

Return of The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit

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A Memoir

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Arrival

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3:15 p.m.

The satisfying, cool June air is immediately evident upon exiting the revolving doors of 55 Water Street, the one-time largest office building in the world. My six month Home Office assignment in Lower Manhattan is now complete, marking a return on Monday to my New Jersey Regional Office.

Walking down Old Slip, my destination is a short distance away. I cross South Street to Pier 11. As I take a seat on a wooden bench, the harbor's breeze offers a gentle welcome. I rest both feet atop the adjacent railing and observe two ferries arriving in succession. Neither one is occupied by the special passenger I have come to greet. My watch tells me it is early, but the anticipation is there.

Staring far out into the East River, I reminisce about what this final Friday afternoon will leave behind. There will be no more lunches along the promenade in Battery Park, no street concerts at Bowling Green, no more time spent at the *Vietnam Veterans Plaza*, no walks to the South Street Seaport and no more periods of reflection at Ground Zero. I will miss the shops along Nassau Street and the after work strolls past City Hall. I will miss the street peddlers, the ice cream truck parked at the corner of my building, the street fairs, coffee shops and *Shakespeare & Company* book store. I will miss it all.

4:07 p.m.

Lost in introspection, I only now recognize that a third ferry has already circled the harbor and begun to dock. A short time afterwards, he appears. Despite the afternoon's sun glare in my eyes, I have little

difficulty picking out the tall figure in the crowd, walking briskly down the steel plank. The broad shouldered man with the white hair is returning to the big town after a long absence. He is not so much a visitor and certainly not a stranger. He is neither business associate nor a client, but rather one who spent the bulk of his professional life as a National Operations Manager only a few streets away.

The new arrival has come to share in the remembrances of my last day in Lower Manhattan. He understands the intricacies and nuances of these streets far better than I. A firm handshake and warm greeting cement our meeting. As a point of reference, the well-dressed gentleman in the dapper sports jacket happens to be my father-in-law, Peter.

"Hi Pete! I'm glad you could make it."

"Good to see you, John. I've been looking forward to this day for a long time."

On the Street of Dreams

4:20 p.m.

No itinerary is needed on this most informal of evenings. The mood is relaxed and conversation flows as we pass on foot beneath street signs bearing the historic names of Broadway, Fulton, Maiden and Wall. The affinity we share for this city is clear by the recitation of personal experiences. Our stories, though separated by decades, are equally memorable.

We whet our appetite at *Harry's*, located at One Hanover Square, a Downtown establishment synonymous with Wall Street financiers. Many a deal has been sealed here over cocktails and aged, prime N.Y. strip steaks, with roasted shallot whipped potatoes. The bartender places a dry Manhattan in front of Pete and a vodka tonic for me. To our left is a wall-mounted television. The closing prices scroll continuously across the bottom of the screen. Pete strikes up a conversation with a middle-aged waiter who says he has been working at *Harry's* since the doors first opened in 1972. Although neither man has a recollection of the other, it is almost a certainty their paths have crossed years earlier in this hallowed room.

After drinks we depart *Harry's* for a leisurely walk along my favorite street in all of Downtown. The lively activity that is Pearl Street comprises a Dickensian world of boutiques, art galleries and bistros with its landmark buildings dating back three centuries. The appealing character of the shops and restaurants had drawn me to walk along this crooked narrow artery on numerous lunch breaks. When I point out the popular *Mercantile Grill* restaurant, Pete fondly recalls that in years past, this inviting haunt was well-known to him and his peers as *Jimmy's*.

Another block or two more and we have arrived. It is the address that I heard so much about through the years and the final stop needed to make my journey complete. Prominently displayed between four columns in the front of the glass entranceway is the building's only inscription, *80 Pine*. On the far left side of the building, some thirty-five feet above us at street level is the second-floor corner office window. A convenient vantage point if ever there was, this was Pete's domain before retirement twenty-four years ago.



“John, do you see where we’re standing...right here at the corner of this building. Now, look straight up. That was my corner office...right there, on the second floor.”

So it was here where my father-in-law spent a career perfecting his craft in the world of corporate America. Here, where he enjoyed the added perk of being a spectator with a front row seat to the nameless faces of passerby below, forever scurrying to and from places unknown. The pervasive atmosphere of this street has not been altered by time.

The longer we linger, the more recollections are triggered. Pete spins wonderful tales involving old friends and colleagues, some serious and others whimsical. The imagery conveyed leaves me to imagine that at any moment one of those long ago retired associates wearing a long overcoat, might emerge from the elevator, pass through the lobby and exit these doors, with a wave to Pete before departing for the trip home.

Early Evening

5:50 p.m.

We dine at *Fino Ristorante Italiano*, a relative newcomer to the financial district and are quite pleased by our wonderful meal. The warm, elegant atmosphere complements the free flowing conversation which runs the gamut. We speak about the joy of family, our spouses and children, happy times, good books, favorite restaurants and island vacations. We don’t shy away from talk about serious matters – health concerns, illness, the ravages of cancer, loss and all the adversities that come from living a life. We discuss our mutual passion for baseball and football, the state of the economy, the politics of the right, left and everywhere in between. Our talk is mostly confined to this glorious city and all it has to offer. Sitting across the perfectly adorned table setting from me is a man very much in his element. I am struck by a comment spoken years ago by my brother-in-law, Michael. He referred to Pete as “the consummate New Yorker, who happens to reside in New Jersey.” It is an easy concept to comprehend.

The suave, on-screen persona of Gregory Peck is no match for my real-life father-in-law. Pete will always be *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, arriving in the city each morning by mass transit, toting a leather brief case and the obligatory hat in hand. The only question that requires answering is whether he was ever the owner of a gray flannel suit.

There is no more apropos depiction of New York train commuters than a wonderfully illustrated *New Yorker* Magazine cover from years past (November 4, 1961). I will always maintain that one such passenger seated aboard that train must be Pete. The passage of time will not diminish that very image for me.



The story resumes in the evening hours with Peter's return commute across the river. Doris and the four kids are all in waiting, as the NJ Transit train pulls into stately Madison station. Everyone is ready to greet husband, father and patriarch and take him home.

"They were great times, John."

Nightfall

9:40 p.m.

The streets are mostly empty now, as Pete and I retrace our steps back to Pier 11. Darkness has fallen and the magnificent city appears radiant. The illuminated spires seem to touch the sky. Our wait is not very long before the ferry arrives to take us to Hoboken. We climb up top to sit outside and take in the glittering skyline one last time. The boat pulls slowly from the pier and Pete turns to look back. His eyes tell me he is taken aback by the sheer number of new skyscrapers. So much looks different, he says, yet so much remains the same.

The Manhattan excursion is now complete. My ride up the Hudson with Pete is remembered as the culmination of a special evening, a marvelous adventure to treasure with the man in the gray flannel suit.

Epilogue

New Dreams

March 2011

Nine years have all but passed since that early June summer day we spent together. The old adage appears to ring true – *The older we become, the faster time seems to go by*. A second maxim has equal merit – *Age is just a state of mind – it's really only a number*.

Pete is certainly the embodiment of the latter, as he is essentially unchanged by the years. He remains the impeccably dressed gentleman with the courteous disposition and genuine smile that always appears whenever he extends a firm handshake greeting.

Knowing how much Pete loves swimming and beach vacations, I once asked him what his favorite season is. Without hesitation his reply was that he enjoys them all. I would not have expected a different response. He is known for following an annual ritual of eating corned beef and cabbage on St. Patrick's Day, enjoying pancakes on Fat Tuesday, and the clanging of spoons on pots and pans to welcome in the New Year. No matter the occasion, whether he is parasailing, enjoying a hot dog and beer while watching a Yankee game on television, or taking his grandchildren to the Paper Mill Playhouse and dinner afterwards, Pete's unspoken motto has always been one of experiencing life to the fullest and enjoying every stop along the way.

Pete will celebrate his birthday early this month. With the spirit, patience and optimism that has defined his life and been passed on to countless others, it is no wonder why this birthday is cause for celebration. Happy birthday wishes are in abundance for the consummate New Yorker, who proudly happens to live in New Jersey.

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