

Washington Heights is one of the most dramatically hilly sections of Manhattan. Here, for once, the grid has been obliged to adjust to topography. There are steep stairs linking one street to another, as in European cities; and the catacomb-like subway stations with cavernous, arched ceilings and elaborate tile-work are built into the rock-face at such a depth as to require elevators. Certain east-west thoroughfares, such as West 181st Street, accommodate the land by gently curving to their termination at the peak of the cliffs. West 181st Street, once the heart of a Jewish neighborhood, retains a few kosher food stores and restaurants; and the street still acts as an unofficial barrier, dividing the southern end of Washington Heights, which is largely hospitals and Hispanic tenements, from the more Irish and Jewish northern end, with its middle-class cooperative enclaves and nursing homes.

If you walk downhill towards the river on West 181st Street, you come to Cabrini Boulevard (formerly Northern Avenue), one of New York's tucked-away treasures. Here are some remarkable apartment house enclaves, built during the 1920s and 30s, when city developers still thought it economically viable to erect castles for the middle class. On the eastern side of the street is the older Hudson View Gardens, a Tudor extravaganza in brown brick, with simulated half-timbering of dark brown wooden diagonals crisscrossing the facade. The apartment houses were built by George F. Pelham in 1924-25, and stand at attention along the street-wall, correctly if somewhat stodgily, like a regiment of Tudor cottages on growth hormones. Across the way from them, on the western side of Cabrini Boulevard, is Castle Village, built by Pelham's son, George F. Pelham II, in 1938-39. This is a more frankly up-to-date and, to my mind, fascinating high-rise apartment complex, stretching all the way from West 181st to West 186th Street. It has been maintained in tiptop shape: the white window frames all look newly painted, the apple-red brick facades spanking clean. The "architecture" of Castle Village, if one should even call it that, attempts nothing ambitious; it is meant to convey cozy comfort, familiarity. The one original touch is that all five buildings are in the shape of a cross, which maximizes river views (eight out of nine apartments get them on each floor).

It was this X shape that caught the eye of Lewis Mumford, and prompted him to write a "Sky Line" column about Castle Village in *The New Yorker*. Unlike the architectural critics we have today, who focus obsessively on the plum commissions assigned or not assigned to a dozen international cutting-edge stars, Mumford was curious about the everyday built environment actually going up around him. After praising the enclave's attention to "Light, air, space, gardens—the substance and ornament of all good architecture," and the "simple vernacular of our period: wide, steel casement windows; a plain, unadorned facade," Mumford nit-picked the color of the brick, the "barricade"-like repetition of five identical, large buildings and the X plan's space-wastage compared to "a zigzag or sawtooth layout." He concluded even-handedly: "The builder of Castle Village is to be congratulated for going as far as he has gone, but he is to be reproached for not going further, since he had perhaps the finest site remaining in New York for residential purposes."

It remains a fine site, with the cruciform buildings set discreetly back from the generous grounds. What captivates me most about Castle Village is the broad lawn sweeping down to the ledge that overlooks Fort Washington Park, the George Washington Bridge and the Hudson River. In the late afternoon, this secluded garden is a pleasure out of an Italian countryside, with quaint stone fence, benches, sitting nooks and magnificent trees, which give form and shade to the whole. Whether the public has or has not the right to enjoy this view—a sign on the lawn says "For Residents Only"—I always partake, and no one ever stops me. The former, Gothicized estate of Dr. Charles Paterno that once rested on the site may be gone, but you can still imagine,

from the grounds' placement and from one remaining fragment, a pergola on the northern end of the garden, its picturesque configuration atop this hill overlooking New Jersey.

If you continue north along Cabrini Boulevard, past Mother Cabrini High School and Cabrini Chapel, the buildings suddenly cease along the western side of the street and give way to a mysterious wooden railing, which overlooks a steeply treacherous, pathless and largely impassable forest on the border between Fort Washington Park and Fort Tryon Park. When I lived in Inwood, in the mid-1960s, I used to be fascinated by this stretch of rural wildness. With no trouble at all, merely editing out distant traffic noise, I could imagine it the setting for some feral hermit's existence. At twenty, prematurely plunged into my first marriage, I was soothed by the wilderness glimpsed from Cabrini Terrace, so at odds did it seem with the surrounding *gemutlich* apartment buildings and bungalows of Washington Heights and Inwood, where elderly German Jews lived on reparation checks, and doctors' families occupied the spacious ground floor. These amiably middle-class homes soothed me as well, but in a different way: we were lucky to have found refuge amidst them. Upper Manhattan, though thoroughly respectable, wasn't fashionable enough to be pricey; and financially needy newlyweds like us could still find decent apartments at bargain rents. I remember living there with Carol during my last year at college, 1964, and several years after, and that feeling of still technically being on Manhattan Island, but far removed from the careerist energy and pulse and glamour, "the rat race," as we enviously called it; how poet-friends from the East Village had to be coaxed to visit us, and took several books with them on the subway uptown, as if for a three-days' journey; how I'd show them around, proud of the area's obscurity, its backwater charm: those private bungalows on Payson Avenue, with bricks the color of dried blood and casement windows with black hinges overlooking hilly Inwood Park, which Carol and I, mocking their propriety, would nonetheless fantasize retiring to in old age.

The dream of that first marriage was to bypass youth and ascend straight to a responsibly shared life in double work-harness. The goal seemed reasonable at the time, since we got along so companionably, but it proved impossible because we were way too young and exaggerated our maturity—a fact that only surfaced when life began to test us.

I was twenty-two when the screws tightened. I mention my age partly to exonerate myself in advance for bad behavior. It was not that I behaved so despicably, which could at least allow me the retrospective allure of villainy, as that I was so passive and overwhelmed and inadequate to the challenge. My wife was also young at the time, but she behaved with far more womanly self-respect; age is not the whole story. Nevertheless, we were babies: two baby literati, presuming ourselves writers with no assurance from the world that we ought to. For the moment, we supported ourselves by free-lance editing, tape transcribing, ghostwriting—"taking in wash," we called it. We barely survived, using nearby Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital's emergency room as our family physician; and when starvation threatened, Carol went out and got a full-time job. I'm especially embarrassed to recall that part: but there seemed to be an implicit understanding between us, typical of the period, that I was the literary genius of the house and needed to hone my writing, whereas she could develop hers any old time.

One day Carol came home and told me she was pregnant. We had been wondering what had happened to her period, but I took the firm position that there was no point in worrying about what might not be the case. Now it was the case. What to do? We began by taking long walks, up and down the hills of Manhattan's northern tip, analyzing the pros and cons. I cannot think of those discussions without associating them with the terrain, the Cloisters and Fort Tryon Park where we picnicked if the weather was good, the frozen-in-time residential sections of Inwood, and our feverish agonizing, dropping our voices in the presence of passersby when our vocabulary became too explicit ("curetage," "trimester"). One night on Broadway, near the Dyckman House, we were stopped in our tracks by a couple clouting each other outside an Irish saloon, and we were

unsure how to take this: as a recommendation to start a family or not, since everything that crossed our path seemed an omen.

The most painful part of these increasingly nippy walks (it was autumn, edging over into winter) was that neither one of us seemed able to express a strong opinion about what he or she wanted. We had that young lovers' symbiotic habit of sympathizing with the other's viewpoint; and, like detectives hired to shadow one another, we watched carefully for signs of deep, unequivocal feeling, the better to support it. Not sure what my true feelings were, I told myself: If Carol really wants this baby, I will back her up, we'll somehow make ends meet. I had always imagined having children someday. The fact that the opportunity had come sooner rather than later—well, I could adjust to the challenge of fatherhood, I guessed. I had a great desire to be an adult. I also wanted to act nobly in a crisis, to shoulder my end of responsibility, or at least to appear in public to do so. Why should Carol have to make a sacrifice and give up a baby she wanted? If, however, she feels not yet emotionally ready for a baby, or thinks it would get in the way of her career, I'll support her decision to end the pregnancy. So far, she said she wasn't sure she *did* want it. But perhaps she was only saying that because she was uncertain whether she could depend on me, my being such an egotist. If I were to start saying I was sure I wanted this baby—which felt in any case like the mature, adult thing to say—she would undoubtedly—or most probably—come around to a certainty of wanting it. My pretend-decisiveness would conquer her hesitation, and, once the baby was born, she would, I felt confident, become a wonderfully devoted mother, and this devotion would in the end dissolve what remained of my own ambivalence. In fact, she might never even notice my ambivalence if I played the pro-baby role with enough conviction.

But of course, nothing goes unnoticed in marriage. And the fact that it was thought of as a role, not intrinsic to my character, meant that it could be superceded by another role ("If you really want this abortion I will support you all the way"), which is indeed what happened, until the two roles began alternating in such quick succession, as we went over and over the same ground, that in the end, understandably, she stopped listening to me. She turned inward. I began to sense a quiet will gathering inside her and hunkering down; we were no longer belaboring the topic as much. In truth, I began to miss that operatic agonizing; a part of me could have gone on and on with it. About that time, my wife began seeing a woman psychotherapist, and I suspected that they were working it out between themselves. Whether or not this suspicion was correct, the day came when Carol calmly informed me that she had made up her mind to have an abortion. It was fixed, final, no more discussion.

As abortions in 1966 were illegal, we would have to become outlaws. We asked around, and heard about a saintly woman physician named Dr. Elizabeth Something-or-other, in Philadelphia. Carol made an appointment to see her, and we took the train to Philadelphia. At first it seemed like a tourist adventure: we talked about seeing the Philadelphia Museum, and exploring a city neither of us knew. On the day in question we were too nervous to look at paintings, but we killed an hour or two walking around the historic district, admiring the old iron lampposts and cobblestone streets and Federal-style row-houses in which ordinary people still lived; and, with that hunger for normal life which must have sprung from the desperate little act we were contemplating, I predicted aloud that we would someday come to live here, in one of these same charming historic townhouses, as a reward for our current hardships.

The doctor's waiting room was crowded. We sat there patiently, and finally it was Carol's turn. I glimpsed Dr. Elizabeth for a few seconds, beckoning my wife inside: she was an elegantly poised brunette in a navy blue angora sweater, nicely put together (I placed her in my harem of erotic fantasies instantly, jerk that I am). Thirty minutes later Carol re-emerged, looking thoughtful and sad. For some reason I can no longer remember, Dr. Elizabeth had refused to perform the abortion. Perhaps she felt the police were watching her too closely, or she had decided to perform abortions only for in-state women, or else truly indigent cases. Whatever

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her reasons, they could not have been mercenary, because afterwards we did not think critically of her, only of ourselves: you would think we had failed a stiff entrance exam. We had a hollow feeling, as though our insides were already scraped out, while we waited at Union Station to catch the return train. Someone at the food counter had on a soul station, Diana Ross singing “My World Is Empty Without You, Babe,” and this, too, seemed an omen.

Back in New York, Carol found another abortionist on the Lower East Side, and went alone to the appointment. The first curetage did not take; she was obliged to return to the same bungler (we could not afford two fees) and have it done all over again. I shudder to think how close we came to tragedy. No, I don't want to think about it. Half a lifetime later, she's alive, I'm alive. Both married to different people.

I cannot say that the abortion alone inflicted a mortal blow to our marriage (there would be others); but it did uncover veins of mutual mistrust we had not known existed. It left me feeling ashamed of myself, aware of my untrustworthiness and eager to cover it up better next time. And I think it left Carol not only wounded and weary, but resentful—either because I'd been unable to protect her from the sorrow she had gone through, more or less alone, or because my failure to lobby harder for baby and family had alerted her to a secret (even secret to myself at the time) inconstancy on my part toward the marriage, a footloose streak that would one day lead me to go off and fulfill some bachelor destiny.

“Destiny” is what you know about your life in hindsight. Or maybe it's the stubbornness that takes over once your character, colliding with the world's barriers, has coalesced into a set of rigidities. “There is a point beyond which there is no going back. That is the point that we must reach,” said Kierkegaard. He was speaking of faith, but I would apply the same idea to love, monogamy, or the decision to have a child. Precisely what I was missing as a young man—now I have it almost too much—was a conviction of limits and the irrevocable: many paths seemed equally provisional, equally capricious (like the choice of trails from the Cloisters down to the street below), and so I felt a fraud asserting any one in particular.

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At Fort Tryon Park, which can be entered around 190th Street, I pass the familiar herbal garden and the medieval tower of the Cloisters, all the generous bequest of the Rockefeller family to the city of New York. Not only did they bequeath the land and the buildings, they bought up the Palisades across the Hudson, on the New Jersey side, so that visitors to the Cloisters would have a magnificent wooded vista to contemplate, protected from future development. Say what you may about the cupidity of Rockefeller, none of today's billionaires would even think to give the city so magnificent an enhancement.

Descending from the Cloisters, I see Inwood stretched out below: its comfortably lower-middle-class mix of three-story retail along Dyckman Street and Broadway, and six-story walkup apartment houses along the cross-avenues, has not changed much since the Sixties, at least from this angle; its chic-resistant personality rejects gentrification.

I remember how Carol and I used to walk down to the river along Dyckman Street, at dusk on a summer's night, past a carpet-cleaning factory, and how scandalously intimate with the Hudson we were able to get, close enough to trail our hands in the swift-moving water. Yes, this is where we always entered, through the fence at the edge of Inwood Park, right next to the marina (which seems to have undergone improvements since I lived here). You can still walk along a narrow dirt path, above the black rocks, the rip-rap leading to the water—or over the rocks themselves—but I prefer the path. To the west is the river, broad and consolatory, and the Palisades cliffs, fortunately untouched, or just barely, by condo construction at this northern point, so that it must be almost the same vista the Lenapes and Wiechiquaesgecks saw. To the east, as you walk along the dirt-path, are the fenced-in ball-fields of Inwood Park. I am walking along at five o'clock, the setting winter

sun licking the trees golden, and I am absolutely elated. Why so happy, I begin to wonder, when I have been walking along the waterfront all day? Is it that this stretch feels particularly wild, finally, as though I were actually in the country (leaving aside the ball-fields)? Is it the magical hour of day? I am the only walker here, which frightens and exhilarates me a bit, though just as I think that thought a jogger whizzes by me, an elderly, bespectacled man with stringy calves. He is older than I by a decade and yet in better shape. Well, never mind: walking is good exercise, too. I am happy, happy, happy. Further downtown, so many obstructions, fences, roads keep me from the river. Only here, on the northern tip of the island, with highways nowhere in sight, do I feel in direct contact with the river, I smell it, I lustily breathe it in.

After walking about two miles along the Inwood Park shoreline in this contented state, ahead of me I suddenly see a fence blocking my way. The dirt path is drawing to an end. I call out to the elderly jogger, who is circling back in my direction, "How do you get out of here?" He yells back, "You don't!" then, looking annoyed that he will have to break stride and play Good Samaritan, comes to a halt. "You either have to go all the way back to Dyckman Street, or halfway back to that foot-bridge"—he points to a green structure with steep stairs—"or, I guess you could try squeezing under the fence and proceeding that way." I am all for going forward; no turning back! All day I have been moving north, north, north, and am not going to be deterred at this point from savoring the uppermost curve of the island.

I thank him and approach the chain link fence, which is twisted out of shape in one corner of the base, suggesting others have ducked under here before. I crawl on all fours through the tangled vines, then stand up, banging my head against the fence-post. Just then a train hurtles by, so close as to give me a fright. Ohmigod, I must be on the Metro North train tracks. Posted signs say: "PRIVATE PROPERTY AMTRAK KEEP OUT!" Gladly would I, but I am trapped in a cage: beyond the tracks stands a chain link fence too high to scale.

I have no choice but to follow the tracks. I walk along the gravel by their side, reasoning that another train should not be coming anytime soon. I now start crossing a narrow rail-bridge over a body of water—the Sputen Duyvil, I believe. In other words, I am leaving Manhattan! I have left Manhattan Island, I will never caress the giant's rounded shoulder. It is getting darker, and also colder. I need to put my gloves on but the wind is so vigorous that I'm afraid if I let go of the railing even for a second I'll fall into the river. I look down below, past the meshed metal path I am standing on (is it even designed for walking?), to see if I am getting dizzy. Just keep moving forward.

Finally I make it to the end of the bridge; I am in Marble Hill, which used to be part of Manhattan before the dynamiting of Hellgate channeled the Harlem River through. Just beyond is Riverdale, the Bronx. Some beat-up train tracks lay ahead, not a human being in sight. I feel like a hobo hopping freights. If I keep veering east, I will get to those apartment buildings looming up ahead. The underbrush is too thick, I can't find a path along this abandoned, funky set of train tracks. I'll have to walk right down the middle of them! They're probably no longer in operation. Sure enough, they dribble off into the grass. I push through dense shrubbery and find myself looking up at substantial apartment houses in the distance. The problem is that I am separated from them by a new set of train tracks, and these are much more serious-looking.

As I get closer to the outside track, I read with alarm: 1700 volts, dangerous, do not touch ever, or words to that effect. I wonder what 1700 volts would do to me. Across the tracks, waiting for me, is a glass-enclosed train station: "Spuyten Duyvil," says the station sign. Now I have to calm myself and mentally picture stepping casually yet carefully over the third rail, under no circumstances tripping or grabbing the rail for support. The fact that I am notoriously clumsy enters into the imaging process. Well, I may be clumsy in general but I will not be clumsy this time. No: I will step with a high arc over the rail, going nowhere near it, as soon as I feel calm enough. And so I do. Then I step high over the second and the first rails, not taking any chances touching them, although they are not marked with warnings. Looking up, I notice an old woman in a babush-

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ka who has been watching me all this while, behind the plexiglas, with a scared expression. Is she frightened of me, or for me? Do I remind her of the Creature from the Black Lagoon, or some crazy mugger who lives beside the tracks and is going to attack her? At the moment I'm no menace to anyone but myself: not sure how to pull myself up onto the platform, it is too high to belly-flop onto, but I'd better do it before the train comes. Luckily, I find a metal ladder at the end of the platform, I climb it and ascend the steps of the station and cross over, past Babushka Lady, into civilization.

I scramble down a long hill, legs now shaking with exhaustion, and find myself on Broadway, by the elevated #2 line. A Manhattan-bound bus happens to be standing there, with a sign that promises "168 Street." I board it, and look around in the pitch black Bronx night at dingy stores with neon lights lining the street. As we are crossing the bridge into Manhattan, a very small Hispanic nurse, sitting next to me, says:

"Mister—the Lord Jesus Christ loves you."

"Okay. Just leave me alone."

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Determined to go back and explore the rounded shoulder of upper Manhattan, I return eight months later, this time accompanied by a labor historian I know, Steve Fraser, who lives in an apartment with spectacular views overlooking Inwood Park. We enter the park at Isham Place near 211th Street. A broad open green slopes gently down to the water. The prettiest part of Manhattan, it seems at that moment. A large pond is awash with ducks on a warm June day. At the artificial lake's edge sits a white, Art Deco-style park building which is now used as an Urban Ecology Center. Steve tells me that after World War II there were plans to redirect the Harlem River into the park and establish a public marina there, but the city ran out of funds, or rethought the scheme, so now you have just a little canal filtering water into a pond. At one of the pond's indentations, the city is trying to establish a little beach, as a wetland mitigation project. So far, all you can see over in that corner are some rocks, dirt piles and shade trees: it gives a scruffier sort of edge than elsewhere on the geometrically engirdled pond.

Across the river, on the Bronx side, is a cliff with a giant C on it, my alma mater's imperial mark, which both embarrasses and pleases me, the sky-blue edged in white repainted each year by fraternity boys suspended on ropes, to signify Columbia University's territorial claims in the area through its operation of team athletic facilities: Bakers Field football stadium, a tennis club and a rowing boathouse. Steve, seeing me stare at the orgueilleous C, shrugs, as if to say, "What are you gonna do?" He is more interested in the Inwood Little League field, founded in 1950, in which his son hit several home runs, and which he assures me has "perfect" ballpark dimensions for that playing level.

Steve is justly proud of Inwood Park, which he says is very safe, especially in summer, when there are always plenty of residents from the community using it. In September, Native American tribes gather in the park for an annual shad festival, either bringing the fish in to cook or catching them. Here, too, a plaque informs us, is where the settlers supposedly bought Manhattan from the Indians. That it was an important site for local tribes is well-established: archeologists have found middens, mounds of shellfish shells, left by Native Americans in Inwood Park, and these historical sites are now protected, more or less, from souvenir-hunters by chain-link fences.

We start ascending into the woods. Inwood Park is much wilder than, say, Fort Tryon Park, it has no Cloisters or rose gardens. It has, in fact, the only virgin forest left in the city—a "climax" forest, meaning that the plants are stable and capable of perpetuating themselves. The hilly, wooded terrain is much like one you would encounter in the country, which makes it a complete anomaly for Manhattan. Perhaps less has been made of it than seems proper because it so serenely resembles a familiar landscape—elsewhere.

“Instant air conditioning,” says Steve, beaming, “even in summer during heat waves, it’s cool here.” He points out the caves where homeless people used to live during the Great Depression, and perhaps more recently. The park was also a big hangout for teenage drugs and drinking in the 1970s, according to the poet Jim Carroll’s *Basketball Diaries*. Irish teenagers especially would hang out in the woods and play basketball in the courts by the water: they looked strong and athletic till their mid-twenties, after which their bodies would sag, deteriorate from drinking.

“I used to bring my dog, Baron, over here for hours each day,” says Steve. “That dog would get into fights with squirrels, raccoons, even rats—he was a real hunting dog. When he died, my wife said, ‘That’s it, no more dogs in the house!’”

Still ascending, we pass a house for tollbooths over the Henry Hudson Bridge. Swerving back into the forest, we could swear we were on a country road. The farther away you get from the highway and the river, the quieter it becomes. Steve starts looking for the ruins of the School and Home for Wayward Girls. It used to exist high up in Inwood Park, sometime in the late nineteenth century. Finally we happen upon it: a stone wall, waist high, and various granite foundation blocks. Steve is excitedly telling me the background of the institution, who is thought to have started it, what the philanthropic ideology at the time was, when I notice, atop one of the low stone walls, an unpleasant surprise: the word “KIKE” has been formed out of twigs. I feel suddenly unwanted in this Eden. And I feel sorry for Steve, who is also Jewish, and whose pride in his neighborhood park is deflated. We say something banal about how deep and enduring anti-Semitism remains as a world-force, but it also strikes us as just bloody strange that such an archaic derogatory locution would crop up today. In Philippe Soupault’s *Last Nights of Paris*, the narrator says that he walks all night through the city in order to encounter a corpse. I walk and walk, it seems at that moment, in order to encounter a sign that will tell me to get lost.

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