as he summarized his life for me, beginning with the Sunday when his mother went into premature labor and delivered a baby weighing less than four pounds – a risky proposition in those days, when many preemies went blind as a result of the oxygen indiscriminately pumped into their incubators. The details kept coming, and my host, genial and alert, seemed to relish the narrative. He had avoided the draft and Vietnam, just as most of our group had, sharing the same high lottery number of 185. His role in the student protest movement at his college had been twofold: he helped to take over the dining hall and cheered when his roommate furtively slipped some acid to the local ROTC recruiter. I learned about his career in commodities, trading fats and oils – the former campus revolutionary had gone to work for Unilever, the giant multinational and margarine purveyor to the entire planet, before starting his own consultancy. He still liked Led Zeppelin. His twenty-six-year-old daughter was teaching English in Tokyo. He had recently joined with neighbors to fend off the

placement of a 22-million-gallon propane-storage tank in Searsport – as tall as a fourteen-story building, it would have been the largest such facility on the East Coast.

“Still fighting the good fight,” he said.

As I listened to him – sturdy, successful, still a bit of a rascal – it was hard to believe Italiaander was once a fragile preemie, unlikely to survive. But he seemed eager to look back and take his victory lap, and I wondered whether this triumph felt not only personal but communal.

“It seemed like our generation always had a sense of itself as a cohesive entity,” I said.

Gazing out over the waterfront, Italiaander nodded in agreement. “I certainly feel it, as strongly now as in college,” he said. “It’s a curiosity. We shared the major events: the assassinations, the Beatles on Ed Sullivan, the moon landing. We watched the same TV shows as kids. Maybe it goes even further back than that – as far back as we can trace it.”

This seemed as good a moment as any to trot out a crazy little theory I had dreamed up while researching late-Forties parenting techniques. Consider, I told Italiaander, how deliberately newborns of the era were isolated from their parents. Exhausted mothers were cautioned to limit the time they spent with their newborns – and the time they *did* share was clouded by the lingering effects of heavy anesthesia, which had

transformed labor into a nonevent for many of them. Fewer than one in five mothers breast-fed their babies back then, fearing the effect on their figures. Indeed, one in six mothers didn't even touch her baby the entire first week, but contented herself with viewing the infant through the nursery windows. As for the fathers, only one in seven glimpsed the baby more than once before "it" was brought home.

By contrast, I went on, consider what transpired between the newborns themselves. During this unprecedented boom, their bassinets were often separated by no more than six inches, at least in metropolitan hospitals, and for the next week, they spent virtually all their time breathing the same air together. Fresh out of the womb, reading each stimulus as a key to the universe, they produced one another's primal sounds, sights, and smells. Could that at least partly account for the sense of mutual attachment that has been a hallmark of the boomers? "I told you it was crazy," I said. "But was Woodstock thus imprinted in the nursery?"

Italiaander studied me with a peculiar expression, as though I might be nuts but he didn't mind. All part of the fabric of life. "Well, I was in an incubator those first two weeks," he said. "But what the hell, it's no crazier than a lot of things I could name."

One of his five cats wound itself through his legs. Outside the windows, the bay was brilliantly clear, its

whitecaps bright with promise. Hard to believe thunderstorms were predicted for later that day.

"Final question," I said. "What happened to the ROTC recruiter with the acid?"

"Oh, he took it in stride. Apparently it wasn't the first time. He recognized the symptoms right away and checked into the local hospital."

"Happy endings," I said.

"So far, so good."

Italiaander's words echoed in my ears as I took the train down to D.C. a few weeks later. Life *had* been good for our generation, hadn't it? We enjoyed quite a run – the question was whether we deserved it. This was what I hoped to ask Peggy Ellen, born at Brooklyn Jewish just a few hours before me.

In many ways, she struck me as the perfect person to ask. The offspring of Polish Holocaust survivors, members of the Warsaw intelligentsia who had spent four years in German resettlement camps before emigrating to the United States, she had imbibed a sense of the world's inequity practically with her mother's milk. When she was a child, her parents Americanized the family name ("The locals had trouble pronouncing 'Elenzweig' ") and opened a mom-and-pop grocery store in Atlanta. There Ellen observed the desegregation of the public-school system during the early Sixties, accomplished by dint of legal pressure but without the chaos and violence that attended similar

efforts in other parts of the South.

It was, she suggested, a formative experience. Ellen went on to a career as a federal prosecutor, concentrating on white-collar fraud. She rose to become chief of the Economic Crimes Unit of the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia, spent eight years at the SEC, and is now deputy special inspector general for SIGTARP – the federal agency charged with investigating crimes related to the 2008 financial crisis. Ellen estimated that, as a result of her work with SIGTARP, more than a hundred bankers had been charged; at least thirty-five of them have already been put behind bars. This was a surprise to me, since I had assumed that most of those crooks got off with no more than a slap on the wrist.

“These people should be held accountable for their misdeeds,” she told me, looking over the fifty daffodils that had just finished flowering in her yard. She had planted them herself, she said, on her hands and knees, although she now had a gardener to help with such tasks. “Advil makes me feel eighteen,” she noted. In fact, Ellen herself looked in full bloom – a fox, as we used to say in our innocent political incorrectness, who had filled out and avoided the sunken eyes that had stamped so many of our mothers with a look of surprise or hurt or defeat.

I followed her into the living room of her spacious 1905 Victorian, where she stoutly defended the bona

fides of the boomers. “We were a massive force from the beginning,” she said, “changing how people thought about Vietnam, the environment, civil rights, women's rights, gay rights, endangered species. So many things.”

“So we've kept those noisy promises we made in the Sixties?”

Ellen laughed and stroked the head of her Samoyed, who was shedding white hair all over my black jeans. “Probably not,” she allowed. “The world still has problems.”

“How do you answer the charge that we hogged all the good stuff and left slim pickings for the generations to follow?” I was thinking of the frequent complaint that boomers have depleted Social Security, clogged the labor market by refusing to vacate jobs, profited from a huge rise in real-estate prices, and so forth.

“Some of those charges are true enough,” Ellen said. “We presided over the invention of junk bonds and the unprecedented concentration of capital in the hands of a few.” In other words, many of the people that she had fined and imprisoned at SIGTARP were fellow boomers, playing both sides of the game as usual. Her work was not only a blow struck against financial malfeasance but an act of generational housecleaning.

“Did some of us sell out? Of course. But one of the main things we *did* accomplish was to transmit our ideals to our kids, who have fewer visible prejudices

than we did.” I followed her gaze to a photo of her two children, a lawyer and a teacher, both of whom looked idealistic enough. “We’re Scorpios,” she said, adding that we were an optimistic lot but not explaining the mystery of how such optimism could be maintained into one’s seventh decade.

Howard Wiedre had taken a more circuitous route to the kind of activism that Ellen considered the identifying characteristic of our generation. Born into an Orthodox Jewish family of working-class immigrants, he spent his first ten years getting “beat up a lot” – first in Brooklyn and then, after his mother died and his father married a “stingy, withholding” woman, in the Bronx.

“Jews weren’t well liked there,” Wiedre told me, recalling the torments inflicted on him by Italian gangs. Though strong for his age, he never really thought of defending himself until the Six-Day War of 1967, when Israel defeated the Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian armies. “Wow,” he remembered thinking, “Jews *fight!*” The eighteen-year-old began reading everything he could find about Israel, learned karate from a Korean master, and got involved with the Jewish Defense League, whose ultra-Zionist leader, Rabbi Meir Kahane, favored immediate Israeli annexation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Wiedre became the head of the J.D.L.’s Bronx chapter and a protégé of Kahane himself. At a summer

camp in upstate New York, he received paramilitary training and learned to shoot a rifle. Back in the Bronx, the J.D.L.’s encounters with Puerto Rican gangs and the Black Panthers increasingly turned into street battles. One night, on his way home from karate practice, Wiedre was arrested for carrying a sack of nunchakus. This experience caused him to begin wondering about the direction of his life.

The turning point came not long after. “We were marching through Harlem in our J.D.L. berets,” he told me, “and the Panthers came out with pickaxes. All hell broke loose. A ten-year-old black kid jumped into my arms to slug me. It was a defining moment, because the kid was cute and I thought to myself, *This is not what I want to do.* I put him down and started to turn my life around.”

Wiedre married and moved to California, where he earned two advanced degrees in education. He still believed it was his duty to transform society, but he applied neither the paramilitary techniques he had learned under Kahane’s tutelage nor the legal tools that Ellen used to chase down white-collar offenders. Along the way, he started a chain of tutoring centers for students with learning disabilities. “Renovating a kid is my chief satisfaction in life,” he said. “I’m a fixer.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I was broken and fixed myself. Where I was raised, you fixed yourself or you ran into trouble. A lot

of people from Brooklyn and the Bronx didn't, and wound up dead or in jail."

The chain was a success. Wiedre now lived with his wife, a psychiatric nurse, in a million-dollar house on a suburban cul-de-sac in Carlsbad. He was still adept in the martial arts, with black belts in three different styles, and had hardly left Judaism behind: in 2009, he set up a short-lived blog to scold *60 Minutes* for its coverage of the Middle East stalemate. ("You had better believe that the Jews want peace," he declared. "I support giving the Palestinians their own state.") Yet his views on these issues had become more mellow and reflective, and during our conversation, he spoke of building bridges with the Islamic community – a sentiment that would have struck him as anathema during his J.D.L. days.

He had been lucky, I suggested. But so had we all. We were the beneficiaries of an extraordinary number of gifts, which the world conferred on us before we even knew we needed or wanted them. Television arrived just as we reached the age to enjoy it, and the same could be said of LSD, birth control, soul music, bell-bottoms, antibiotics, frozen foods, and so much more – the entire panoply of cultural and consumer pleasures that had fallen into our laps. We bought our first houses before prices skyrocketed, sowed our wild oats before AIDS, raised our families before the age of terrorism. Forging our values in an era of spectacular

growth and unlimited expectations, we were allowed to dream big – indeed, as the recipients of such largesse, it would have been almost churlish to do otherwise. We lived in blessed times, as did the younger boomers who followed, and became the richest cohort in history. Weren't we arguably the luckiest generation?

"Catchy," Wiedre said when I suggested the idea to him. But he reminded me that our blessings had not been equally distributed, that our youthful euphoria had been part of a zero-sum game. During the boomer heyday, black Americans were fighting an uphill battle for the most basic civil rights, and 9 million U.S. soldiers were doing our dirty work in Vietnam. "They had to make their own luck," Wiedre said. "If they made it at all."

So what about the original guy I met in the bar that night? Downtown Nantucket, with its cobblestones and Greek Revival gems, looked much as it had in 1987, when Rob Andersen and I had our chance encounter. For that matter, it looked very nearly as it did in the mid-1800s, which made it a fitting place for a game of chronological catch-up. It was pouring rain, the streets were jammed with tourists, and Andersen and I approached each other in a crush of umbrellas. Looking weather-beaten in a sweatshirt and yellow slicker, he walked me past the defunct bar where we'd first met and led me to a chowder house. There he took quiet command of the conversation, his refined delivery at

odds with his rumpled appearance. I couldn't help thinking that with his long, pewter-colored hair parted in the middle, he resembled a slightly disheveled Founding Father.

Andersen came from a Norwegian seafaring family. In the 1880s, his grandfather had been recruited by the U.S. Navy to wire the boats in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. On a patch of farmland not far from where Brooklyn Jewish would open its doors in 1906, the patriarch built himself a three-story stone house – what his grandson called “your basic little mansion.” Andersen himself was raised on Long Island. After studying history in college, he played drums in a series of rock-and-roll bands, and then took up an even more quintessential boomer pursuit: collecting driftwood on California beaches to serve as bases for those Seventies-era glass-topped coffee tables. Moving to Nantucket in 1977, he took an interest in old architecture and became a master carpenter, helping to restore Main Street to its former glory. And, like his grandfather, he built his own house.

“May I see it?”

Wordlessly leading me to his pickup in the rain, Andersen drove across the island to his house, a low-lying structure tucked away in the dunes. With the help of his wife, Sybille, a professional midwife, he had built the place with exotic Indonesian timbers. The same material was used for the furniture: swooping

chairs and soaring bedframes he carved himself. A Zen-like tranquility adhered to every board.

It was contagious. By the time he drove me back to town an hour later, I was uncharacteristically calm. Calm and a bit freaked, both. The sun had come out, so bright we had to squint, and we lingered a while on a wooden bench in a playground, shaking our heads at the spooky synchronicities. Not only were the dates of our milestones nearly identical (marriages, divorces, children's birthdays), but we had both bought Massachusetts property for the same amount of money, owned a hundred-year-old Steinway Model M grand piano, and totaled three cars in successive crashes. The longer we talked, the more parallels appeared – just as they had in meetings with my other birth mates. I felt unsettled, like one of those early Victorian scientists who sensed the existence of evolution before it could be named or germs before they could be seen. I didn't want to be like one of those folks lost in the woods who sees a human face in the bark of every tree trunk, deducing patterns where none exist. But neither did I want to brush off the phenomenon as New Age dross simply because it was outside my comfort zone. A child of my time, I wanted to believe *something*, but also didn't.

“I know why you're doing this,” Andersen said, so softly I had to lean closer.

“Tell me, please.”

“You’re crazy, of course. Like I am. Like a lot of us are. Not psychopathic – *good* crazy.”

I shifted on the bench. “Go on.”

“You’re interested in what connects *Homo sapiens*,” he said. “You grasp the plain, astronomical truth that we’re on a microscopic pebble hurtling through space at sixty-seven thousand miles an hour – and in a very real sense, connecting with one another is the only thing that matters. You were reminded of that fact when you bumped into me at that bar. Something clicked in you, and it’s taken a bunch of years, but you decided to investigate.”

I let this sink in for a minute. “What do you make of our bumping into each other in the first place?” I asked.

He had no answer. We shrugged and prepared to separate. As we did so, we noticed a plaque on the bench, commemorating the birthday of somebody born on November 19. With all the flukes flying around, the date being one day off came as a distinct relief.

“You don’t believe in fate, destiny, all that, do you?” I asked.

Andersen paused, framing his thought.

“I believe in everything,” he sensibly replied.

Does it mean everything or nothing to be part of the same generational cohort? My brief encounters with Italiaander, Ellen, Wiedre, and Andersen suggested that the moment of our birth had indeed shaped us in some crucial way: there was, at the very least, a kind of

idealism to us all, although it had been diverted into very different channels. But unlike Andersen, I don’t believe in everything, and my skepticism kept rearing its head. I wasn’t, of course, the first person to ask these questions. Back in 1742, David Hume noted that human beings were born and died in ragtag formations. Society would be very different, he argued, if entire cohorts vanished at the same time. That way, the political slate could be wiped clean, and we wouldn’t be stuck with the ramshackle arrangements dreamed up by our parents. “Did one generation of men go off the stage at once,” Hume wrote, “and another succeed, as is the case with silk-worms and butterflies, the new race, if they had sense enough to choose their government, which surely is never the case with men, might voluntarily, and by general consent, establish their own form of civil polity.”

Hume was being speculative. He knew that human society, unlike that of silkworms or butterflies, “is in perpetual flux, one man every hour going out of the world, another coming into it.” But that didn’t stop subsequent thinkers from pursuing some kind of generational theory. The most conspicuous, perhaps, was the philosopher Karl Mannheim, who wrestled with the question in his essay “The Problem of Generations” (1923). Like Hume, he acknowledged that human beings lived and died in a revolving-door fashion, with no neat division between cohorts. Yet he

thought that generations were significant – and that what unified their members, entirely apart from the accident of chronology, was that they were galvanized by the same great historical events. During the Napoleonic Wars, for example, the peasant, tradesman, and urban loafer alike became part of the same cohort. Or so argued Mannheim, in the mildly impenetrable prose favored by Mitteleuropean sociologists: “Individuals of the same age, they were and are, however, only united as an actual generation insofar as they participate in the characteristic social and intellectual currents of their society and period, and insofar as they have an active or passive experience of the interactions of forces which made up the new situation. At the time of the wars against Napoleon, nearly all social strata were engaged in such a process of give and take, first in a wave of war enthusiasm, and later in a movement of religious revivalism.”

Mannheim took a sociological tack, seeking out the spiritual affinities in any given generation. Others have approached the problem in a more scientific manner. In England, there is a long history of cohort studies, stretching back to the Victorian era. In our own day, British researchers launched a series of longitudinal studies, whose data-collecting frenzy begins practically at the moment of conception. A recent phase, initiated in 1991, assembled 1.5 million tissue and fluid samples from more than 14,000

children, including urine, plasma, milk teeth, placenta, and even stray bits of umbilical cord. A similar project, the National Children’s Study, was authorized in the United States in 2000. But fourteen years later, after enrolling 5,700 subjects at a cost of \$1.2 billion, the whole enterprise was shut down in the face of budgetary and managerial acrimony. (One disgruntled N.I.H. official compared the study, with its multiplicity of goals and procedures, to a “Christmas tree with every possible ornament placed upon it.”)

For my purposes, of course, milk teeth and umbilical bits are beside the point. I’m more interested in the intangibles: the psychological and spiritual adhesives that bind us together. That puts me back in Mannheim’s camp – and indeed, his ideas have been revived in recent years by the demographers Neil Howe and William Strauss. Not only do generations exist, they argue in such books as *Millennials Rising* (2000), but they flourish and perish in a very specific cyclical pattern. The authors refer to these successive cohorts as idealists, reactives, civics, and adaptives. According to their scheme, my birth mates and I are idealists. That makes sense to me: I’ve already noted our shared attraction to social transformation, sometimes as a specific goal and sometimes as a will-o’-the-wisp, which lends a greater significance to our lives than they might otherwise enjoy.

Which is it, then? Meaningful or meaningless? It’s

hard to draw such conclusions with the data on hand: my birth mates and I do not a generation make. To be even minimally representative, we would need a Midwestern C.P.A. with Lyme disease, a gay waitress, perhaps a war hero. Yet it would be wrongheaded to pretend that this subset of mostly privileged people signifies nothing at all. We do have more than a bit in common. As I suggested above, we still see our youthful ideals as worth believing in, even though we've had to make adult accommodations along the way, many of which might have struck our youthful selves as craven and conventional. We tend to see the glass as half full. ("Cynically optimistic," as one of us put it.) We're settled in our houses, loyal to our pets, healthier than our parents were. We are startled by the passage of time and even more startled by realizing that, having passed age sixty-five, we've been alive for more than a quarter of the nation's history.

So here we are, having just turned sixty-seven: a hippie carpenter, a commodities broker, a federal prosecutor, a radical education reformer, and a writer, all originating from a single delivery room in the middle of Brooklyn. Are there more conclusions to draw? Probably – but I can't, or won't, for a simple reason. I'm missing an important part of the story. One of us, a vital member of our cohort, declined to see me when I was making my rounds in the summer of 2015.

Back in 2003, Nicole Parry had not been reluctant in

the least. Quite the opposite: she was more excited than any of the others. "Hm, hm, hmmm, I'm telling you," she murmured in a singsong as I explained why I was calling. "I wasn't even going to answer the phone just now, but something told me, *You better pick that up.*"

The next afternoon, I emerged from the Brooklyn subway into ten-degree weather – so cold that people were walking around unaware that their noses were dripping. The Franklin Street neighborhood around Brooklyn Jewish looked iffy enough that I asked a passerby whether it was safe for me to proceed by myself. "Aw, man," he said, pained by the question, "you'd be safer than I'd be in your neighborhood."

Parry called. "Stay there and I'll meet you," she said, not wanting me to come to her apartment. A minute later, a whippet-thin black woman was waving at me, bundled up to her chin in a knee-length dark parka, with gray wisps of hair escaping from beneath her bandanna. We came together in a warm hug, but just as suddenly, she pulled back and seemed to withdraw into herself.

As we moved down the frigid sidewalk, I sensed her struggling. The bond between us was immediate – we shared the same manic energy – but so was the tension: the situation was at once natural and completely artificial. On we walked, proceeding past African hair-braiding salons, an old synagogue that

had been converted into a pawnshop, and a derelict arcade called Saviors Game Room.

And there it was, the old Brooklyn Jewish, now dilapidated and fenced off by sheets of plywood crowned by coils of razor wire – a glorious relic, whose bricks were lit up orange in the slanting sun. It was undergoing renovation into private apartments, and as we watched, workmen chucked debris out a third-floor window with snow shovels. Parry studied the scene and agreed to sneak inside with me. We squeezed through a gap in the plywood and entered the old lobby, whose ceiling was dripping water. Dust coated an old portrait of a white-bearded Orthodox Jew holding a prayer book. A construction worker peeing in the corner shouted in Spanish but made no attempt to stop us as we ascended a staircase jungly with dangling wires. Several flights up, we found what we were looking for: the remains of the maternity ward and nursery, a gutted expanse with a pigeon flapping through it. There we stood, the elevated S train rumbling by outside, while Parry told me pieces of her history.

Her parents, born-again Christians whose life revolved around the church, had left Barbados and St. Vincent in the 1940s and settled in Brooklyn, where her mother found work as a telephone operator. Dyslexia blighted Parry's childhood. It made school especially challenging, and she often played hooky, riding around the city on the subway, visiting art

museums, collecting stamps. She quit school in the eleventh grade, returning later to obtain a G.E.D. She had a son out of wedlock at age twenty (though she initially told me she was childless), became a History Channel aficionado, and worked a succession of jobs, including a clerical gig at the records department on Worth Street, where I had done the bulk of my research. At the moment, she was employed as a health worker, visiting outpatients in Queens. But after offering these details, she would divulge nothing more. In fact, she seemed to regret sharing even that much.

"I'm just private," she said, as another contingent of pigeons began cooing on the other side of the room. "I clam up about myself."

"Do you not trust me?"

"I'd like to not trust you, but I do," she said: a curious locution. "I just feel I've said enough."

And so it stood. I guessed that she was one of the many economically disadvantaged black children born in Brooklyn Jewish, which had a generous charity policy. I knew that she felt herself to be the product of Sixties values, just as my other birth mates did – she had marched against the war in Vietnam, and believed in nurturing those more vulnerable than herself. I was hoping, when I contacted her a second time, to learn much more. Had she gotten a college degree? Did she still watch the History Channel? How was her son doing?

When I called, however, she sounded alarmed. “How’d you get this number?” she cried out, quickly cutting off the conversation. I tried a few more times, with no better luck. It was the fright in her voice that persuaded me not to press the issue.

I can only speculate as to why she wouldn’t talk to me. The first time, she had been very curious about the others – more curious than they had been – and I’d gotten the feeling that she was measuring herself against them. Maybe I’m mistaken, but had she ultimately recoiled because she felt ashamed that they had traveled the globe and she still lived within five minutes of the place where we were born? (When I told her the story of meeting Andersen in Nantucket, she wasn’t sure where Nantucket was.) If she felt that her life had been meager in comparison, I wish I could disabuse her of that notion. Given what she had been up against, she was in many ways the most accomplished of the six of us. But the connection had been broken, and my reassurances, which she probably would have found condescending in the first place, would not be delivered. Her absence leaves a hole in this story, a vacancy, which nonetheless completes it.

What happens now, nearly thirty years after I bumped into the first of my “lucky” birth mates in a Nantucket watering hole? Do I check in ten years hence, or organize a wheelchair-based reunion when we hit the century mark? Having reentered these stories

in medias res, I’m reluctant to let go of them, but also unsure how best to proceed. A reunion – all of us in the same room, breathing the same air again for the first time in nearly seven decades – might have the effect of slowing down time. Or not. In any case, it would serve to remind us of a simple truth: at every moment of every day and night, in hospitals around the globe, miraculously ordinary people are being born.

Other than that, the only thing I know for sure is that I want to give my birth mates something to commemorate our shared connection: a humble token of our common origins. I had found just the right souvenir during my stealth visit to the hospital in 2003. I thought I had lost it, then located it again this past summer, tucked away in the sweltering attic of my Massachusetts farmhouse: a twelve-by-twelve-inch square of gray linoleum that Parry and I had peeled off the floor of our nursery. I would cut it into six rectangles. Placed in plain frames and mailed regular delivery, they might be worth keeping a while. ♦

Side by...

Séta

Hamvas Béla

EGÉSZ ÉLETEM SORÁN csak egy, vagy két emberrel találkoztam, aki a séta művészetéhez értett, ahhoz a sétához, amely zsenialitás, ahhoz, amely, hogy úgy mondjam, szent lődörgés. Az angol sauntering szó, amely ezt kifejezi, régi származék. Abban a korban keletkezett, amikor - a középkorban - sokan az országot rótták, könyöradományokból éltek, és a Sainte Terre-re, a Szentföldre zarándokoltak. A Szent Földre mentek ezek a szentföldezők, ezek a sauntererek, a szent lődörgők.

Vannak azonban, akik a saunterert a sans terre-ből magyarázzák, ami annyit jelent, mint földnélküli, hazátlan, jó értelemben, akinek nincs otthona, mert nincs is szüksége rá, mert minden helyen otthon érzi magát. Ez a sikeres lődörgés titka. Aki egész ideje alatt otthon ül, még lehet a földön a legnagyobb csavargó; de a lődörgő kevesebbet csavarog, mint a kanyargó folyó, amely szorgalmasan a tengerhez vezető legrövidebb utat keresi.

Minden séta keresztes zarándoklat, mi sétálók szen-

...by side

Saunter

translated by *Tárnok, Attila*

ALL MY LIFE I have only met a few people who knew everything about the art of walking, genuine walking, that is; one might say, the sacred act of loafing around. Saunter is an archaic term. It originates in a time when – in the Middle Ages – many people were roaming country roads, relying on charity during their pilgrimage to Sainte Terre, the Holy Land. They went to the Holy Land, these holylanders, these saunterers, these sacred loafers.

Yet there is another explanation. The word saunter may come from sans terre, meaning without land or being homeless. In a positive sense of the word, it might describe people who have no home because they do not need one: they are at home everywhere in the world. This is the secret pleasure of loafing around. People sitting at home all their life may be the most restless vagabonds in the world; while a true saunterer tramps around less than a meandering river that diligently seeks the smoothest way to sea.

We walkers go on pilgrimages, we are crusaders of

vedélyes szívű keresztések vagyunk. Ha el tudod hagyni apádat, anyádat és testvéreidet és feleségedet és gyermekeidet és barátaidat úgy, hogy nem látod őket többé, ha megfizetted minden tartozásodat, megírtad végrendeletedet, felszámoltad minden függő ügyedet, szabad vagy, és készen állsz ahhoz, hogy sétálni menj.

Ismerőseim gyakran szeretnék, ha tudnának úgy lődörögni, mint én. Ez a szabadság, gondtalanság, függetlenség semmiféle pénzen nem vásárolható meg. Hogy az ember sétálni tudjon, az adomány, és pedig az ég adománya. *Ambulator nascitur, non fit*. Csodálkozom, hogy délután, amikor már mindenki elolvasta összes újságját, az utcán nem tör ki az általános forrongás, és az emberek nem szélednek el a világ minden irányába egy kicsit csavarogni.

A sétának semmi köze ahhoz a higiénikus aszkézishez, amit az emberek egészségügyi okból tesznek. A mindennapi séta a nap kalandja. Az ember elmegy az élet forrásához. Amikor egy utazó megkérdezte Wordsworth inasát, hogy ura dolgozószobája melyik, így szólt: Ez a szoba itt a könyvtár, dolgozószobája azonban a kapun kívül van.

A séta a legjobb, ha az ember meg se gondolja, csak úgy elmegy kalap és kabát nélkül, este jön vissza, vagy éjszaka. Persze csak nyáron lehet, s ez a séta klasszikus ideje. Télen az előkészületek, az öltözködés az egészet megkeseríti. Sokan sporttal próbálják egybekötni. Ilyesminek nem vagyok barátja. Nagy cipő, meleg ha-

ardent hearts. If you have the courage to leave your father, your mother, your brothers and your wife, your sons and your friends, expecting not to see them again, if you have paid off your debts, have signed your will, have wound up all matters pending, then you are free and ready to go for a walk.

My acquaintances often wish they could loaf around as I do. This freedom, this independence, this carefree life cannot be purchased for money. The ability of walking is a gift, the gift of heaven. *Ambulator nascitur, non fit*. It is a mystery to me how in the afternoon when everybody has finished reading through all the newspapers an overall upheaval does not break out and people do not disperse for a stroll in all directions of the world.

Walking has nothing to do with the hygienic asceticism that people turn to for reasons of health. Walking is the adventure of the day. The walker's destiny is the source of his life. When a traveller asked Wordsworth's valet to show his master's study, he said: This room here is the library, but his study is out of doors.

Walking is best without plans. Just leave without a hat or a coat, and come home in the evening or at night. Naturally, such a saunter is only feasible in the summer, the ideal season for walking. Preparations and putting on my clothes turn me down in the winter. A lot of people try to blend walking with a sport. I

risnya, vastag ing, kesztyű, szvetter, forró tea, vigyázni az időre. Egy síkirándulás csaknem annyi körültekintést kíván, mint egy bankrablás.

Külön varázsa van annak, ha az ember kelet felé sétál, vagy ha nyugatnak. Ha kelet felé megyek, akkor közeledem ahhoz a helyhez, ahol a nap kel, ahol az eredet van. Nyugat felé az ember a Heszperidák kertje felé halad. Nyugat a misztériumok és a költészet égtája.

Az utakat a legjobb elkerülni. Az út végül is a politikához vezet. Ha az ember eleget sétál, vagy ha fölmege a hegyre és körülnéz, csodálkozva látja, hogy a tájban milyen kevés az út. ♦

would not advocate the idea: heavy shoes, warm stockings, a thick shirt, a pair of gloves, a sweater, hot tea, consulting the weather forecast... Going skiing needs almost as much circumspection as robbing a bank.

Walking eastward and westward offer their own respective mysteries. If I go east, I am approaching a place where the sun rises, the source of all beginnings. Going west, one is nearing the garden of Hesperides. West is also a point on the compass of mysteries and poetry.

It is best to use untrodden paths. Travelled roads eventually lead you to politics. Go far enough or go up a hill and look around and you will be amazed how few roads there are in the country. ♦