WHAT IS A PARK?

1

I arrived eighteen minutes late at our neighbors' apartment for the meeting with the candidate. A friend's call had delayed me, but maybe the meeting wouldn't start on time and I'd be arriving with just a soupçon of fashionable lateness. At the door, I hesitated to press the buzzer, but I couldn't just walk in. Aiming from a foot away, I turned my index finger into a missile and fired at the buzzer. It's harder to do when you can't see, but I like a challenge.

Bull's eye! There was a muted ring inside the apartment, and the door opened. The levity and variety of voices inside told me my timing was also on the mark. Doris, who was hosting the meeting with her husband, Jamie, said, "You're on your own?"

I was tempted to do a mock glance up and down the empty corridor, but limited myself to "Yes." Alison, my wife, had been detained at her office.

I joined my neighbors, standing in a semicircle around the candidate. From the little he was saying, I sized him up as a guy in his thirties, dark hair, nondescript tie and blue blazer, arms at his side, hooded eyes appraising each person as they spoke. Afterwards, I learned that I'd got the sartorial generalities right, but I didn't go into the hair, posture or stare. Jamie offered me an array of soft drinks and lastly wine. When I opted for wine, he extended the options to red or white. He handed me a plastic cup of white wine, stepped to the candidate's side and invited us all to sit.

The candidate took his place at the front of the room. The backs of my knees were resting

against a couch opposite him, and I sank down on it. A friend named Jenny sat next to me.

"Fred," said Jamie, "why don't you tell us why you're running for office and talk to us about your priorities?"

"Let me first thank all of you for coming this evening and Jamie and Doris for arranging this meeting," the candidate said, modulating his voice to the size of the room. "As you know, the election won't take place for another year, but a serious contender must start early."

I noticed he hadn't opened with a formulaic joke. Refreshing. He cited his background in Congress, working for one of our state's U.S. Senators, and then on his own in city government. He listed his qualifications in criminal enforcement.

He continued, "If you look back at how frightened and anxious we were after 9/11, we really have turned the corner on terrorism, as we also have on crime. That doesn't mean we mustn't keep focused on security and related difficult civil rights issues, but the passage of time allows us to think about other pressing matters. We need to create more green spaces for ourselves and our children. Contacts with nature remind us that life isn't all about terror. I want to make parks my number three priority, after security and raising our public schools to a high standard that will make us proud to send our children to them."

Standing right behind me, a neighbor named Kevin spoke up. "How do you propose to improve our schools?"

The candidate told us about a school success story for which he took some credit. Then he said, "System wide, I would establish merit pay."

"Oh no," Jenny gasped at my side.

"Oh?" said the candidate.

"Merit pay would disrupt education. It would make teachers competitive. They'd stop

sharing information and techniques—"

"On the contrary." Kevin's voice boomed overhead like a low-flying jet. "There was an article in *The Times* just the other day about how teachers are flocking to teach summer school to earn more money. Merit pay is an incentive they need and want."

"But merit pay won't help our children," Jenny said.

The candidate seemed intent on listening, taking care not to offend potential voters. How could he know which of us would prove important to him? How about Jenny, a teacher who'd retired early? He might wonder if, with her long dark hair, she was an intellectual but passive observer or someone who made things happen. He wouldn't yet know about her letter-writing campaigns. How about Kevin, presumably wearing his trademark textured jacket and colorful tie. He was a lawyer, but was he the kind who worked quietly for his clients or a rabble rouser? I wasn't sure myself.

Turning to the candidate, Jenny asked, "What would you base merit pay on?"

"Evaluations, how their students perform on tests."

"But that's the worst incentive—kids' test scores. You force teachers to emphasize what ought to be secondary. And for merit pay, some might help their students cheat. There was an article in *The Times* about that happening in Chicago."

"We know from our law firm experience," Kevin thundered, "that merit pay is the single best motivator and also a means of weeding out the bad."

Jenny and he got into it for a while, but she was conciliatory by nature. She said, "You can't do it through merit pay, but yes, you must find a way of dismissing bad teachers."

"Tell us about your experience in the private sector," Kevin commanded.

The candidate began, "I've worked primarily in government—"

Kevin interrupted. “Elected officials need private sector experience to know how to make decisions. It’s their lack of private sector experience that explains our chronic budget problems.”

“Exactly,” said the candidate. “I did mergers and acquisitions at a law firm. It was an experience that gave me several important lessons.”

“Name two,” said Kevin.

The candidate proceeded to do just that, and eloquently. Still, a politician was yet again conceding the inferiority of the public to the private sector, and that nettled me. No wonder government was hamstrung in so many ways. I knew—I worked for government.

“Tell us why you’d make this Brooklyn Bridge Park your number three priority,” Kevin demanded.

A park had been proposed for our neighborhood, Brooklyn Heights, down beyond the expressway and reaching to the river bank.

The candidate began, “Parks are essential for wellbeing. We need them for our kids to have space to play in—”

Kevin interrupted. “We already have the playground at Pierrepont.”

“But it’s all stone and concrete, Kevin,” Jenny said.

“Exactly,” the candidate said. “We want our kids to have grass to play on. Right now you basically need to go to Prospect Park for that, which for most of us means getting on the subway. After a week of commuting, I know I don’t feel like going down into the tunnels.”

Someone said, “And when I do, I’m always about to get on a train to the office before remembering it’s a weekend.” Polite chuckles fluttered around the room.

“So ride a bike,” our resident fitness freak said.

“Bikes aren’t for everyone,” someone else replied. I mouthed, “Amen.”

"Here's a stat for you," the candidate said. "Of all the cities in this country, New York has the lowest area of green space per person. I think we owe it to our kids not only to make more space available, but to make the spaces work."

Appreciative murmurs did a modest wave around the room.

Kevin was not so appreciative. "I want to go back to the recreation spaces we already have in the neighborhood. There's a real question whether people would use the park once it's constructed. People here will remember the playground over by Columbia Heights. Every time I passed by, there wasn't a single person there. Now it's closed."

"Kevin," Jenny said, "the problem with that playground was it was so remote it was dangerous. The other playground, on Pierrepont, is busy all the time. Lack of use won't be a problem for a large green space."

The candidate said, "Exactly. It is the responsibility of your elected officials to bring the planners and the local communities together. I've developed a strategy…" He took the floor and we listened for a while.

Just when I was about to ask a question, he said, "It's late and I don't want to keep you."

Someone said, "My stomach's growling."

"And I've got to get ready for a trip tomorrow," another said.

Despite the growling stomachs and next day's plans, people milled around.

Kevin appeared in front of Jenny and me and said, "I hope you don't mind a little government bashing."

"You helped bring out what little we learned about the candidate," I offered by way of an olive branch, then realized what I'd said to be polite was true.

"Don't you see the playground over by Columbia was always too isolated," Jenny said.

I wanted to say, give it a rest, Jenny.

"It's the proverbial chicken and egg question," Kevin said. "A place is deserted until the crowds come. What makes them come?"

"Location, location," Jenny said, smiling.

"You make great points." Though Kevin was patronizing her, I sensed Jenny was charmed.

Finding ourselves alone in the hallway, she said, "I shouldn't have gotten so excitable—about schools I mean. I get so wound up."

"You're entitled. It's your life's work."

She laughed, apparently not as frustrated as I that we'd learned more about our neighbors than the candidate. She started for the elevator, and I said I'd take the stairs.

"The stairs? Are you sure?" I answered by unfolding my cane and turning to the stairwell door. She said an affectionate "Goodnight." Over my shoulder, I replied in kind.

On the way downstairs I returned to the question of the new park. As the candidate had said Prospect Park, Brooklyn's answer to Manhattan's Central Park, was a short subway ride away. Nearer by we had the Promenade over New York Bay, but it wasn't a green space. True, it had the view on one side and cultivated flower patches behind iron railings on the other, and the north end and Montague Street entrance had benches shaded by trees. But it was narrow, surfaced with blue stone and hexagonal asphalt paving blocks, and a constant drone rose up from the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway underneath. We also had the landscaped area around the courts and the Post Office, but the criminals and potential terrorists who plied the lawns and shrubs there at night and on weekends had missed the news about the decline in their activity. It felt safe only when court officials and postal workers took their weekday lunch hours and I, for

one, was at work in Manhattan.

How much did a park really mean to me? I spent so much time writing and researching that I was chained to my computer. Was I bowing to irrational and tyrannical received wisdom that staying indoors on a sunny day was wasteful, even a day so hot it made you itch? The question put me out of sorts. I made coffee and went to work on yet another office memorandum.

2

Nearby we had a grass area, situated between the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges, called Empire Fulton Park. Funny I hadn't thought of it at the meeting, even though it was to be incorporated into the projected Brooklyn Bridge Park. Few people knew about it, which at first seemed strange because it was right by a couple of famous restaurants, the permanently moored vessel that hosted the "Barge Music" chamber concerts and a pier where wedding parties drove down in limousines to have themselves photographed against the Manhattan skyline. But in a city conscious of crime, as Kevin had argued, sparsely populated sections perpetuated sparse visitors.

On Saturday, Alison said she wanted to paint there, and I decided to join her. Though the sky was clear, the noon forecast mentioned thunder storms, but if the rain came, we could rush home in a quarter hour. We walked toward the Promenade, then turned down the long hill toward the river's edge. We crossed streets that had no traffic lights because so few people walked there, another self-perpetuating situation, and then over a restaurant driveway. There was no direct route, one more reason why the park was so little known.

We followed an asphalt path between areas of grass. Overhead traffic sped along the Brooklyn Bridge behind us and the Manhattan Bridge ahead. We were each carrying a bag over

the shoulder and a folded chair. On our left, across the river were the South Street Seaport and the eastern side of lower Manhattan. Alison picked out a spot and we stepped off the path. She remarked on someone sunning several yards away. “Nothing but a piece of string on their butt.”

“Gender?”

“Can’t tell. Smooth skin, but could go either way.”

We walked on until Alison noticed some flowers she liked near a bench. We put down our bags.

“Come look at these flowers,” she said. They were single-flower roses, each set of five petals arranged in no special order that I could ascertain.

“Sloppy for a rose,” I said.

“Not sloppy. Simple. Here, take a whiff of this.” I lowered my nose and found my face engulfed in it. I stood up sneezing.

“Smells beautiful, doesn’t it?” She could be so oblivious to my distress.

“Yes.” Between sneezes, I was being truthful. I’d caught the scent before the overdose.

“Look over here. I can’t believe they’re in bloom this late. Lilacs.”

At first, overpowered by the roses, I couldn’t detect any scent. But after some careful sniffing around, it came through. “Lovely,” I said to Alison, straightening up.

The scent of flowers carried such moral weight. Why? Was it because after a childhood indifferent to flowers, I’d thought seriously about them for the first time while reading Wordsworth for a college course? Beyond that, was it because flowers die so soon after their prime, inspiring poets to make them metaphors for transient beauty?

Perfume makers understood their power. I’d once asked a man from a perfumery what made a good scent. He was sitting next to me on a flight to Paris. He made a gruff noise and

didn't speak to me the rest of the way. I think he suspected me of plotting industrial espionage.

I lounged on the bench and Alison perched three yards before me on her unfolded seat. Her subject was to be a fence intertwined with lavender-flowered wisteria, the grass leading up to it, an overland section of the Manhattan Bridge, a short stretch of the East River and a glimpse of Manhattan. Describing it all, she made no reference to the World Trade Center, which not too long ago had been visible from here. I put earphones on and nuzzled into the narration of a Lawrence Block novel. The girlfriend of his hero, the ethical burglar, was reading one of Sue Grafton's alphabet mysteries. Interesting that Block would pay tribute to a fellow mystery writer through his characters. I asked myself how I felt about Block making me conscious of the book as book and so testing my willing suspension of disbelief. I reached no conclusion, but missed several sentences in the course of trying and had to rewind.

"Aha," Alison said, hearing the click of my player's buttons and insinuating some insight into my state of mind.

Disbelief disrupted, I clicked another switch and checked out the radio. Jonathan Schwartz was playing Sylvia McNair accompanied by André Previn. The host came on and I waited in vain for the normally garrulous Schwartz to say more than the title and artists' names. His failure to embellish suggested he felt words couldn't do justice to the performance.

My attention wandered to the bridge traffic. I picked out a seagull's ocean-vast cries and stretched my ears to the water for the sound of waves lapping. They were just out of range. I had no awareness of people around us. We were alone, unless the gender-indeterminate back was still bared to the sun. I returned to the earphones.

I'd nearly finished the novel when Alison announced she was done. I knew from experience there was no hurry. I stayed between the earphones as she examined her water color

from various angles. Under the narrator's voice, I heard her scratching out this or that excess. The novel ended as she was putting away the paint box and folding the stool.

"What I'm trying to work out," she said as we retraced our steps, "is how to get the little bush to look as though it's in front of the tree. Both are pale green, which is a receding color."

"Receding color?"

"Remember I was telling you about using green to show a shadow behind a red object? Red is the most prominent color, and it turns out greens and blues are the most recedent. So if you have two light green objects, they both fade into the background."

So much contrivance was required to imitate nature. Witness all the trouble perfume makers went to mimic flowers.

She went on. "So the trick is how to get the bush to stand in front of the tree. I can think of two possibilities. One is to place it farther down on the paper. The other is to make it darker and bolder, which ought to bring it forward."

I was glad the storm hadn't materialized. I'd enjoyed being in a park, away from my computer.

3

The meeting with the candidate had made me curious about how other parks had come into being. I spent an evening on the Internet looking up the nineteenth century park designers, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. Despite the seeming consensus among experts that Brooklyn's Prospect Park was their finest creation, the scattered information on most websites concentrated on their Central Park. The evening became a week as I tried to sort through the inconsistencies among various websites.

I decided to turn my quixotic project into an essay. Alison, a student of New York's architectural history, ransacked her book case for studies that I'd go over with my readers. I called the New York branch of the Library of Congress's talking book program and found that Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar's *The Park and the People*[1] had been recorded. It was the leading history of Central Park, often paraphrased online and touted by Alison. As I listened to the recording, I had to revise everything I'd written so far. But there was nothing like piecing together a puzzle for deepening understanding.

Until the 1840s, New York had felt no need for expensive parks. There was a place for Sunday excursions in Fort Green, in the then separate city of Brooklyn, and another a short boat trip away in Hoboken, New Jersey. But then Andrew Jackson Downing, a famed landscape designer enamored of the public parks in European cities, lobbied for a similar project in New York. Newspapers took up the cause, and it was endorsed by both candidates in the mayoral race of 1850. Downing drowned in a steamboat accident in 1852, but the project was kept alive by Vaux, whom Downing had recruited while touring public parks in England.

A dispute arose over the projected park's location. The artisans and laborers who lived downtown argued for the expansion of Battery Park, at Manhattan's southern tip,[2] while the so-called "gentlemen" class lobbied for a new park north of present-day 40th Street, where they had large country homes. Interspersed among these "Uptown" residences were shanty towns and asylums for orphans, lunatics, the elderly and the disabled.[3] The gentlemen won.

The street grid for the entire island of Manhattan had existed on paper since 1811, but at

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[1]Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992. I cite this book as "Rosenzweig and Blackmar" from here on.

[2]Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 43-4, 63.

[3]Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 62.

that time, construction was well short of 40th Street. Nevertheless, the middle and northern areas of Manhattan were already developing, aided by the New York and Harlem Railroad. Completed in 1834, it served what became the Upper East Side with regular runs to the villages of Yorkville and Harlem. The uptown population multiplied five times between 1840 and 1855, twice the rate elsewhere in the city. By 1855 almost 60,000 people lived north of 40th Street. Of this number, probably only 1,600 inhabited the area chosen for Central Park.[4]

Early in 1857, Olmsted, another Downing protégé, was hired to supervise the thousand workers hired to clear the land set aside for the Park. When a competition for the right to design the Park was announced, he collaborated with Vaux on a joint entry. In April, 1858, their "Greensward" design beat out thirty-two other submissions. Olmsted was appointed Chief Architect and Vaux Assistant Architect.

The City rapidly and ruthlessly acquired the land, including the area occupied by Seneca Village, a thirty-year-old community with three churches and a school in what would become the west eighties. The 1855 New York State Census counted 264 residents. It started out as an African-American community, but by 1857 Irish and German immigrants had moved in alongside. When Seneca learned it was to be leveled to make way for the Park, Andrew Williams, a bootblack and an original Seneca resident, campaigned to save his community. The New York Historical Society, Columbia University and the New York Public Library displayed an affidavit and other documents drawn up by Williams on a rather didactic website for young students.[5] Although the website didn't make these records accessible to a blind computer user,

[4]Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 60-64.

[5]URL: http://projects.ilt.columbia.edu/seneca/start.html
To be specific, the site was created by the New York Historical Society, the New York Public Library's Office of Young Adult Services, and the Institute for Learning Technologies at Columbia University. The website credits Rosenzweig and Blackmar.

they evidently revealed how hard he fought for his community. His last battle was over the city's compensation for the property it was about to seize.

On October 1st, 1857, Seneca's residents were evicted, along with the inhabitants of other shanty towns on the land designated for the Park. There was apparently no violence. There was also no newspaper coverage.

What had Olmsted, author of *The Cotton Kingdom*, a critique of slavery in the antebellum South, thought of this devastation? I found no answer. What had happened to the 264 or so Seneca residents? More clicks, and I was advised they'd disappeared without a trace. Even Andrew Williams, who had struggled against all odds to make his voice heard, subsided without a recorded word as Seneca Village was buried under top soil and seedlings.

Olmsted's designs normally stayed close to a location's original scenery,[6] and I'd always assumed Central Park had grown out of the existing landscape. Rosenzweig and Blackmar put me right. The 843 acres consisted of smelly swampland interspersed with outcrops of rock, as high as ninety feet. The area was also more industrial than the websites had led me to believe. In the shanty towns hogs had been raised and bones boiled. Bone boiling produced an ingredient used in perfumes, and I wished I'd known to ask the perfume man on the plane about it. The stench from the bone boiling factories and other uptown industries distressed the merchant estate owners and was no doubt one reason why they promoted that location for the Park.

The Greensward design completely remade the area, which for Olmsted was no contradiction. He believed that nature's highest attribute was its civilizing qualities, consistent

[6]For example, he hardly altered northern California's Mariposa Estate, where he was hired in 1864 to design a park intended to demonstrate confidence in the Union's ultimate restoration. See Olmsted's *Yosemite and the Mariposa Grove: A Preliminary Report, 1865*. It appears online in accessible form at the following URL: http://www.yosemite.ca.us/history/olmsted/report.html. Handwritten and typed versions are displayed at: http://rs6.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/consrvbib:@field(NUMBER+@band(amrvm+vm02))

with the pastoral aesthetic of that era. Where nature fell short, he molded the space to bring them out. Vaux concurred. So, Central Park's meandering paths, the scenic rolling landscapes, the sudden vistas, the lakes, skating ponds, the rustic bridges, the seemingly spontaneous copses were no accidents. Olmsted and Vaux planned them all. They cut drives for carriages through the landscape and sunk underground roads for cross-park traffic.

Fashioning this soothing landscape required blasting, drilling, sledging, stone breaking and damming. New techniques for drainage and making sturdy paving had to be invented. A quarter million trees and bushes were planted, and thousands of tons of top soil imported from New Jersey. Offsetting the Park's lopsided proportions of two and a half miles high by half a mile wide, Olmsted and Vaux built sections on diagonal axes to create the illusion of long perspectives.[7]

An astounding amount of work must have been done in a matter of months, because on a Sunday in December of 1858, three hundred New Yorkers skated on the Park's frozen pond at 73rd Street. Ten thousand people appeared the next Sunday and as many as twenty thousand on Christmas Day. The Park was more or less complete below 79th Street by December, 1860.[8]

Olmsted was Chief Architect until the spring of 1861, when President Lincoln summoned him to head the Sanitary Department, a forerunner of the Red Cross, but even during the Civil War, work continued on the Park. Vaux stayed on throughout as consulting architect, and Olmsted returned after the War.

Both Olmsted and Vaux saw a connection between public parks and democracy. Parks were places where nature could delight the senses and, through the senses, the mind and spirit of

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[7]See "The Cultivator," by Martin Filler, in the November 15, 1999 issue of *The New Republic*. It appears online at the following URL: http://www.thenewrepublic.com/archive/1199/111599/filler111599.html

[8]Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 191.

city dwellers. There the classes could mingle. Olmsted argued that nature, art and government ought to work together toward the civilizing ideal.[9] And yet Central Park was a constant source of fights over politics and design, demonstrations of democracy in action that made Olmsted miserable. I'd witnessed something of this paradox in our neighbors' living room.

As Rosenzweig and Blackmar show, developments in Central Park's early years anticipated trends toward the end of that century and throughout the twentieth. Despite the then prevailing view of government as protector of private property, the Park's construction was a public project motivated partly by a desire to kick-start the economy during the decline of 1854-1857, long before John Maynard Keynes. Moreover, Olmsted and the Central Park Commission insisted on the best man for each job, contrary to the accepted practice of political-patronage hiring.[10] Even so, pay was below living wage and benefits virtually nonexistent.[11] Labor was another two decades or so from being a force to reckon with.[12] It was considered a vindication of Olmsted's safety measures that only five workers were killed. They and the many others rendered unable to earn a wage by injury were deemed to have assumed the risks inherent in dangerous work. A widow won $50 in compensation: a victory, but even at that time no munificent sum.[13]

Olmsted and Vaux were under constant pressure to modify the Greensward plan. Vaux succeeded in defeating a proposal to border Central Park in a forbidding, Tuileries Garden-like,

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[9]Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 136-9.

[10]Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 154-158. Women's involvement was negligible. Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 176.

[11]Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 170-9 and 195.

[12]There was a major labor action in 1863, but it was to protest Lincoln's decision to enforce the draft law after initially lax compliance. A march that began with the Park's work force moved downtown and deteriorated into the savage "draft riots." An account of the issues and a harrowing depiction appears in Edward Robb Ellis's *The Epic of New York City* (New York: Kondansha International, 1966, 293-316). See also Rosenzweig and Blackmar 195-6.

[13]Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 166.

iron fence. He persuaded the Commission to erect, instead, a stone wall.[14] Sometimes they did compromise their pastoral intentions, or so it seemed to some website writers. An example was Belvedere Castle, designed by Vaux and fellow architect Jacob Rey Mould, on Vista Rock, the Park's highest point. From what I could tell, based on website descriptions and without the pictures to guide me, the structure was a piece of Victorian retro, with two towers, one circular and the other rectangular, and turrets.[15] Looking out over the Lower Reservoir, part of the Croton water system, it could have made a claim to pastoralism.

A zoo, like a park, was thought to bring prestige to a city. When the Central Park Zoo was proposed, Vaux objected. Olmsted urged that the zoo be situated on the current site of the Museum of Natural History, across the road from the Park's western boundary. But in 1870 it was built inside the Park, a sign that the two men were losing control over their creation.[16] They went on to design Prospect Park, but dissolved their partnership in 1872.

All the writers regretted that Vaux never won popular recognition for his contribution. He subordinated his interests to advance those of his partner, presumably in order to promote the Park. As a result Olmsted's name is inextricably linked to it. It may be that the consequences were fatal. On a foggy November day in 1895, Vaux's drowned body was recovered from Brooklyn's Gravesend Bay. He was seventy-one. It might or might not have been suicide. Olmsted had become senile and wasn't told until a lucid interval three months later. He himself died eight years later at the age of eighty-one in McLean Asylum, whose grounds he'd designed.[17]

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[14]Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 199.

[15]Due to budgetary constraints, only the right half of Vaux's original plan was built. Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 202.

[16]Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 343-4.

[17]Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 373-4.

Despite the Commission's avowed regard for the common people,[18] it was hard to get to Central Park. As late as 1883, an apartment building constructed next to the West 72nd Street entrance was named "The Dakota," reputedly because it seemed as far from populated Manhattan as the territory for which it was named. I wondered about that. Fifth Avenue, just half a mile away on the Park's east side, was by then a row of mansions. Still, the cost of a horse-drawn carriage ride uptown effectively barred all but the affluent, with their nurse maids and coachmen. Moreover, Olmsted's Park rule barring "commercial wagons," though intended to promote enjoyment of the Park, meant that only the carriages of the well-off could negotiate its scenic drives.[19] The afternoon parade of elegant carriages became a daily spectacle of ostentation that Walt Whitman denounced in 1879 as that "oceanic tide of New York's wealth and gentility."[20]

But the next decade, the mingling of the classes was realized as New York's workers and immigrants moved north. One online commentator[21] asserted that people were drawn to the Park because they had few distractions to turn to. Movies, television and video games weren't even glimmers in the imagination. I'd always thought people in those days created their own diversions. Didn't they sing and accompany themselves on piano? Didn't they sew, compose poems, conduct scientific experiments, write letters the way we talk on cell phones, step to

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[18]See Olmsted, Sr., Frederick Law, *Forty Years of Landscape Architecture: Central Park*, Frederick Law Olmstead, Jr. and Theodora Kimball, editors: Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, MIT Press Paperback Edition, 1973. Olmstead quotes from the Park Commissioners' Report of 1870, which I assume he either authored or approved, as follows: "The gratification, within justifiable limits, of the people has been the end sought to be obtained... It offers wide opportunities and abundant facilities for exercise, for rest, for rural suggestion, and for perceptive education" (406).

[19]Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 245.

[20]Walt Whitman, *Complete Prose Works*. Philadelphia, 1892, 135. Also, Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 224.

[21]Witold Rybczynski, in a July 14, 1999 *Atlantic Unbound* interview. Rybczynski is author of an Olmsted biography entitled *A Clearing in the Distance*. The interview appears at URL: http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/interviews/ba990714.htm

intricate formal dances? Weren't their courtships drawn out and didn't family matters occupy immense time and energy? Apparently not so, at least not universally. I came across an assertion that some civic-minded New Yorkers intended Central Park to give common people an outlet besides their saloons.[22]

An 1895 photograph taken inside the Park shows tall buildings, such as the Dakota, on the skyline.[23] Communities spread along the Park's east and west borders as the subway, which opened in 1904, stretched ever farther north. Harlem was soon thriving on the Park's northern boundary at 110th Street. But now Central Park was competing with Coney Island, which drew double the number of Park visitors in the 1890s. Other forms of recreation were also winning the public's affections. In 1908 the Manhattan Business Directory listed 123 movie theaters.[24]

It proved impossible to preserve a truly pristine rural quality in such an urban location; the delights of nature alone couldn't attract enough visitors to justify the Park's expense. Belvedere Castle and the zoo had been the first compromises. Throughout the twentieth century, benefactors donated hundreds of fountains and statues commemorating the imaginary and the real, from Hans Christian Anderson to Alice in Wonderland, Alexander von Humboldt to the Civil War's 107th Regiment. Restaurants, children's rides and tennis courts flourished. The Heckscher Playground, built in 1926 and consisting of four and a half acres of swings, jungle gyms and wading pools, drew families from all over the city.

Even so, by 1934 the Park was in a state of neglect.[25] That year its fortunes changed again when Robert Moses, builder of twentieth century New York, was appointed Park

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[22] Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 310.

[23] The photographer was "Byron" and the picture's title is "Skating in Central Park." Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 375.

[24] Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 384-386.

[25] For a vivid description of the Park's degradation in the early 1930s, see Caro, Robert A., *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*: New York, Knopf, 1974, 334-336.

Commissioner. A political reformer, he demolished the Central Park Casino, the restaurant that symbolized Tammany corruption and Prohibition gangsterism. Mayor Jimmy Walker had held court there until falling from office in 1932. In its place, though not the same location, Moses evicted the sheep that had grazed in the Park's west side and transformed their barn at 66th Street into a new restaurant, "Tavern on the Green."[26]

Moses embraced cars as the next big thing and adapted Central Park's carriageways to accommodate them.[27] He covered over the long-ignored Lower Reservoir with the Great Lawn. Believing public spaces were for play rather than contemplation[28], a populist philosophy that the online commentators found an ironic twist on his autocratic style, he built baseball fields and handball courts. The online commentators considered the six hundred playgrounds he built utilitarian and bunker-like, but acknowledged that benches allowed mothers and nurses to watch the children.

How much could I trust the stories I read about Moses, more powerful than any New York politician past or present? Rosenzweig and Blackmar recount the story of the 1956 confrontation between Moses's bulldozers and West Side mothers opposed to their children's play area being turned into Tavern on the Green's parking lot. Press cameras witnessed the event, and Moses lost in court.[29] Olmsted might also have had confrontations, but back then there were no cameras. Moses was a product of his times, and in so many ways.

In *The Power Broker*,[30] Robert Caro wrote that Moses destroyed neighborhoods by dissecting them with the Cross-Bronx Expressway. But I knew from Alison that authorization for

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[26]Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 454. The sheep were moved to Prospect Park.

[27]Rosenzweig and Blackmar note wryly that Moses, champion of the automobile, didn't himself drive. He had no need to. A perk of his job was a chauffeur (491).

[28]See, e.g., Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 449.

[29]Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 481-3.

[30]See footnote 24 for the book's citation.

this project had been obtained before Moses took office. On the other hand, he intended to build the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway right down Henry Street, in the heart of our neighborhood. Had he carried it out, I'd never have known the place I've called home for many years. Thankfully, the Brooklyn Heights Association defeated the plan. Moses responded by pressing two levels of the BQE against the cliff that descends from Brooklyn Heights to the East River and cantilevering the Promenade on top. This engineering feat not only preserved the neighborhood, but it actually gave Brooklyn Heights its most celebrated feature, hardly the action of a vindictive man bent on pursuing his projects at any cost.

Moses resigned as Commissioner in 1960 and the Park evolved again. Its first political rally, against the Vietnam War, was held in 1966. There were love-ins and mass concerts.[31] When money woes and reaction hit the City in the seventies and early eighties, management passed to the private Central Park Conservancy, which banned rock concerts with a nod from the U.S. Supreme Court,[32] even though symphony concerts and operas, their audiences deemed less rowdy, continued to be performed.

Reading about Central Park in the eighties, I was also reviewing the time I'd lived in the city, where I arrived in 1979. On December 3, 1980 John Lennon was murdered in front of the Dakota, his New York home. Three years later Strawberry Fields, where nothing is real, was made real at the Central Park entrance nearest the Dakota on the building's hundredth anniversary. Reading about the 1982 anti-nuclear protest, I was reminded how I'd walked around and around the long perimeter of a grass rectangle. With 750,000 participants, it wasn't only the largest demonstration in Central Park, but also in U.S. history. June 12, was it? The Internet was

[31]Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 493-8.
[32]Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 518.

the next best thing to a diary.

Despite Central Park's reputation for prowlers and thieves, crime has been lower than elsewhere in the City.[33] It has been living room and bedroom to today's homeless, yesterday's hobos, with whom it has a long and mixed record. There are picnickers and hip-hop musicians, tourists taking pictures and ornithologists studying rare species in the Ramble. Rock concerts have returned, along with the occasional political rally.

Nature as destroyer; nature as recollection in tranquility; nature as competitive sport; nature as innocence; nature as dumping ground; nature as commercial opportunity; nature as educator. Central Park has proven nature is many things.

The authors on the Internet bickered over how Olmsted would have felt about today's Park. Some assumed with dismay. Others argued his respect for democracy would have won him over. As for Vaux, I like to believe the man who had given up fame for the sake of the Park's success would have embraced its statues, concerts and rollerbladers. Although they went against his plan, they'd brought the crowds and thus enabled management to preserve much of the Park's rural feel he'd fought for.

Central Park owes debts not only to a few great men, though they accomplished so much. I couldn't shake the ghosts of people unappreciated in their time, from the Seneca Villagers to the laborers wearing themselves out during ten-hour workdays under an August sun. Nor the residents of those uptown asylums cleared away for the Park. At least one asylum had been for the disabled. People with disabilities aren't bound together by ethnic heritage, those elusive threads that make a cloth of history. Even so, I felt a vicarious sorrow. They'd had no Andrew

[33]Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 478-80.

Williams to make an official, if futile, note of protest. They'd existed only to vanish.

After the meeting in our neighbors' apartment, we started getting letters from local legislators. The Brooklyn Bridge Park was to be seventy acres (truly a paddock by Central Park standards) and would run from Piers 1 through 5, along the East River and New York Bay. It would incorporate tiny Empire Fulton Park, where Alison had painted a water color and I'd read the end of a novel. It would welcome restaurants and other enterprises to bring in revenue. Looking from sea level over to Manhattan's financial district, the Statue of Liberty and the other landmarks of New York Bay, it would be a spectacular setting. All that was certain. But the history of Central Park told me that the desultory discussion in our neighbors' apartment would lead one day to something that none of us could forecast.

4

Alison and I decided to tour Belvedere Castle. We took the C Train and entered the Park at 81st Street. The castle turned out to be tiny. I measured its width as forty paces, a suitably old-fashioned scale, and its height at a few flights of steps. Although made of rough stones, the walls were proportioned and their ends sculpted with straight edges and curves. Stone molding ran shoulder-high along the structural walls, while carved granite topped the surface of the low walls along the walkways. Birds sang away inside the castle's roof. Alison gasped as I ran my hand along a wall toward bird droppings.

She described diminutive angular arches with spaghetti cross-pieces intensifying the saturated greens beyond the castle's warm grays. She talked about the views over a lake, the Delacorte open air "Shakespeare in the Park" theater before us and dense woods all around. But I couldn't get the hang of the castle as a whole. She said it made sense because the design was so

eccentric. I said the entire concept was odd. Castles came out of medieval Europe and had no place in America. She contended they fitted in with the Romantic period. I conceded that at least Belvedere Castle wasn't as grandiose as the railroad barons and bankers' homes from that era. I decided the castle that warm afternoon was beautiful.

Standing on the ramparts with the woods stretching away below me, I recalled the neighborhood park of my boyhood, when I'd been able to see. I'd entered it after cycling down a long hill of suburban houses. There was a lake for paddle boats over on the right and lawns spread out to the woods on the horizon. One day I found a stream leading to a disused factory. I wondered why no one else strayed from the park to that spot. Later I realized the stream had to have been polluted. I didn't think to ask myself why the park's planners had left it untouched or not fenced it off. It simply hadn't occurred to me that the park could have been planned.

In that long-ago park, I'd look up at the sky and watch the clouds float by in case some celestial man winked at me from around a puff of cumulus. I'd wait for an imaginary, angelic girl to walk toward me from the far trees. Sometimes I rode my bike all the way down there just to see the trailing strands of her hair, though knowing I'd never find her.

Standing there on Belvedere Castle, I wondered what exactly made a park a park. I'd known parks on tops of mountains, ones with roller coasters, others by the sea, suburban parks with barbecue pits. In the West and in Africa there were parks where animals more or less roamed. A park was as many places as the memories of the people who had attended the meeting with the candidate. In our neighbors' living room, we hadn't been talking about the same thing. It wasn't possible.

With so many concepts to work with, how did a planner ever accomplish anything? With so much to negotiate, how did a politician?

5

"Isn't it funny how we went to meet the candidate but all we did was spout off?"

I was sitting with our neighbor, Jenny, under the shade trees at the north end of the Promenade on a hot Saturday afternoon.

"I wish they wouldn't make merit pay a political issue. It would ruin the understanding among teachers and between teachers and kids. Only teachers know how true this is."

"You convinced me when you said merit pay would motivate some teachers to help students cheat."

"I liked him, though," she said. "Didn't you get a good feeling about him?"

Politics are messy. She accepted it.

I said, "I've been thinking how miraculous it is that we go from idea to public meetings, then to planning, then to building. Each step is so difficult and involves so many people, I wonder how we make it past the public debate phase, never mind to completion. And yet here we are, with all of this." I waved at the Brooklyn Bridge, the Staten Island ferry, a container ship she'd mentioned earlier down at the Atlantic Avenue Pier. "And then I thought how life imitates politics. I could tell you step by step the course of my life: the schools I attended, my family's moves from suburb to suburb, my choice of college, then law school, then the kind of law I practice, deciding where I want to live. I could tell you about all the steps between, and I still can't fathom how I find myself chatting here on the Promenade in Brooklyn."

"I was born in Brooklyn," she said, "and I couldn't explain all the steps, either."

Alison was on her way from art class to join us for a walk. I imagined catching a glimpse of her, wide-brimmed hat shadowing her face and spilling out curls of hair, as she strode along

the Promenade. Before noticing us, she'd have her inward look.

Jenny said, "I hope they arrange access to the new park so that we aren't overrun. The streets are crowded as it is."

As if to dramatize her concern, music with a thudding bass from a portable radio moved from right to left before us. In another era the radio's carriers would have been stared down. With cultural diversity in ascendency, peace and quiet had lost their power of persuasion. Nature as home entertainment center, I thought. Yet we understood the radio blarers were trying to make some statement. I, too, was trying to find my voice. Nature as democracy, just as Olmstead and Vaux had advocated.

"Alison and I went to Belvedere Castle last Saturday," I said. "Ever been?"

"I love Belvedere Castle!"

Harking back to my first reaction, I said, "I find a medieval castle in a place meant for contemplating nature strange."

"I don't look at it that way."

"No?"

"No, I don't. I remember going there once. I must have been waiting for someone and climbed up to the castle to read. But you know what, I didn't read a single sentence. It pulled me into its aura."

I remembered how aware I'd become of the beautiful afternoon at the castle.

"It did," she said, apparently deciding her statement felt right. "It's a fantasy."

"Nature as fantasy," I said.

"Hm?"

"That meeting got me to look into the history of Central Park. It made me aware that we

look upon nature in so many ways. I didn't think of fantasy as one of them."

"But it can be, don't you think? I'm not talking Disney, you understand. I mean the fantasy that allows us to enjoy nature and helps us become more ourselves. Oh, here comes Alison." Jenny half stood and waved.

Alison called out, "Hi," an audible smile taking over the inward look I'd assumed.

It had been a long time since I'd ridden my bike to the disused factory. That ride had become as much a fantasy as the man behind the clouds and the angelic girl. Who was that man? He probably came out of Arthur Rackham, illustrator of the books of my childhood. And the girl? Whoever she was, I believed she prefigured Alison. The intersecting lives of Olmsted and Vaux had started me thinking about the links, fortuitous or ordained, between people.

There were always links. Fantasy must be the link between who we were and who we wanted to be. Or between who we were and what we wanted to achieve. As Jenny said, fantasy helped us become ourselves.

But how did a fantasy come into being? And again, how did a park?

Alison nudged my shoulder. She'd apparently been saying hi without my hearing her. "Hey, are you on the same planet?"

I looked up from the bench. "What's a planet?"

THE END