

(October 2008)

Dear friends,

Greetings from New York! I have been here for about a week and a half now. New York is the same as it always was, only more so – still huge and fast-paced and full of the very best of everything available 36 hours a day. As David Letterman memorably said, New York: the city that never sleeps, and looks like hell in the morning. Except New York looks beautiful in the morning. The traffic doesn't move, but the city looks beautiful.

I feel a curious ambivalence about the hugeness and relentlessness and the crowding and the skyscrapers and so on. It is exciting, but also exhausting. I grew up here, and so it feels like home, and yet it also feels very strange. As I walk the same streets I walked as a child and as a teenager and young man, everything feels exactly right – the trees look the way trees are supposed to look, the pattern of lights at night look just the way I first learned a street should look. The massive roof lines on the streets – so high, so wide, not only on Park Avenue but on ordinary streets like West 35th – those are my native hills. I know just where everything is – I don't need a map to find anything, my feet remember the way. I was in the American Museum of Natural History just the other day, and passed the diorama of Peter Stuyvesant and the Indians I first saw 60 years ago. I felt like I was still wearing short pants and an Eton cap.

But on the other hand, it is very wearing. The noise, the pace, the crowds, the traffic, the horns, the intensity radiating everywhere, the ubiquitous sense that this is The Major Leagues, and if you can make it there you can make it anywhere, the very fact that this is the absolute center of the whole world – it is a little hard for me these days. It was a great place to grow up, but it was good that I left – I don't have the stamina for it. For two or three weeks, though, it is wonderful to be here. And it isn't all Times Square – Riverside Drive is a quiet leafy street, as beautiful as any in Paris (well, *almost* any). East 74th Street, where I am staying on my brother Christopher's couch, is pretty nice too. So is West 111th Street. The buildings (when you lift your eyes above the ravaged ground floors) are a museum of architecture – Beaux Arts and Italian Renaissance and Art Deco and exuberant Victorian and even some good post-modern. I have been riding the buses rather than the subways – with the gridlocked traffic it takes much longer, but I am in no hurry – and there is always something to see from the bus windows.

And the museums are better than they ever were, especially the Metropolitan, where I have already been several times. I have been twice to the Michael Rockefeller Wing – the first time to the Oceania section, the second time to the African – looking at one jaw-dropping item after another. The same in the French paintings, and the Egyptian Wing, and the European decorative arts rooms, and indeed everywhere in the greatest museum in the world. This weekend I am going to check out the Tibetan armor. I went to a special exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, about Van Gogh's painting of night scenes – my

brother Adam got a free press ticket. Later I took my ease in the sculpture garden, in the exact spot where I used to sit when I was a member 50 years ago. *Plus ça change ...*

Museums and theatres and friends and family and the streets of my youth – a very good way to spend a few weeks in the softest, gentlest, most clement October I can ever remember. I left my coat behind in San Francisco and asked my friend Makiko to FedEx it to me, and then I didn't need it. Tomorrow Christopher and I go up to Yale to deliver huge boxes of family papers to the Library there, and see the room where archivists in white gloves will reverently preserve my parents' old checkbooks. And on Sunday I come back from the center of the world to cool foggy San Francisco, where the rooflines are two stories high instead of 60, and shops and restaurants are not open all night, and everything is a lot smaller and quieter and more bite-sized, and nothing is nearly as splendid except the views. And that will be just fine, although I would prefer it if I could take the Metropolitan Museum of Art with me, and put it perhaps in my back yard.

David

Since this is a postcard, here is a picture (by Andreas Feininger, from sometime in the 1940s).



(April 2009)

Dear Friends: Greetings from the East Coast!

I arrived in Washington on April 13, as the last of the cherry blossoms floated down on soft spring breezes to cover the brick sidewalks of Georgetown and Capitol Hill and the leafy lawns of Chevy Chase. It takes an Eastern spring to remind me how raw California is – even in San Francisco spring means that we go from brown to green and then, soon, back to brown again. But a Washington spring is full of colors with the trees in bloom, cherry and dogwood and magnolia and lilac, and green leaves and wide lawns and cheerful fountains, and broad avenues and gracious mansions and smoothly pillared stone façades. The White House looked somehow different now that Mr. Cool has taken the place of the Usurper. Even the Capitol seemed as if it might harbor some nobility somewhere – but I go too far.

I spent a few days in Washington, seeing friends and my nephew Noah, and going to museums – the new Smithsonian American Indian museum, and the Byzantine collection at Dumbarton Oaks, and a show of 1934 paintings from the Public Works of Art Program, and some fine small Art Deco bronzes by Paulanship. And then I left for New York.

In New York the spring was even gentler and more sensuous than in Washington. The air felt like nothing – the way the water feels in the tropics, when it is the same temperature as the air and you can hardly tell the difference. The magnolias were in bloom in front of the monumental apartment houses on Fifth Avenue, graceful flowery boughs adding delicate accents to the buildings' strong straight lines. New York, for all its energy and verve, can have a hard and angry edge, but the breeze and the flowers washed it away, and without the hard edge New York is irresistible. Then it got hotter, and then it got colder, and then it rained, and then it blew, but the city remained transformed by the memory of the wonderful softness. Maybe you had to be there.

So I settled in at my brother Christopher's house on East 74th Street. I saw friends and relatives and went to theatres and museums and sat in the park and ate the hot dogs and kebabs available it seems on every corner, and also bagels and lox and matzo ball soup, and foul-smelling cheeses you can't find in California, and drank Dr. Brown's diet black cherry soda. I have been to the Metropolitan Museum three times already – to see photographs by Walker Evans (and his famous collection of picture postcards), and a show of late Bonnard interiors, as colorful as Matisse but with the soft focus of Monet, and just today to the 19th century European painting rooms – there must have been a billion dollars worth of Van Goghs in one room alone (the Irises were my favorite this time, but I have a different favorite every time I see them). I saw a program of very funny one-act plays by Ethan Coen, in a little theatre on West 20th Street, and have just come back from a brilliant production of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (Pulitzer Prize for Drama, 1938). I went to see it because Edward Albee said it was his favorite play, and I

can certainly see why – as a play it is easily spoiled by sentimentality of the Henry Fonda variety, but there was not a milligram of sentimentality in this production. It was the sort of experience that theatres were created for.

And then I walked part of the way home, the spring evening still gentle as a kiss, from Barrow Street in the West Village where the theatre was, past the Waverly Place house where a girl friend of mine lived 45 years ago, past Two Fifth Avenue where my grandmother lived, along Washington Square that Edith Wharton wrote about, to the East Side. I stopped for a while on a bench in Washington Square Park and watched the NYU students frolicking like puppies with their illuminated frisbees. Above them the trees feathered leafily like those of Corot whose paintings I had seen in the Met just that morning. And above the trees, the sky, never quite dark in Manhattan even at midnight, and a bright sickle moon sharp as a knife blade. I have to say it: **I♥NY**.

Also: a boat trip down the East River, past Wall Street and the old red brick warehouses of Brooklyn, past the Statue of Liberty, through the harbor full of ships as it has been for nearly 400 years (no masts now like Whitman wrote about, but the same idea), and out into the Ocean to Sandy Hook, New Jersey (and back again). And also: a ride on a poorly organized Chinese bus to State College, Pennsylvania, for a visit to Joel Solkoff, which once I got there was great fun – we tootled around town doing slaloms and pirouettes in electric power chairs, startling the locals. And a bunch of other stuff too – I have been a busy beaver these past few weeks, like the beaver on the New York City seal.

Still to come: more friends and relations, and more museums, and a retrospective show of fabulous jewelry at Cartier (!), and a jazz club in the Village with my brother Adam, and a reunion at a school I loathed 50 years ago (but I have been reconnecting with my classmates), and then on Sunday on to Boston and more friends, and some work on a project in the peerless library of the Flag Research Center. And then back, finally, on May 7, to San Francisco, which although not the Big Apple and short on cherry blossoms, and it does sleep sometimes, and Edith Wharton never wrote about it, is still and will always be my own foggy sweetheart home.

David