

## Strangers in the Park

Harrison Park is close—visible from our back deck, but “you can’t get there from here” as New Englanders like to say, unless you cut through the neighbor’s yard. So I usually arrive by driving along three different streets in a big U. Then I unload my dog for a short walk. The park is dedicated to soldiers from our city who died in World War One. Large oaks and beeches grace the upper end, planted in 1919 to honor these men. I say upper end because the land slopes down to the west, toward busy Route 5, the railroad tracks, and then the river. In the middle of the park the land is level enough for a baseball field, tennis courts, and a parking lot. The remainder is mostly woods with a few faint trails that are always deserted—while I’m there anyway. Except for the kit fox, turkey, or occasional hawk I’ve seen, it’s just me and my dog. If I was a boy, this area would be the perfect hide-out to explore, fight battles over, build tree forts, or puff stolen cigarettes—but I’ve never seen any kids. Times have changed, I suppose.

Nevertheless, I have met some interesting people in the more civilized sections of the park. One guy, a Vietnam vet, would sit in his car in the lower parking lot and watch over “his” white cat. The

cat lived there like a free spirit but had the best of both worlds— somebody set her up with a doghouse shelter just inside the woods, and she had food and water bowls filled. I would sometimes stop and chat with the guy, although I soon realized he would rather be left alone with his newspaper and his feline friend, who was always nearby—lounging on the asphalt pavement in sun or shade, or sometimes atop a picnic table. My impression was that he was an anti-social curmudgeon, but I noticed he had a load of anger churning inside him—from what I didn't know of course, but it was at such a level that I believe it could explode someday, in one form or another. (Update: The cat disappeared last year, and I haven't seen the vet in quite a while.)

One April day three years ago, I was walking Chester, our first hound dog, in the upper lane. This is a narrow road that winds alongside the woods and ends in a circle. People often park there on weekdays to eat their lunch. As I approached the circle, I saw a pickup truck, a man and two little girls. They were about three and six years old, and the man looked to be in his thirties. The girls were in the bed of the truck finishing lunch, and he lifted them out so they could pet my dog. They were darlings and the their father was very friendly, upbeat—telling me they were on their way to Lake Pocotopaug near East Hampton to go camping. He said he used to go as a kid and was looking forward to spending the entire

summer there with his daughters. His wife had to work, I assumed, but would visit them on weekends, and then he lowered his voice and told me something that caused my heart to sink. By way of explanation—or more likely as a need to express such an unbelievable, overwhelming fact—he said he didn't have much time left because of cancer. Stunned, instinctively glancing at his girls, I could only offer him the usual platitudes. We spoke a bit more and then it was time to part ways. He said he hoped to see me again, as he would be passing through on occasion, and I said I may stop in and visit them at the lake. But I never went—never saw them again, and I regret it.

Another time I chanced upon the following scene, familiar to anyone ever stuck on the poor side of middle class. I strolled out of the woods with Chester, squinting in the bright sun. Nosed up to the curb in the parking lot sat a dark, compact car—missing its front wheel. A man squatted in the summer's heat, surrounded by tools. Off to the right in the grassy margin, sitting on the cat's picnic table, was a young woman. She said her name was Maggie and her friend was fixing the brakes on her car—doing her a big favor. Maybe early thirties and wearing jeans—I don't recall much now and never wrote anything down—she asked to pet Chester and then began talking. She told me she was single but had a son in middle school who she worried about—because of things like drugs—and

how she wanted to move him to another school and also get out of their cramped apartment. But through bad choices and bad luck—the usual suspects—there’s never enough money. The man left to get parts and she pulled out a cigarette—her fingers a bit stocky, I noticed, relative to her trim figure. She paused for a drag and then continued with a story about her brother’s dog—inconsolable after his master’s death. Her words spilled freely for half an hour, revealing things she needed to say, if only to a stranger and his dog. Before I left she said she hoped to see me again at the park, but I guess her car is running well.

There were times when my chance encounters with strangers have not gone well, but even these offer opportunities to learn. As an extrovert (with introvert tendencies) I enjoy being around people. I could never be a hermit—and I’ve met a few in some out-of-the-way places. I like to be part of a group with shared interests or goals, especially at work. Toiling alone as an artist and now writer can be tough in that regard, so I’m even more likely these days to collar a neighbor or stranger for a gab session. Most people I meet—the angry vet being one of the exceptions—can be incredibly open and engaging, perhaps another manifestation of the fact that we are insanely social creatures, longing for connection.

Especially for a writer, getting out and doing stuff—engaging with

others in various activities, be it just talking—is critical. Today I see people who are hooked up to earbuds and lost in their smart phones—shut off from what’s around them. I recently read yet another pompous author’s advice to young, wannabe writers. He said you need to sit down in your room and just write—as many hours as possible—sacrificing time spent with family and friends, or in choir or sports or exploring abandoned bridges or taking a walk in the woods (paraphrasing liberally here). Or you won’t be like him, author-extraordinaire. (I think he wrote fantasy.) This is bad advice—one should do the exact opposite. Not that it’s an either/or situation—one should still write, but not at the expense of living life. Get out and do things you are passionate about, and then try new things—be open to new ideas, places, and above all people—including strangers. They often reveal their deepest, most honest selves, and this will enrich your writing. As a bonus, if your face isn’t buried in a smart phone, one of them could become your best friend—or at least contribute a name for a character. It wasn’t deliberate—perhaps done subconsciously, but I named the heroine in my novel Maggie. Bruised and busted down, stranded in a city park, she’s a single mom with nothing more than her little boy and a dream.

For pictures, see the image gallery.