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A New York Childhood, Part I

Places, not sounds, smells, or tastes, take me back to childhood. No madeleines for me. A rock in Central Park, a granite-faced apartment house with that smug New York look of bourgeois elegance, a window seat where a child can perch unobserved -- these recall my early years.

Sometimes a passage in a book paints the picture. Jane Eyre, for instance, taking refuge from her cousins' persecutions: "I mounted into the window-seat; gathering up my feet, I sat cross-legged, like a Turk; and, having drawn the red moreen curtain nearly close, I was shrined in double retirement. . . . With Bewick on my knee, I was then happy: happy at least in my way. I feared nothing but interruption. . . ."

Sanctuary. I never knew Bewick, but I read everything else in the omnivorous way of children in those pre-television days. From the moment in first grade, never forgotten, when everything on the page suddenly made sense, books were my addiction and my solace.

My idea of a satisfying afternoon would begin after I got off the Amsterdam Avenue bus and walked across Seventy-fourth Street to enter our dignified old apartment house on Central Park West. Mentally, I would already be immersed in The Secret Garden or The Lost Prince, or one of the less classy books I devoured with equal greed; I reveled in two interminable series, the

Bobbsey Twins (later abandoned for Nancy Drew) and Bomba the Jungle Boy. Most people have heard of the first, almost no one of the second. Yet it was the Bomba books that for all their absurdities gripped me with the vision of a life outside the constraints and supports of settled society. Before me stretched the rest of the afternoon; with any luck there would be Schrafft's cream mints, the best candy in the world -- now long gone, alas.

Like Jane, I feared only interruption. It could come from my older sister or my baby brother, who always wanted attention. I would say hello hastily to my mother, who had dutifully made sure she was home when her children arrived from school. (How sad, I think now, that we appreciated the gesture so little, when she tried so hard.) Then I'd bury myself in my book and my solitude.

I hid, not hard to do in our big apartment. It had recesses and dark corners, nooks and spaces a small child could wriggle into and not be found for hours. I remember spending hours under the grand piano, moving away only when my sister practiced or the music teacher came. My own room was mine -- no one else allowed in without permission, all invaders repelled. Just to make sure of my invisibility, I often spent the afternoon in my closet, which had six built-in drawers topped by an empty space that made an ideal cubbyhole. Or, secure behind a closed door, I curled up on my bed and read until dinner.

I read everything, sometimes for the story, always for the

sake of the activity itself. I became one of those people who cannot fall asleep or take a ten-minute subway ride without reading, who plan a vacation by first collecting a pile of books. As a child, if I had nothing of my own I would pick up whatever was handy, sometimes with incongruous results. Once, I remember, bored with a family conversation, I took one of my parents' collected volumes of Turgenev off the library shelves and spent a contented, if uncomprehending, hour reading it. My father, happening to notice what his eight-year-old daughter was immersed in, chuckled about it for years.

We never had "readers" at Horace Mann School, except for a primer that I knew by heart before I entered first grade, having heard my sister struggling over it day after day. Once we had mastered the trick of deciphering words, Horace Mann expected us just to read. Nothing could have suited me better. I was amazed in later years to find that many children never really acquired the skill and regarded reading as one more set of workbook drills; to me, it seemed an extension of learning to speak, and I don't think I ever saw a reading workbook.

We had a small library in our classroom and a fairly extensive one that served the whole school; as we got older and read more, we also haunted the New York Public Library. I can still see its Amsterdam Avenue branch, the austere, echoing stacks along which I loved to wander, picking one volume after another off the shelves to see what it might contain. As I progressed from Black Beauty (the first book I ever fell in love

with, to the point where my father finally rationed me to one rereading a year) to Frances Hodgson Burnett and Louise Andrews Kent, then from the Brontes to Sinclair Lewis, Steinbeck and Dos Passos, with healthy dollops of Marcia Davenport and Margaret Mitchell -- The Valley of Decision and Gone with the Wind each rendered me incommunicado for a week -- those shelves never failed me.

For all its drawbacks -- and I was lonely, I suppose -- such a life had one great advantage: because young children are fact-collectors, indiscriminately stockpiling everything they read and hear, I accumulated a fund of miscellaneous knowledge that has fortified me ever since. Though mostly odds and ends, it sometimes made me sound as if I knew everything. It also gave me a precocious vocabulary, the major prerequisite for acing the Verbal SAT.

Books weren't everything. Like most children of the period, we had our radio programs that must absolutely not be missed. Some families had to schedule their trips to fit the program schedule, though I don't recall that we were quite so inflexible. We listened faithfully to The Lone Ranger, Uncle Don (with a sneer -- I knew how awful the program was), Jack Armstrong the All-American Boy, Buck Rogers, all the panoply of late-afternoon programs that American children lived by -- plus Jack Benny, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Fanny Brice, and Fred Allen, the evening programs we shared with our parents. My father enjoyed the Sunday afternoon Philharmonic concerts, almost the only

classical music on the air in those days before FM; I can still recapture not only the picture of our living room with cigar smoke hanging in the air as the music rolled out, but the feeling of Sunday afternoon, the post-dinner lethargy as we sprawled on the floor and half read, half listened, struggling finally to rouse ourselves for a game or homework.

We lived in a spacious, solid cocoon, a ten-room apartment at 135 Central Park West. As apartment houses go, it was not large -- twelve floors, with four apartments to a floor -- but its age and the lavish quality of its construction gave it a European quality. We were told it was the second oldest apartment house in New York; the oldest was next door, the far more famous Dakota. Our building covered the block between Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth streets, its solid granite exterior -- almost black then, now sandblasted almost white -- and oversized windows proclaiming its solid urban worth. We entered by going up half a dozen steps (no handicapped access in those days) and being admitted by a doorman. Inside, the hall divided left and right; straight ahead was a curious glassed-in garden where once had been a carriage entrance. We went left, and, at the end of the hall, were taken up in a green and gold elevator to the eighth floor. On that landing, as on every landing in the building, were the entrances to two apartments, -- on this floor, ours and the Rosenmans'. We kept a close eye on the Rosenmans because Sam Rosenman (usually addressed as Judge though he had long since left the bench), was one of President

Roosevelt's speech writers, and we never knew what national figures would be going in or out as we arrived. The two Rosenman sons, roughly around my age, were occasional playmates but usually enemies.

These details all sound very grand. To a child they were just one more route to be traversed before we could get in or out. Apartment houses of this type set up so many barriers that indoors and outdoors are sharply separated. People who live in ordinary houses, where they can simply open a door and be outside, have no idea how different life becomes when they must plan ahead just to get out of the house.

The marble, gilt, and Louis-something furniture of the entrance hall may have impressed adult visitors, but we saw them as merely the setting for those critical personages, the doormen and elevator men. Joe and Al, the day-shift doormen, did what all doormen did: they kept an eye on us, told us stories and jokes, kept us out of trouble and never told our parents. If we were really good, or needed comforting, they let us work the switchboard for the internal house phone system. Scotty and Bob, the elevator men, let us run the elevator if no adults were around, philosophized about their lives (Scotty in an impene- trable Scots accent, but we acted as if we understood him), listened to our school triumphs, and made us feel important. Their uniforms looked natty and distinguished to me; I remember how disillusioned I was the day I found out that their starched shirt-fronts were just dickeys with clip-on bow ties, fronting

for plain plebeian undershirts. Bob, handsome in a minor-movie-actor sort of way, was carrying on a protracted, unhappy love affair with our cook Amelia (proof of his good taste, we thought), and we kept our knowledge of their meetings and quarrels from our parents.

The world of servants always involved secrets. We had a cook and a maid who occupied two small bedrooms behind the kitchen, and my brother Freddy's nurse, who slept in his room. A laundress came in once a week to do our mountains of clothes, and occasional waitresses and cleaners filled in when needed. I spent a lot of my time in the kitchen with all of them. They teased and hugged us, filling the gap left by my parents, whose conscientiousness and ambition for us were not lightened by much warmth; I think we represented the future for them, but were never entirely real as people. Amelia and the others thought we were comical and cared nothing for our futures, to our relief. They took us to Mass most Sundays and, I suppose, thought they had done what they could for our souls. The middle-class sections of the city were full of little Jewish and Protestant children fluent in Catholic ritual because their parents were happy to have them out of the house on Sunday mornings.

Our enormous, inconvenient kitchen had a deep window recess where I spent hours listening to the servants' gossip, especially when their friends came calling. I learned a remarkable amount of what was going on with my parents' friends, as their maids and cooks hung out in the kitchen and forgot that the little girl in

the window had ears. I learned to see the world through their eyes, to understand how hard a life they led and how meager were their hopes. Amelia, for instance, had immigrated from Croatia a few years earlier and succeeded finally in bringing over her little daughter, a blonde, chubby Slavic doll who attached herself to Freddy and learned English in a few weeks. Amelia had to find a home for her, and for a few years we followed the trials of one single mother who could not keep her child with her. Stories like this, and the mothering Amelia gave me, made me see the world from the servants' perspective, but I only once expressed my sense that their life was exceptionally hard. My mother, who believed she was doing them all a favor in those hard times by giving them jobs, reacted with enough anger to shut me up forever on the subject.

Our different understanding meant that when the war came and they all took defense jobs, I approved their common sense but she felt betrayed.