

Declining Sun

It was perhaps the wideness and the generosity of the port at Battery Park and its installations. Sites of embarkment always generate thoughts of setting off to better lands especially under bright morning skies ; sunsets are tinged with gloom – the flamboyant gasps of dying days. It was also the feeling of youth and hope, for one who was no longer youthful and had long viewed hope as the kind lie you tell, well, to the hopeless. Nevertheless, a whiff of candor remained deep within me, as it often does when a strange elan silences the nattering voice of experience and ports clanging with masts and groaning with foghorns mix with blue skies to whisper a line from Browning that indeed all is right with the world.

My setting off was not a purely neutral embarkment, as the port serviced Liberty and Ellis Islands, which are, most Americans would agree, places to explore and to return to. They are literally in all Americans' DNA, and the shroud of remembrance envelopes them as much as a body being laid into a grave with prayers read over it, except they are visited with intense celebration and joy. Here is the sod of true equality – the land where one can gently preen before one's ancestors in a strange sort of thankful pride and,

yes, humility. It is a place where one actually hopes to meet ghosts, especially one's personal ghosts and one does. Like everyone who walks up that famous stairway at which the hawk-eyed inspectors started to separate the weak from the healthy, I ascended thinking of my grandparents, my grandmother in particular, who was frail and sickly most of her life, but who had somehow climbed like a mountain goat, stifling her breathlessness and pinching her cheeks for color to gain entry into the land of gold that the Lady of Liberty promised only hours before. Their ship landed and I wondered when it did, if my grandparents were conscious of the history they were making, or, if they were petrified with fear. I decided that the second option would be the most probable. It is too late for buyer's remorse, however, when the price of passage required months of saving and sacrifice. Then came the separation of couples, the Aeolian bag of tongues expressing every sort of human sentiment, giving every sort of administrative information in the great room where competent officials playing gods, gave new identities to those so eager to leave their old selves behind "In the old country," jumping into the great unknown of America on the thought that whatever they found, it would be so much better than what they had abandoned. In that room, invisible cows of freedom and opportunity roamed and everyone clamored to nurse at their tits. I wondered, as all people who journey to Ellis must wonder, what sort of weather my grandparents had experienced when the Necker, their ship docked on a September day in 1904 and how they were received by the

administration, which, I later learned, included Fiorello, LaGuardia a Jewish Italian, who spoke many languages and must have acted as a Janus to the populations who were neither really American, but who had ceased being purely Irish, Polish, Greek, Italian, German or any of the other confetti of peoples who would bloody the battle fields of Europe 10 years after the Necker had safely delivered my grandparents to the New World. Their lives were certainly years of hardship, but also ended in safety and prosperity.

Going to Ellis after a stopover on Liberty Island, I found myself sharing a bench on the boat with a group of young school children, all African-American, probably from a school in Harlem or Bedford Stuyvesant. We were outside, feeling the heave and the rock of the boat upsetting the many picture-takers which did not include me. My fellow bench sitters were a couple of beautiful pre-teen girls, with hair done up in high ponytails. I initiated a conversation, to which the girls responded seamlessly. Obviously we were riding towards my history, not theirs, but in those heady, carefree minutes where everyone is literally in the same boat, nothing but not getting wet and keeping one's cell phones away from the damaging sprays while trying to capture the best angle were all that really mattered. I felt no need to record anything ; sometimes flawed and embellished memories are preferable to those documented by various gadgets. I wanted this to be a happy one.

Moreover, Ellis is imprinted in my heart and my brain ; no camera can ever capture a ghost.

The girls were eager conversationalists . I imagined that this was their first trip to Ellis and I asked them outright if it was. Then I went a bit further.

“You’re sisters or best friends.” I ventured.

“How did you come by that?” One girl asked. She was thinner than her companion and had a pensive almond-shaped face.

“Well, you have the same ponytail hairdo,” I answered, “except you have the elastic with a blue ball on top and your friend’s ball is yellow.”

“Got it lady !” The one who hadn’t spoken replied. She had a round, cheery sort of face and the type of features one never imagines in a scowl. “We’re best friends.”

“Where do you go to school?” I asked, shifting to avoid an oncoming spray. Cries of joy surrounded us. We were experiencing the same ocean as our forefathers.

The blue ponytail gave me a Brooklyn name and confirmed what I already suspected – class trip.

“And do you know why we’re going to Ellis Island ?” I asked, trying not to sound too professorial. (I am a former teacher)

“To learn about American history.” Blue ponytail answered again.

“Well, perhaps.” I added trying not to seem superior, “I’m going to say hello to my ghosts.”

That precipitated from both girls a concert of “boos” and gales of laughter and questions to which, I think, they already knew the answer. “Lady, do you really believe in ghosts ?”

“Not usually,” I answered, pushing back into personal abstractions. “But, whenever I ride out to Ellis Island, I sort of think they exist. In any case, mine certainly do. They came as living people in 1904, running away from the Russian Tsar.”

“What’s a Tsar ?” Yellow ponytail asked.

“A Russian king. They were always very bad, particularly to my grandparents and their family.”

The word king and bad provoked a second or two of thoughtful head-nodding. They somehow went together, particularly when associated with “Russian.”

“And your grandparents really ran away from the Russian what’s-you-call-it by coming to Ellis Island. And your Granny too ?

“That’s right. Like a lot of people on this boat, we’re all going to see the ghosts of our grandparents, or great grandparents, who escaped all sorts of kings from all the countries of Europe.”

Blue and Yellow Ponytail took this in with solemn acquiescence. It lent a bit of thoughtfulness to a day away from the drudgery of school work.

“So, you really see their ghosts ?” Yellow Ponytail asked, in false naiveté. She was too old to take any of this literally.

“They can be your ghosts too,” I answered. Then with a smile, “I run a rental agency for phantoms. If you are ever in need of a granny from the spirit world, just contact me and I’ll notify my staff at Ellis Island.”

A rental agency for ghosts got giggles and we cracked a few jokes. “Boos” punctuated the final seconds of our conversation. Then, before we knew it, we were docking and the girls melted into the crowd of school children following their teacher up the ramp. That was four years ago, in 2017. Now those two friends are teenagers and God knows what their teachers have put into their malleable brains about Ellis Island and immigration. But back in those halcyon days when pandemics were a thing of the Bible or Science Fiction, one could greet one’s ghosts on Ellis Island without fear of joining them.

It was after the visit, that I made my way uptown, to see an old friend. The day had been perfect, a sort of visit that only appears in videos created by tourist agencies. Warm and sunny, but not overbearing in its heat. There was a rush of freshness in the late summer air, and the parks were still green and full of squirrels charming crowds with their pert antics, and pigeons gobbling morsels of bread, and sparrows swooping down to steal them. Mothers wheeled prams and some of the fathers had hoisted their tots on their shoulders, smiling under the burden. Fatherhood has always been proud and walking with a mantle of a child’s legs about one’s neck also speaks volumes about things never changing.

It was a “long walk” sort of day. Buying a sandwich and a soda to calm my hunger, I yielded to the idea of a journey on foot, and so, the hustle and bustle of southern Manhattan flowed into the area around quirky Bleeker Street, the self-consciously avant-garde village, and finally 4th Street where I hailed a cab to take me to 14th Street with its subway. Then, a little tired and footsore, I boarded the Lexington Avenue local which stopped a few blocks away from my friend’s apartment on Park Avenue. I got off a stop before, just to hook onto Park and enjoy a different sort of beauty and the fine weather.

A tunnel of reassuring opulence, Park Avenue, like British royalty, maintains a special relationship with everlastingness. Whatever mess the world is in, there will always be flowers in the traffic islands, polite doorman and doctors’ ground floor offices on Park. It’s as good as money in the bank. This is, of course, an illusion ; but, I am not loathed to indulge in gentle dreams at this stage in my life and the castle-fortress aspect of the alinement of buildings, streaming from the Helmsley structure northward, does much to reassure a person whose prize possessions increasingly embrace memories. Unlike youth, which, like Ellis Island, has nothing to lose from the great leap into the unknown, folks my age are clingers and Avenues like Park, Madison and Fifth are sites and states of mind we cling to. In this world, where even the concept of parenthood and birth-assigned genders are being erased, what is left but geography and states of mind ? My old friend, who has lived on Park since

the 1970s, takes part in this feeling of permanence and whatever our differences, if she goes before I go, she will be remembered, much in the same way as I remember my Ellis Island grandparents. The illusion of eternity lingered as I was announced by the doorman and ushered into an elevator manned by a uniformed elevator man. I should add that the elevator had an accordion gate and a crank, which was not used and had, thus, the status of a museum piece. We stopped on the 12th floor and erratic notions of apostles, astrology, and superstitions flurried around in my mystical brain. My friend occupies one of two apartments on the floor. Even the chime of the doorbell had a solemn cathedral ring.

The apartment was not of showy opulence, but of staid, harmonious good taste. Large, but not palatial. Several original works of art adorned the walls and in another there were enough books to stock a book store. The lady who invited me had reached a charming elderly stage in life, which the latest in medicine and cosmetology had contributed to render even more charming. We sat before a plate of petits fours which might have been tiny porcelain sculptures to be admired but parsimoniously eaten, because tea in certain circles requires not consuming the delicacies. Perhaps this phenomenon was a vestige of the Edith Wharton era when the upper classes had servants and the kindness to leave them the remains to be eaten in the kitchen. We

chatted, avoiding the elephant in the room, to use a current expression. Lady Bracknell would have not felt out of place about our subjects of conversation— one's infirmities and the weather, and please do not stray from those conversational pastures. Unluckily, Lady Bracknell, in this household, proved to have a curious slant for Lenin. My older friend had reached that autumnal period in life in which all the events of the human comedy should be met with ironic indulgence and appeasement of spirit before that final leap into the unknown. However, a social conscience and or a furious desire to be in keeping with the times bested any sense of logic or coherence, and, like Lenny Bernstein and the Black Panthers, the patina of Leftist politics proved to be just another accumulation to be displayed. If opinions were objects, hers would be tacked on the wall, between the Miro oil and the Chagall gouache. The hostilities began after the Earl Gray was poured, and the second sculpture pastry was politely refused. (I know the codes) Then the remark fell out of the blue, The lady said, "Trump, of course, is Hitler." The arrows of outrageousness pierced the armor of restraint and bled absurdity. I asked her how she came to that conclusion, and as the question came out, I made sure that she noticed that my eye wandered from the Steinway to the Chagall gouache to settle on the silver platter in front of us.

"Because he is." The response was voiced as succinctly and as childishly as Yellow Ponytail's joke about wanting to rent one of my ghosts.

I launched blindly into an exposé of American democracy and the free market which if anything, enhanced everyone's well-being. And which would withstand everything, even a boor. I brought my friend to the verge of tears, which she stymied only by repeating "Trump is Hitler." Conscious that my presence had become not really pleasurable, I took a page from Lady Bracknell and guided our exchanges towards the more familiar issues of small talk. I had violated the rites and had brought sadness to a kind person. The visit was over.

But not the urge to walk, this time towards Central Park and the declining sun. I needed the sky's sedate gloom as antidote to incoherences. The day had begun brightly, but had ended on an O. Henry twist crowning an Edith Wharton afternoon. Well, both were New Yorkers, as I am or was. Strangely, my mind wandered back to the two best friends with similar ponytails and I wondered what their teacher told them as they walked up the stairway which determined if my grandparents would or would not enter the New World. In my mind, I give her explanation a sugar-coated tone. I hope she told them that, whatever color or creed, we as Americans all had stakes in this exceptional experiment, and she could have (as I would have) ended with the mention of Ethiopians comprising part of the populations fleeing persecutions in the 20th century. Finally, as I passed the wanderers to and from the Park, mothers with prams, and , yes, Dads with children perched on their

shoulders, the feeling was that I was not only walking with ghosts, but that I was a ghost myself.