

PERIPETEIA IN TRIBECA

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SPRING. ONE OF THOSE first days of earth heat after the long and leafless winter. As if, in a matter of hours, the trees become downy puffs of tiny white blossom. Spring.

And the end of the term! I drive back to New York City from a final faculty meeting, the evening sky sequencing through a set of pastel shades that to name is somehow already to parody: turquoise, talc, lavender, coral, peach, blush.

And no traffic in the tunnel! The western ghats of glass downtown twinkle at the sunset like a giant array of tinted vanity mirrors.

I find a parking place on Franklin Street and shoulder my bags from the back seat. I'm staying at my girlfriend's place for a few nights, just down Greenwich Street to the Brutalist towers presently coming off rent control at a clip that gladdens the cold hearts of invisible landlords.

TriBeCa. Not my neighborhood. I live all the way uptown, in Washington Heights. The blocks down here still impress me, as they did when I first moved to New York twenty years ago. It is a neighborhood without affordances. With the exception of some rump holdouts in those Brutalist towers, it is essentially for the very, very wealthy. For beautiful rich people and celebrities, or for aspirants in these directions. The whole place feels indifferent to ordinary people. The buildings are anonymous, nondescript. Even the restaurants turn their shoulders against the granite sidewalk as if they would like you to go away. It is unclear, to the untrained eye, what is actually here. Only at night can one catch glimpses of the exqui-

site pin-spot lighting in the vast lofts above—hidden aeries of studied luxury. Scrimms veil the street level windows, and now and again, here or there, a large door opens onto the cobblestones and a big black Range Rover or a Panamera rolls out—with a car seat in the back.

Which is to say, I am walking through one of those rare plots on the surface of the Earth: an aggregation of nearly unimaginable wealth. I can throw a medium-size rock about seventy yards. From my current location, across from Locanda Verde, the ambit of my throwing arm surely encompasses real estate that, at \$2,500 a square foot, would net—pause for calculation while walking—about 200 million dollars. It is entirely possible that I could, on a lucky day, bean half a dozen billionaires from a pitching mound established on this corner.

But on an evening like this, who would want to? What a lovely evening. The gentle breeze coming off the Hudson. The beautiful people down from their roof terraces and here among us, walking their dogs and pushing strollers. Peace and beauty. The kindness of the weather seems to have filled the hard city with a tender joy. I see a sockless man in impeccable loafers lingering outside the TriBeCa Screening Room. For a moment it feels to me like he may have brought LA with him when he came, and that he is contemplating his handiwork as he looks up at the western glow. The doorboys beside him look like something out of a Merchant Ivory picture. On another day, it would irritate me. But tonight, I love them—personally and individually, along with everyone else within eyeshot. I am having a proper Whitmanian ecstasy on Greenwich Street. Spring! And a final sun flare from below the horizon makes the very dome of heaven a half-cut cantaloupe of orange-pink sweetness. All is right in this good world! Not a mote of its orbicular glory is lost on me!

Thusly vibrating, I pass one of the neighborhood's rare open-fronted bistros, from which emerges the warm light of a classy establishment deep into the hour of Aperol Spritzes and precisely jiggered Negronis. Small tables spill out into the perfect evening, and good shirts are open at the neck—a tableau of affluence and charm.

But what is this? What is *THIS*?

Within that handsome cocktail lounge, a set of very large flatscreen televisions (four of them, mounted up behind the bar) are offering the clientele televisual supplementation to their refined camaraderie—in the form of a *live UFC fight playing simultaneously on all the screens*.

I pause for a moment. Long enough to see the camera wobble in tight on the action: a man held against the cage, his face again and again receiving blows to break the bones that guard the eyes. The four TV screens in perfect synchrony. A hail of blood-spattering fisticuffs. Large and close.

So lovely, the people beneath all this. Who do not seem to mind.

LIKE ALL THOSE OTHER FOLKS LIKE ME, I was surprised by the outcome of the 2016 election. I had been sure the American people would not elect Donald Trump as president of the United States. My (delusional) certainty derived from a (delusional) sense that I had some “feel” for Americans. I harbored a (delusional) confidence that my personal experience—youth on a cornfield in the Midwest; time in the South as a youngster; an adolescent dalliance with guns and shooting ranges and the subculture of military-memorabilia collectors; a law-and-order “Young Republican” phase, which culminated in my brief tenure as treasurer of the Pennsylvania Young Republicans—had afforded me a privileged intimacy with all those heartland, scrub-buck, back country patriots who were wearing MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN hats. I, an ass with a man bun who paints his nails, believed (delusionally) that I “knew” them. And I felt that, despite their casual racism and sexism and

xenophobia, those Americans would not vote for Donald Trump, because their pride in the dignity of the republic wouldn't permit it. He was scum; they knew that. A low brawler. Vulgar. He was not the stuff of the American Experiment, for which they had a nontrivial measure of hand-over-the-breast pious regard. When left alone in the booth, not enough of them would be able to pull the lever.

Quite wrong, of course, all this.

It seems obvious in retrospect. But I was devastated. What is a nation if not, in substantial part, an *imagined community*, as Benedict Anderson taught us, and as I taught others, waving his book around at the front of lecture halls. I had imagined the community—incorrectly, as it happened. Where was my nation? Or, to put it a different way, *who was this nation?*

The work of answering this question is happening all around us, in soul-searching, protesting, Op-Ed-ing, and hand-wringing. What is the emerging consensus surfacing as an answer? *That we are less changed than we thought.* That the bad old America of prejudice and resentment is coming back.

Bigotry and racism are undoubtedly still with us. But my concern is that we may have the fundamental vector of the problem wrong. I am inclined to fear that the real matter is not that we are less changed than we thought, but that we are more changed than we have yet recognized.

STANDING ON GREENWICH STREET on that perfect evening, watching the lotus-eaters in full possession of their casual balm beneath the heart-race blood splatter of an orbital socket battered into the sinus cavity beneath, I had a sudden and jarring thought: These are not the people that we were. We are different. We are becoming different. We have already become very different.

When the refined, at their crepuscular leisure, are open to this imagery as an ambience, we are not what we have been for a very long time, if ever. Yes, casual sadism has long been an occupational hazard of elites. And yes, the great and good have, in many times and places, gathered to imbibe the blood-lust of physical combat. But at least they bothered to credit the visceral charisma of such occasions. What does it mean when such apex violence is *background? Like wallpaper?*

Brutality. Plus complacency. The normalization of the in-no-way-normal. A pretty impressive desensitization to sharp pain and ugly harm—legible in an equal indifference both to the (questionable) glory of such Homeric spasms and to the (unquestionable) gory urgency of hands wet with human blood.

Standing on Greenwich Street on that luminous eve, I was sharply struck by the fact that I had not been wrong at all. The Americans I knew in Indiana and North Carolina and in the hills of Pennsylvania—the ones gutting long stringers of crappie with flick after flick of the fillet knife, or playing billy goat on all fours in the manure with a wobbly kid still in the manger, or showing me a real Nazi flag in a glass case from under a folding card table at a gun show—would *not* have voted for Donald Trump, and would not have done so for the very reasons to which I clung two falls ago. But that was true when I knew them, and that was now many years ago. Before two decades of internet porn and carrion-spraying video games and ubiquitous, graphic, televisual traumatics. Now, we, the people, are different. Less gentle. Less easily offended. Less roiled by sympathy. Less inclined to service pieties, however hypocritical, and more fundamentally inured to the grunt-cussed ugly of one slam after another. What is brutal. Don't flinch. Therein, strength. The strength for our time: indifference. What we need to navigate the lurid, saturated, relentless, cacophonous, glandular agon wherein we reside, and try to survive.

Which is to say, maybe we didn't elect Trump *despite* his being a truculent, brutal, callous vulgarian who cudged his way through our polity and across our screens, but exactly *because* he's a truculent, brutal, callous vulgarian who cudged his way through our polity and across our screens. Because "we," from the monied Elysium of TriBeCa to the parking lot of that Walmart north of Muskogee, don't really care about that quite like we once did. We just can't.

Or, rather, to be more precise, *we care that we don't care.* It's that important. This was what the well-to-do were saying together, silently, that lovely evening, as they sipped drinks in the shifting light of the fight. It was a chance to prove that they did not care, that they were not touched by it. That they were not "sensitive." And we like those opportunities now. They give us much-needed glimpses of control over a world that increasingly runs us. All of us.

I am convinced that, among other things, the 2016 election was a chance to prove that we don't care about the gentle pieties. That we don't mind the brutality. The ugly. The vulgar. Not in the ways we did. Enough of us do not care. And are happy to show it.

Brutal. Don't flinch.

More of this is coming. ●