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## A Walk in the Park

By Mitch Berman

**F**rom the start — which is to say before night fell, before he walked like an old man, before he got involved in a Class A Felony, before he lost hope — he could see the exit. It hove in plain sight perhaps two blocks away, though in Central Park distance was measured not in blocks but in strides, as time was measured not in hours but in the slant of sunlight through the leaves. This afternoon's walk in the park had marked his first departure in months from the path of office-subway-apartment-subway-office, from a range of possibilities written in steel rail. Today he had wandered from place to place like a boy exploring the rooms of a castle, from paths with the herbal smell of daisies to meadows with the spicy scent of cut grass to misty glades where the air was heavy, old, still, like that in a cedar closet, and where branches divided by shafts of shadow leaf-tinted green sunlight that picked out fallen leaves like flecks of gold glitter; today he had seen an elderly woman leave a Cadbury bar at Strawberry Field as an offering to John Lennon, had been run into by a bald black boy who was trying to stomp pigeons, had watched from the lawn behind the Metropolitan Museum's Temple of Dendar as a young woman holding hands with a gray-haired businessman clamped her eyes shut and tossed into the Temple's reflecting pool coin after coin after coin: today he had awakened to the city as a natural

phenomenon, to the place he had in it, to the infinite possibilities in it, which, being infinite, included meeting a woman in Central Park, a woman who — the possibilities being infinite — was beautiful, fell in bed with him, fell in love with him... Now he could see the exit, and should he have been allowed to proceed at his own pace, would have reached it in no more than three minutes.

“Excuse me, sir,” said a voice from behind him. He turned to it.

The woman who called him sir was twice his age. She was squat, with features that were bold and outstanding, as if drawn with a felt-tipped marker. Not all the hair pinned up on her large broad head had gone gray, and not all of it had stayed pinned up. Her rayon crepe floral print dress was enormous, and fit. The closely spaced buttons running from neckline to waist were misbuttoned below her bosom. She wore no jewelry, and her only makeup was two quick smears of liver-colored lipstick. She had no purse, but carried a rough brown Bloomingdale’s sack that said BIG BROWN BAG and a heavy curve-handled wooden cane that was raised straight up into the air like an enormous index finger.

“Do you know if that’s the 86th Street exit?” she asked.

“I have no idea.”

“Well it is!” The woman let the scuffed rubber tip of her cane bounce to the ground. “I’ve only taken it a thousand times at least.”

“Then you’d better do it again,” he said. “It’s getting dark.”

“You make it sound so *easy*.” There issued from her a sigh that was more than a sigh, more than a wheeze, more even than a moan, but less than a wail; it was a wail that mumbled, mumbled not because it didn’t want to be heard, but because it wanted to be heard not wanting to be heard. “Just a little thing like walking is very difficult for me.” She raised her voice. “*Very* difficult, I assure you.”

The sun was going down; she was a handicapped old woman: his response was compulsory. "May I walk you out of the park?"

"Oh, would you?" she gushed instantly, her voice crammed full of false surprise, as though she'd been forced to wait too long for his offer.

*Oh, would you?* he mimicked to himself in a Polly-wants-a-cracker falsetto.

A wind swept toward him; he could hear it, and watching the oak trees in which the last orange rays of the sun had moved high up the bare old trunks, he could see it too. The wind came then with a cool rush, its sound distant because the trunks were upraised arms that held the rattling leaves high above in bony fingers, and distant, too, because it was a sound he hadn't heard in years, a sound associated with far places, not city places, certainly not New York City places; the wind came then, and swept him back to the past. He lay in his bedroom half-dreaming of his brilliant future and listening to the dry soft clatter of eucalyptus leaves outside his window, like muted applause. The breeze filled out the gauzy curtains, put form behind them, and he smelled the memory of a smell that had never been much stronger than the memory of a smell: the tangy acidic resin-powder scent of eucalyptus coming across the edges of his nostrils, then gone, then come again, then gone.

A moan-sigh-wheeze-wail dispelled his reverie. "I'm scheduled for a hip replacement in three weeks," said the woman. "It's *very* painful. Very painful, I assure you." She let out another muffled wail. "It can't be any worse than *this*."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"What do *you* have to be so sorry about?" she snapped. "*You* had nothing to do with it." And shaking her head, trailing off, "absolutely nothing to do with it ..."

*Rotten old hump*, he said to himself, entertaining fleeting thoughts of escape. No, he could not abandon an old woman in the gathering darkness, two blocks from the exit. After all, it had been his idea to walk her there, and to tell her he would do it.

But “walking” implied going forward, and now he knew that it was indeed possible, as Poe had written, to move as slowly as the minute hand on a clock. He felt as if he were working not against mere air but against something thicker, progressing only with the effort one must exert in a nightmare. The old black streetlights along the main road had come on, though their dirty silver glow lit up nothing at this hour. The woman had now begun sighing with every exhalation, which meant with every step, for though she did not breathe rapidly, she took a step no more often than she drew breath. Even at this pace he could feel her pulling and stalling, balking like a horse that did not wish to be led. She would not be satisfied until he picked her up bodily and carried her.

“Why on earth would I come to the park so late?” the woman asked the air around her. “Why ever would I do that?” Then a little louder: “There has to be a very good reason.” She turned her head to him and spoke still louder, her pitch falling heavily, weighing out each syllable: “There is. There is a reason.”

He did not ask her what it was, because he had run away to the farthest place he knew, which was Port-of-Spain, Trinidad. He was holding a large yellow-green coconut in his hands and drinking the milk through a straw. Though here coconuts were called “ice colds,” this ice cold was as warm as the early summer air that conducted scents to his nose: the fatty sweet smell of the coconut itself, curried goat meat from the Hot Tasty Roti truck, toffee peanuts from Sidney the Nut Man. Down the street someone was playing Marley and the Wailers, and nobody had any place he had to be.

The woman’s voice was a poke in the ribs: “*Would* you like to know why?”

“Pardon me ... ?” he said vaguely.

“Certainly,” she said, as if granting an actual request for pardon. “Would you like to know why a woman of my age and infirmity would venture all alone into Central Park at twilight?”

"Tell me," he grunted. It might pass the time, which evidently would not pass in any other way.

She tugged his shirt sleeve until they were at a standstill, then pulled his ear down to her mouth. Her whisper was hot, sharp with hunger: "To escape from those who would misunderstand me!"

*But to misunderstand you, he said to himself, is to understand you well.* "And who might that be?"

"The *police!*" she hissed, halving the word into two syllables and dragging out the second.

"The police," he repeated dully.

She brought her head up, then down into its great nest of jowls. "And would you like to know why I'm carrying this bag?" She held up her sack and gave it a rattle.

"You went shopping at Bloomingdale's?" he said.

"Yes I did. Three summer sales ago. And I bought a Versace scarf that was marked down to twenty-eight dollars and seventy-five cents. Very lovely. Then I folded the bag and put it in the tinfoil-and-wax-paper drawer. I never took it out until today." She moved so close and spoke with such emphasis that her breath rippled the light summer fabric of his shirt. "Do you want to know why? Do you want to know what's in this bag?"

"No, that's all right." He stepped back.

"Go ahead," she urged. "Look in the bag."

"No thank you," he said firmly.

"You don't have to shout!" she said, then mumbled, " ... first he screams at me, then he asks why the *police* would misunderstand ... " She yanked on his arm. "Well are you coming or not? We don't have all night."

He took a deep breath, as he often did when angry, and his lungs filled with the first jasmine bloom of the summer. Moving again, however sluggishly, he felt freed, light and large, balloonish, as if floating up amid the bower of oak leaves that were, in late twilight, turning from translucent to opaque.

"Today when I went downstairs with the trash," the woman began with an air of beginning, "my neighbor, Mrs. The Late Dr. Emanuel J. Buchenholtz, came out from the mailboxes where she'd been waiting to tell someone, anyone her life's story. Try to get around her and she just steps in your way while changing the subject to the final illness of her late husband, the angel — *My Manny*. So. At last, when I pushed past her, yelling at the top of my lungs *You have a great day now, Mrs. Buchenholtz! you just have a great day!* and returned to the comfort and security of the apartment where I've lived for the past thirty-seven years, do you know what I discovered?"

She stopped dead, raised her heavy eyebrows and dropped each word hard: "There was a man on my sofa. A definite man on my sofa." She frowned as if scrutinizing that man for the first time. "A Puerto Rican, I think? I didn't see him 'til I was halfway across the room. A man, fast asleep on my overstuffed.

"I took my cane" — she raised it backhand over her face — "and I belted him right across the kisser. And I said, 'Get out of my apartment, young man! You get out of my apartment, you young *bastard!*'" She brought her cane high with both hands and down, and down, as hard as she could, moving with a speed of which she had earlier seemed incapable. The words came chopping out of her as she flailed the air: "*You — just — get the — hell — out of my apartment!*"

The man had backed off to the curb — he'd had to — and stood watching the old woman whip herself into her fury. Alone in the deserted joggers' lane, she finally expended herself, her big chest heaving, the cane held loose-handed across her body and

about to slip out of her fingers. A bead of sweat rolled across her collarbone, collecting fellows along the way, and disappeared, viscous and fattened, into her cleavage.

"Now look in the bag," she commanded.

The Bloomingdale's bag sat innocuously at her feet. He walked toward it, bent down, pulled open the twine handles. On a cushion of white tissue paper that billowed up around the edges lay a battered brown wallet and a .38 Special revolver.

"Don't *touch* it!" she spat. "You want to leave fingerprints? What's the *matter* with you?"

"What happened to the man in your apartment?" he asked.

"It was a *terrible* mess." She shook her head. "I had to put on a whole new outfit. Thank God for slipcovers is all I can say. It's not the first time they've saved my life." She put both hands on the crook of her cane and leaned unsteadily over them.

"Um, I don't feel so good. I have to sit down."

Leaving the bag on the road, she hauled herself to the narrow path that led to the exit, and sank down so heavily on a park bench that it creaked. "This is very stressful for me," she said. "Very stressful, I assure you."

Placing the Bloomingdale's bag at her feet, he sat down beside her. "What were you going to do?"

"Just a minute." She held up a hand. "I'm having palpitations." She lay the cane across her knees and slapped her chest lightly. Her bosom reverberated. "There. There. What was I going to do? I was going to empty those disgusting things into the reservoir. But it got dark."

"Yes," he said. He was staring at the bag.

"Look — we're just a few steps from the exit. How did that happen?"

He raised his head. The path went through a break in a hedge and opened on 86th Street. The row of streetlights leading to the exit were dark, as if the Park admitted of no

clear way out. The traffic light changed, and cars turned from 86th onto Central Park West with a rushing sound like a stiff breeze.

For a moment he could smell the exhaust. He was in a car, a station wagon, lying in the back, watching the telephone wires dip and swoop in the sky, then lift taut at each telephone pole, like disordered measures of sheet music. Another smell mixed in, that of perspiration. It came from the old woman.

He had to get away from her, to get her away from him. "I'll do something about the bag tonight," he said. "You go home."

"Oh, would you do that for me?" she said. "That's so *nice* of you."

"You go home," he repeated, feeling slightly queasy.

"Let me give you my address," she said. "Maybe you can help with — "

"No — that's all right." He held up a hand.

She caned the ground toward her and pulled herself up with a luxurious sigh. She shrugged, arranging the shoulder pads inside her dress, and sang out as if calling him to dinner: "I'm listed!"

"Don't tell me your name!" he begged.

"Simpson!" she cried simultaneously. "Initial S. There's six in the directory. I'm the one on 81st."

She went off, swaying slightly with each short slow step. For a while her bulk blocked the exit from his sight; then she went through the gap in the hedge and was gone.

The cars came again, their headlights flickering across the path at his feet and illuminating the Bloomingdale's bag. Then the bag and the path went dark. High above his head, the oak leaves clattered.