

Wetlands  
(November 1998)

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*Six by Seven* was a depressing coda to an era of musical genre explosion. Here we were, Mark Newstein thought, in the concluding years of the same decade that had brought forth the transformational masterpiece *Nevermind*, only to see the forces that blasted these doors open with ferocious energy now exhausting themselves, limping along into a gradual whimper, nothing left to say, grunge fading to post-grunge to rap-rock novelty acts, or a renewed embrace of electronica, such as the “drone-pop” presently before him. Mark couldn’t understand why Thom Primanti was so insistent on checking out such a show, a typical throwaway weeknight band, forgetful a Thursday night outing as any other. At least in the process he got to appreciate the impressive renovation of Arlene’s Grocery, a former Puerto Rican bodega turned indie-rock music venue, which nonetheless retained the original ethnic storefront name and signage.

Mark tried to bob his head, but only with partial success. The band was clearly deficient for his aesthetically inclined coterie, a dismal downer in a period so rich in cultural offerings. He found an ally in the masses: just below the stage was a woman towards the front row, even more falsely attempting to roll with the beat, occasionally lifting her camera to take pictures, the band members pretending to be bothered, but also assuming boastful poses as she clicked away. Mark recognized the back of her head first; the camera and position in the crowd then put it all in place— he couldn’t believe his luck. When Stephanie turned towards the eager faces behind her, he vied for her line of sight. But Mark and Thom were too far away, surrounded in darkness.

“Stephanie’s up there,” Mark relayed, a bit too excitedly.

“Oh yea,” Thom replied. “She told me she’d be covering this for the *Rail*.”

Mark wanted to hug Thom, to cover him in kisses, to not only thank him but promise the name of his first child. Instead, he hesitated. With the prospect of Stephanie’s supposed long-term paramour still lingering, he conveyed nothing other than silence.

Stephanie emerged at the bar about an hour later, stopping in her tracks, examining Mark quizzically.

“You guys actually like this band?”

“Good god no,” Mark protested. “Thom dragged me here.”

“Hey!” Thom interrupted. “What’s wrong with these guys?”

Mark and Stephanie looked each other over and laughed. They were immediately brought back to where they had left off, that fleeting, romantic exchange on a subway platform, romantic impulses dragged away in their opposing train directions. Again Mark was quickly taken, but this time, it was Stephanie’s vastly different look that caught his eye. The woman before him was elegant, incongruously dressed up for the occasion— hair pulled back, charming earrings, matching necklace, a tasteful long-sleeve crop-top covering dark camisole. She was a discerning patron of a trendy art gallery or a *nouveau riche* wine tasting, not an attendee at a divey, want-to-be-CBGB bar. Perhaps multiple events had appeared on her culture critic itinerary, thus requiring the more dolled up ensemble to gain acceptance. It impressed Mark; anachronistic as it was, he liked that Stephanie could “be a lady” if she wanted to, and that she usually disregarded this rigid social contract just the same.

A round of drinks followed, along with Stephanie’s invite for the both of them to accompany her to the Wetlands Preserve, an aging hippie commune that occasionally stumbled upon exciting new acts between endless nights of washed-up jam-band

headliners. Thom pled lethargy— perhaps dubiously, Mark thought— yet another subtle nudge, or at least he wanted to believe. That left Mark and Stephanie for another intimate stroll, and a long one at that— across Stanton and the Lower East Side, traversing druggie parks into northern Chinatown, hooking left in SoHo and then finally crossing Canal Street, that epically dilapidated Champs-Élysées, into the wilderness of the deserted Triangle Below.

Stephanie looked at the implausible, vacant TriBeCa scenery that greeted them and smiled. “This is the magic,” she said, outstretching her arms to a quiet landscape of cast iron warehouses, an urban ghost-town. “Why else struggle with a tiny shoebox apartment ? It’s the culture, this weird contrasting energy from one neighborhood to another. I wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

Mark nodded cautiously, unsure if he was a true equal, mere companion, or culturally obtuse placater. He had waited so long to meet someone of this vigor, almost unable to believe it had finally come to him.

The dilapidated entrance to a former manufacturing building where they were headed was hard to miss— sagging red awning, graffiti covered walls, loud circling revelers— especially with nothing else notable in sight. A bit closer, there was also the smell. Known as “Sweatlands” by regulars (or so Stephanie told him), a whoosh of hot air signaled the intimate wall-to-wall crowds that would follow. It offered the distinctive aroma for a flower-child-reprieve, immense amounts of marijuana mixed with an oversupply of body odor.

On the way over, Stephanie had explained a few unique traits that made the club worthwhile, or at least distinctive enough to be deserving a visit: the “in-house” booking for determining who got to play; an intense devotion to recycling and eco-friendly

practices (even drink straws were of a special, re-usable material); late night jams and DJs allowed to continue until dawn; a “stage” with almost no elevation from the crowd, few barriers or security, signaling equal footing of fans and the acts who performed; the live music piped-in to bathrooms and the downstairs “7 1/2 floor” as it was known, considered a “space from another dimension.” All these efforts offered the unwieldy two-level offering a pulsing unity, an uncanny sense of community despite the rude and unwelcoming world beyond.

Though none of it made the show before them accessible. If a dozen inner walls and poles weren’t obstructing their view, huge clouds of smoke filled out the remainder of the visual blockade. The harsh noise from *Kill Your Idols* still reached them— even if a band couldn’t fully be seen, they were certainly heard— intense and frenetic, a punk act stuck in a tie-died world by accident, pissed off something awful, the lead singer physically handcuffed to the microphone in protest.

Stephanie grabbed Mark by the hand as they made their way downstairs— wading through the crowds was an excuse for physical contact, a need to stick together. Upon regaining their footing below, a plethora of pillows, beds and couches greeted them at the “inner sanctum,” the lower level that existed but wasn’t supposed to exist; an open secret, the location for all sorts of hush-hush endeavors, defiantly continuing despite a city desperate to clamp down.

After finding drinks and seats amidst a reggae drum circle on break, Mark turned to Stephanie without having anything further to say. A throbbing hardcore beat penetrated their ears from the speakers above as they suddenly, longingly locked eyes. Mark felt an unqualified confidence as he slowly leaned in, without warning, to kiss her. Stephanie inhaled a deep breath of hesitation, but failed to pull away; instead, she softly

kissed back while her arm came up to grab Mark's, which was now tenderly embracing her neck— the first instinct, to fend him off, washed away as she gently caressed him, ultimately keeping him close for longer than Mark had even expected. Djembes and conga drums around them thudded to their budding tension.

Upon resurfacing, deep chestnut-brown eyes engulfed Mark's hazel stare. *There— that settles that*, Mark happily thought to himself. Stephanie's smile of relief was all Mark needed to know she was just as excited about their new intimacy.

A ziploc bag, passed to them by the Rastafarian to Stephanie's right, looked like it contained a bunch of hideously long, scraggly worms. A circling of joints also followed. Stephanie was dressed so nicely, for a minute Mark thought he might be corrupting her, rather than himself, as they both indulged.

Tripping out as a drum circle came into full force, they were elevated them to a foreign, forbidden psychological realm. For Mark, it was one of those rare moments, where he got to know another person so intimately, all the charades of masking one's true self washing away, in its place authentic feelings, genuine intentions, two human beings lying bare, lifted from the confines of social monotony. Only in these fleeting vignettes did the stinging realization became clear to him, that the proper, prudent way to act didn't sit quite right, that everyday life in fact left a gaping hole, routine social interactions hopelessly incomplete in fulfilling the intense desires rumbling below.

Over several hours, Mark came to know Stephanie like he would never know anyone else, not by dialogue but mere physical closeness, and the almost telepathic energy that began to fuse between them. Stephanie was by turns quiet, cautious, but then alternatively warm— more long gazes often thrown Mark's way as a symphony of African hands pounded stretched animal skin, her intensity signifying that they would

always share this surreal moment together, no one able to later take it away.

Intermittently they would kiss, again softly, but without question or worry, then just as easily return to the circle, entranced by the serenade. As the thumping blared into their eardrums, Stephanie slyly produced her new business card— after silently showing it off, she carefully wrote her phone number on the back side before sticking it into Mark’s pant pocket.

But the effect of the Wetlands could only last within the magical borders that contained it. Once they resurfaced into the outdoors, Stephanie reintroduced them to their tug-of-war.

“I have to go,” she protested.

“Okay,” Mark replied.

“You know I’m seeing someone!” She accused, without warning. But instead of anger, embarrassment reigned over her— Stephanie covered her head with shame.

“I know.”

“You met him at that Halloween party— Ruth set us up a few weeks earlier.”

So Stephanie had only *recently* swooped up, and at Ruth’s bidding no less. Her “long term serious relationship” as was false advertising.

“Well, in that case, you can see me too!”

“I don’t want to do that. It’s not fair— to either of you.”

Mark cringed as the further blows came.

“Look, you’re a lot of fun— I’m happy to go with you to shows and events, if you really want to.”

Mark had grown accustomed to the hard swallow that followed.

“So you’re just going to chalk up the entire evening to a drug-induced mistake?”

She gave a sorrowful look, and simply walked away.

Her cavalier dismissal made Mark incensed. But then it occurred to him that this wholesale neglect, however outrageous and unfair, was just as authentic as their more tender exchanges in the basement below.

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