

A Day in New York

Alain Elkann

It had been a few days since I was alone in the house. They were all away for different reasons. Now and then a young Ukrainian man came to do some work on the basement and the garden. His name was Sergio and he spoke Italian with me as he knew no English, no French, or any other languages but Ukrainian and Italian. We had both lived in Italy for many years. He had lived in the country in Umbria, I in Rome. Now we were both in New York for work. Sergio was in his mid-twenties, thin and tall, very pale with brown eyes. He was kind, but extremely stubborn. He rarely smiled and was a pessimist by nature. In New York he refused to visit anything cultural and had no friends. The only thing he liked was having some free time to visit stores that sold electronics. He pretended to know about and understand everything, but he was often wrong.

That morning we had breakfast together at around eight. He only ate white bread and butter, and drank coffee with two spoons of white sugar. He liked to listen to the radio, Ukrainian programmes in particular, songs or sporting events. He loved cars and the Internet. He loved country villages and small towns. He liked order and Italian shoes.

As I said, the house was empty. Anita was in the country, Victoria on vacation in London, Zeno in California, Masha in Europe for a friend's wedding. The dogs were with Anita in the country. When the phone rang I did not answer it. FedEx delivered a parcel for Masha. Francisca, the housekeeper, arrived. She was in a good, smiling mood, but spring was not yet here and it was still cold, one still needed to wear a coat and scarf. It was raining when, after breakfast, Sergio and I set out together to walk to the nearby subway station.

I had not slept well. I had a slight headache and was exhausted by this endless cold winter. I would have loved to have gone away, as I had wanted to so many times before. Every year I thought about

going away, to India, to Chile, to Australia. Many of the people that I knew of my age were ill. They had health problems and did not want to travel much. I was still living as I always had, with no real plans, week after week. Anita was my family, my new family, and Sergio took care of her homes.

We took the wrong train and so had to change. I realised that Sergio was not at ease.

He said to me, "At night the subway is terribly dangerous."

I asked him, "Do you never take the subway?"

"Only sometimes. I prefer the bus because you can see the city outside."

I knew he was lying when he said that he didn't take the subway, although mostly he took taxis.

Sergio refused to speak, or understand, English. It was strange, but he did not want to learn. He knew things, or so he pretended, as he pretended to have a clear taste when he had no taste. But he was a nice fellow. He was honest, but bad tempered. He was slim, proud of the fact that his mother was slim, but the young woman he had married started to bake cakes immediately after they were married and she put on weight. He loved to drive, but he did not drive well.

When we arrived at Columbus Circle it was 10 to 10. I told him, "I am going to the gym. Please pick me up in one hour. Why don't you go to the park now?"

"I would rather go and look at the shops round here."

"OK."

Mary was tall and had short grey hair. She was Irish and came from New Hampshire. She had a good smile and loved to talk about her writer friends, or some of the articles she read in the *New Yorker* or the *New York Review of Books*. I did not know if she had been beautiful as a young woman. She had something, a sort of gentle but firm charisma. When she exercised with me she said many different things that I didn't really understand, but I knew she was excellent at her job. And she talked to me

about John, a mutual friend and a play writer, very well known, a star in his field. Eccentric and with a mysterious life, John loved music and the opera, and only saw a few friends who had something to do with his work. Mary was his lifelong friend and sometimes they took coffee together in a Greek coffee shop on the West Side, where they both lived.

Mary was a widow, but had a boyfriend who was living somewhere in the country. She had children and was devoted to her craft of physiotherapist as much as to her breakfast, which she took at 6 in the morning before going to work at 7. She had coffee, juice and porridge. At night she drank one glass of red wine, not more. She liked to read and sometimes took days off. What were we talking about when I went to her twice a week for my physiotherapy? About very little, because the exercises were very intense and she commented on my every movement, saying things like, "This is good for the hip, the lower back and the abdominals."

I really enjoyed being at Mary's, she was gentle, firm, competent and simple. She was obviously a Liberal, but her boyfriend was a Republican. I never asked her about her husband, or what sort of job he had. What was her boyfriend's job? She never asked me if I was married or if I had a girlfriend. She knew, and was curious about, a lecture that I was preparing, and she knew that I had some problems with one of my children, but she never asked me much about it.

That day we only had a half hour session, but when I came down I found Sergio waiting. On the video screen in front of the elevator I saw that the stock market was slightly down that morning. It was still cold and raining. We had to go somewhere nearby, the Flatiron Building, to buy some tickets. I took Sergio into a very large Italian food store. We were in Little Italy, where there were also several restaurants, and there was a café where we ordered two espressos. Sergio was amazed.

I asked him, "Did you not know this place?"

"No, I did not."

"The coffee is good."

“Yes, it is a real Lavazza!” he said, as if he were a connoisseur of café Espresso.

We went to the New Balance store to try on some sneakers. The salesman was a young man, quite fair, with very short hair and a large smile.

He said to me, “You came here before and bought the same sneakers a few months ago. I served you, do you remember?”

“Yes, I do,” I said.

It was not true.

Sergio watched the sales boy, who was changing the laces in the new shoes, and said, “He is so slow, my God. He is really prepared to do so little,” and we went somewhere else, to buy some stationary before Olga came to have lunch with me.

Olga had worked with me for many years. Both her parents were of Italian origin and her mother was born in Italy. Her home was in Brooklyn and she was raised there with her two sisters. When she married she stayed in Brooklyn and had three children. She was pleasant and smart. We mostly spoke together about work and extremely little about our personal lives, but that day Olga spoke about a long trip she had taken around the world with her then husband-to-be. She repeated many times how good he had been at organising that trip. He was German, but never spoke German to the children. He was a good father.

When I asked her, “How is your marriage going?”

She said, “Ups and downs, like all marriages. It is a lot of work and patience. Now he is away for two weeks, for work.”

“Do you speak on the phone?”

“Not much. Sometimes a pause is good.”

We took a taxi to go uptown. She was going back to the office and I was going to the shrink. I had a few phone calls in the meanwhile, one with an Italian professor friend who wanted to tell me that his book would be published in Italy and he was really pleased about it, and then I spoke to a doctor, and to another friend who was going to Utah for a few days.

The shrink is a man in his seventies. Usually he is dressed in black, or dark brown or burgundy. He looks a bit like the French author Jean-Louis Barrault, and his brown eyes are slightly Chinese. During the entire hour he drinks water. He speaks little, but is opinionated, and he listens to me. After each session I never know if I will go back again, if he has really been of some help. Of course he is smart, and understands the situation, and sometimes gives clear advice. I cannot really say if he really helps me, but I keep going to see him anyway. Maybe I am just lazy. I don't feel like saying much, but this attitude of not saying enough is a constant in my life. I find it difficult to make decisions and to change.

The topic that we face together is very serious, extremely private, and concerns someone who is close to me and has been seriously ill for a long time. Mostly we discuss how I should behave with this person. I wish we could talk about other issues, but there is almost no time because the hour has passed and the session is over. One of the things I resent is that he is expensive, very expensive, and I don't understand what the return is on my investment. Sometimes we talk about other subjects, but not often. Of course, it's similar with Mary, I don't know how good she is for my body and she is expensive, but when you exercise your body and someone tells you precisely what movements you should do at least you know that this is good for you. Analysis is different. But that particular day I felt that the session was positive.

When I went out I walked for a while. The weather was still inclement, but at last the days were longer. Longer days to me are like hope, the hope that soon it will be spring and summer, that I will see flowers again and leaves on the trees. I stopped in front of a department store and went in. I needed to buy some T-shirts.

I went up on the escalator, an old fashioned escalator, and suddenly I saw a woman with dark hair on her way down, and I fell in love with her instantly.

I could not shout, "I love you."

I could not do anything.

She was going down and I was going up.

I reached the following floor and took the escalator down in the hope of seeing her again, but on which floor? I was on the 4th floor. I had seen her between the 3rd and 4th floor. Maybe she was going down to the ground floor and then out. The cosmetics and perfumery department was on the ground floor and she may have stopped there. But the women's department was on the 2nd floor and she might have stopped there. Or even on the 3rd floor, where they had furniture and all sorts of household items.

I was agitated, lost. Maybe she was still in the store. Maybe I would see her again and immediately tell her, "I love you," but how could I be so sure since I had not really seen her? She had passed like a shadow, but I did feel something, so strong, so immediate.

It was such a long time since anything like that had happened in my life, or maybe it had never really happened before. After so many years how could I possibly lose the chance of finding the woman of my dreams? I looked for her everywhere, on the 3rd, the 2nd, the 1st, the ground floor. But she was gone, gone for ever.

How terrible to know that she existed. She was, like me, in New York, but she belonged to another life and we were not meant to meet. Who knows, maybe we would, but I did not see her well enough, maybe I would not even recognise her. Of course I would, and I would stop her and tell her all about how much I liked her.

I could not stop thinking of her, when suddenly I started to remember a story that had happened to me in Paris, many, many years before.

It was hot, August, and I had to go to the station and take a train to Zurich as I was going to spend some time in the Swiss Alps with my girlfriend and a friend. But suddenly I remembered that I needed a pair of jeans, so I went to buy them in a shop I knew on Rue des Charrettes, near Place Saint-Sulpice. I found a pair and went into cabin number 1 to try them on, and I saw a beautiful young woman entering cabin number 2 and she too was trying on a pair of jeans. We came out of the cabins together, and she asked to try on another pair. So I asked to try on another pair myself.

She did not pay any attention to me, but I recognised her because she was a famous actress. I was so terribly excited that we were both trying our jeans on so nearby, and we were both half naked. But I did not have the courage to talk to her, and I left with my new pair of jeans and went to the station and left for Switzerland. Yes, I was shy.

I also remembered how many times, as a very young man, I had gone every night to a nightclub to see a girl who had a fantastic body, curly hair, and danced really well. But I did not have the courage to get close to her and tell her, "I like you. Can I dance with you?"

I always felt that there was a strange destiny in love encounters. When I met Anita for the first time, a few years ago, it was destiny. She was introduced to me by a friend for reasons too tedious to recount, and she came to see me. She came to my apartment for lunch. The food was not up to standard and I talked too much, but I asked her to stay, I did not want her to go away. She did leave, but soon we saw each other again, and again, and again. Now Anita was in the country, out of town. I would join her tomorrow, or the next day.

I was walking downtown and somehow daydreaming, still thinking of the woman with the long black hair that I had lost. Would I really have changed my life because of her? Who knows? How many times I have dreamed of changing my life, and then life has changed me.

I thought a lot about my past, about the many places I had been to, the friends and the cities that I had loved. But now I was late and I had to go home, change and go out for dinner with John, the friend I had in common with Mary.

For a few years, more or less since the time I met Anita, I had started to see John again, quite regularly. It was as if he was my elder brother or someone close like that. We had known each other for years. I remember him in Paris, in a hotel suite in Milan, and in London and New York. Even when I did not see him someone would talk to me about him, this splendid Jewish dandy and writer, with his amazing smile, his collection of tweed jackets, his habit and pleasure for tête-à-tête dinners. Sometimes we had lunch together, and lunch would be in the same place, at twelve thirty. Right on cue he would leave and go back to work.

Sergio was waiting for me at home. I had a problem with my iPad, I could not send emails. I called Anita, who is very capable in the use of iPhones and iPads, and she said, "Go to the Apple store, 14th Street."

She was right, but I could not be sure I had enough time to go there, come home and go out again to see John in the French restaurant where he wanted to have dinner in a part of the Lincoln Center at 7.15. So I asked Sergio to come with me, and he seemed pleased because he needed to find a new connector for his iPad.

He said, "I don't think I have ever been to the Apple store before."

He paused, and said, "No, I did go once before, with you. Last summer, when you bought your computer."

It was raining, there was a queue, and we had to wait 15 minutes before someone came and said, "Now you have to go to the 3rd floor and wait there for someone to take care of you."

I forgot to say that on the way to the Apple store on 14th Street I saw that there was a church of the Madonna di Guadalupe. I had not known that there was such a church in New York and remembered when, with my second wife, we went to the outskirts of Mexico City to see the sanctuary of the Madonna di Guadalupe. I remembered that on one side there was the old church which was closed, and there was a new church with the sanctuary, and you stood on an escalator and had about 30 seconds to stand in front of the Madonna; and then your time was over.

I called Anita to tell her about my discovery and she answered, "Of course, I know it. It's just next to my doctor and my lab."

"I see..."

I went towards the elevator with Sergio and a man told us it was out of order. Immediately Sergio said, "As usual nothing works, always problems."

I laughed and we went up the staircase. Someone told us to sit on two tall stools and wait for whoever was in charge to come and repair the iPad. He came, inspected my iPad and said, "There is a problem with the server. The iPad is OK, but you have to check with your server."

I did not know what my server was, but Sergio said he knew who to call and ask about my server.

It was getting late and I had to go. John was always on time, I could not be late. It was cold, raining. I found a taxi while Sergio stayed behind in the Apple store, where he was going to buy the connector he was looking for.

The taxi driver was a robust man with grey hair. I asked the usual question, "Where are you from?"

He replied, "From Pakistan."

I said, "Once I went to Pakistan, to Islamabad, years ago. And you?"

"I have lived here for thirty-five years."

“Do you ever go back?”

“Yes, once a year, but there is no work there and my family is here. I go there to see my friends. Sometimes I stay for two months.”

He made a mistake. I had said 64th Street and Broadway and he was on Amsterdam and 71st. He apologised and brought me back to 64th Street. The restaurant was full, and the head waiter told me that John was already there. He was wearing a navy blue cardigan and a dark grey flannel shirt, which I found strange. He ordered red wine by the glass instead of a bottle. I knew he had some health problems, Mary had told me that, but he looked perfectly well. After a while he told me that he was wearing a machine that was monitoring him for 24 hours, an electrocardiogram.

“A Doppler,” I said, and he did not answer.

We talked about the restaurant, about Anita and about the Hamptons. He wanted to know precisely where her house was, because for many summers he had rented a house in Sagaponack, before moving to Sag Harbor.

I asked him, “Was this when your kids were young?”

“Yes, and for many years after.”

We talked about Michael, a friend of ours. John said that he had quit his marriage and was living in Italy by the sea.

“He said that he was confused in his marriage because he was stoned.”

“How funny! Still stoned at his age! He must be over seventy.”

I don’t know why, but John wanted to change the wine, to switch from the Canadian red we were drinking to a Pinot Noir. We ate “coq au vin” and he pretended it was delicious. I did not contradict him, instead I asked him, “Do you think a lot about your past?”

“Sometimes.”

“I was wondering if it was just because we were young or if it really was better then than now. I mean to say, when I was in my twenties and thirties I met incredible people, artists, musicians, photographers, writers and designers who became legends. I also have the impression that money was much less important and was not such an issue. Of course there were some very rich people, but things were more artistic and less glossy at that time. I remember when I was 22 or 23 years old, in the early seventies, being at Andy Warhol’s house in Montauk. Bob Colacello was there, and Ara Gallant, the Mamas and the Papas, the Rolling Stones, Maxime de La Falaise cooking. Paul Morrissey was there, and Peter Brant; and I remember Jane Holzer’s mansion on South Hampton. We went there with Fred Hughes, and then he took me to a smaller house near the village. A very kind man in simple clothes with white hair offered tea to Warhol, Hughes and me, and at a certain point he very politely asked Warhol if he wanted to see his work. Warhol said, “Yes,” so he opened a door and took us into his studio. At that point I understood that he was Roy Lichtenstein.

I had the privilege to be part of that sort of life in other places. I remember Rome, when one was going out for dinner with Alberto Moravia, Pasolini, Bertolucci, Fellini.... I mean is that kind of talent for life still around?”

John seemed amused and annoyed at the same time by my conversation and by my name dropping.

“Yes, there were interesting, talented people, some that you met, others that I met. But there are still stars today, old and young stars. What I can tell you is that you have a much more interesting life today. You have your life. And New York is doing you a lot of good.”

“So you don’t believe that the past was better?”

“This is too long a conversation my boy.”

I understood that my topic of nostalgia was over, and I said, “When are you publishing a new article?”

“In the next issue of the *New York Review*.”

“What is going to happen to the *Review* when Bob Silvers retires? Nobody will be able to do such a fantastic job, with such devotion to the metier of editor.”

“You are right, he is extraordinary. I had lunch with him on Sunday and he was as great as usual. Someone else will take over, but it won’t be the same. OK my boy, let’s go home.”

He was visibly tired, but he smiled and said some nice words to the waitress, a young woman that he seemed to know well.

When I was going back home in the taxi I felt that I had annoyed him with my obsession for my brilliant past vis-à-vis the life of today. Maybe he was just tired, maybe he found me boring, maybe, I don’t know, I spoke too much about my own life.

I phoned Anita and told her that the dinner was so-so, and the food so-so.

“I don’t know why you have to go up and down town all the time like that...”

I don’t remember exactly what else we talked about.

Sergio was already asleep because he was leaving the next day, and I went to bed still thinking of John and the fact that I might have displeased him. So I wrote him a text message to wish him good luck with his “Doppler” test and watched TV. There was a documentary on TCM about the Fondas, Henry, Jane and Peter. It was an old documentary and sounded dated, but it was so very American. And it was also interesting, the relationship between these children and their father, and clearly Jane Fonda was madly in love with her father.

Alain Elkann. Bridgehampton. April 10th, 2015.