New York Stories

Renald Iacovelli

About this edition:

The original edition of this work contained typos and several obvious grammatical errors. Most of these were due to the idiosyncratic blindness any writer is bound to have regarding his own compositions, and on account of which he cannot be effective as a proofreader. As much as possible these errors been corrected in this edition, though no doubt some still remain.

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New York Stories

For

Albert Goldglancz

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JOEY

You no sooner passed through the arch at Station Square and entered into Forest Hills Gardens than you were met with a sign that made it clear you might not be entirely welcome: "WARNING! Entering Private Streets." The word "warning" was in big unmistakable red letters, and the rest of the second line was in big black ones, and beneath that was a single sentence explaining that the area was a "corporation"—a private entity to which no one should think he had some inalienable right as a citizen of the city to walk through or otherwise trespass upon. It was a sign that said in effect: "You can come in and take a look, if you want to—of course, we can't stop you from doing that; but remember you can only look, not stay; so go ahead and walk about, and gawk if you must, but make sure that after you've had your fill you skedaddle back to where you came from, those tawdry outlands of 99¢ stores, greasy fast food joints, and newsstands selling lottery tickets." Pretty much that was the area you had passed through to get here, and if you looked back over your shoulder you could still see it—the rest of Forest Hills with its automobile-choked streets and sidewalks swarming with pedestrians who hurried from one store to another along Austin Street in a frenzied search for bargains. And in turning your head back to this new, better place, you could almost understand how those who lived here wanted to keep it as it was—an oasis of clean gentility amid the madding crowds.

It was an aptly-named area; still more apt was the shortened name it went by—"the Gardens," for there really was, on this June day, much that was garden-like about it. Everything was intensely green, almost lush; there were many trees lining the streets, and hedgerows and shrubs and flowering plants abounded on well-kept lawns. It was delightfully calm and quiet. There was little traffic because motorists generally had no place to park: on every block a few signs warned them that unless they were residents of the area—unless proper identification was showing on their windshield-

s—their cars would be towed away at their expense. The sidewalks were unpopulated, and so clean and straight that they looked as though they had been painted on a canvas. But most impressive of all were the houses. They would have been big even by rural standards, but here in the city, where most people lived in cramped apartments, they were truly like palaces. Many of them were two stories tall and in a grand Tudor style, with great wooden beams inlaid amid their brick facings, and having high, steep roofs from which chimneys of lighter-colored brick reached upward. They were set back at the end of well-tended lawns, or obscured by high trellises, or hidden completely away behind stone walls. The least of them was worth several million dollars. Their grand, imposing facades helped to set the sober tone of the area: one felt that one had to act more carefully here than on the indifferently crowded streets from which one had come. Back *there* one could run or hop or skip or shout or babble, and people wouldn't notice or, if they noticed, wouldn't care: but here a strict propriety ruled, and if you acted in any way eccentric or disturbed the peace and orderliness of the place you were sure to be visited by the police whom an observant resident would have wasted no time in calling. Such a restrictive atmosphere seemed at first intimidating or oppressive, but in a very few minutes one began to appreciate it, and even to find it refreshing. For while there is much to be said for the freedom to act as one wishes, there is perhaps still more to be said for the immunity from having to endure the freedom of others to act as *they* wish. Given the selfish nature of mankind, some reduction in personal liberty is probably always required for peace and orderliness.

As I made my way into the Gardens, I held a piece of paper on which I had written down the address that was my objective: "21 Tennis Place." At the time I had taken it down I had smiled cynically at its connotation of leisured sport and ease; it seemed just another one of those absurd pretensions one comes across so often in New York City, for instance when someone assures you he's an "executive vice president"—in a company that has two hundred of them—or when the city bolts a few cast iron benches onto a patch of concrete and has the audacity to name it a "park." But with each grand, perfectly manicured street I passed it seemed to me that in this instance the intimation of a better, finer class of life really was in order. There probably *were* private tennis courts somewhere about, and one could imagine that behind one of these houses

young men and women dressed in summery white uniforms lobbed balls at one another across a net, getting "a little exercise" while the rest of the world was busy at its dirty, boring, endless labors. I had to ask directions of several people before finding the address, which was at the end of a cul-de-sac. It was a huge house all granite facing, high gables, and fancy quarreled windows. A flagged walkway led from the sidewalk across a long front yard to the front door, which was a marvel of heavy oak planks, thick iron hinges, and a disproportionally small window of thick glass. It reminded me of some immense and heavy door that might have stood at the gate of a medieval castle. Even that door must have cost a lot of money. "Rich," I said to myself, looking to the left and right of me, feeling dwarfed before the great place. I shoved the paper with the address in my pocket and straightened out my clothes a bit. I had worn a jacket and one of the three pairs of pants I owned that weren't made of denim. I trusted that I looked presentable; at any rate, I hoped I did, for I was here for a job.

There had been an advertisement in a local paper for an English language tutor, and earlier that morning I had spoken to the woman who had placed it and she had invited me to come by for an interview. Two months earlier I had been working part-time for an investment banking company, but I had lost the job to globalization, the executives of the company having found some Indian typist in Bombay who would do my job for a fifth of my salary and be glad to survive on curried beans and rice. Since then I had been vainly looking for something of similarly limited hours—and part-time it had to be, for I was also a writer and needed time to write. But in New York part-time jobs are always harder to find than full-time ones, as though the workaday world is determined not to let anyone escape its clutches. That meant I either had to find a regular, full-time job and struggle still harder to write through my exhaustion, or live off my savings till I could find another part-time job and so try to protect and preserve that freshness of mind and spirit without which one cannot hope to create anything vital. In keeping with the reckless tenor of the whole of my foregoing life, I had chosen the latter—to follow, again, the perilously narrow, cliff-side path; and hope that I wouldn't stumble and tumble over. But by now I was beginning to worry in earnest. After two months of unemployment I had very little money left in the bank. Unemployment insurance had paid me but a fraction of my already low

salary, and after constant withdrawals from my slender savings account there remained in it no more than the equivalent of two months' living expenses. Once that was gone I would be facing ... well, as usual, I preferred not to think of what I would be facing.

I rang the doorbell and waited. When no one came to the door immediately I wondered if I had written down the right address and scolded myself for my bad memory and sometime lack of attention to details; it would have been just like me to get it wrong. "Stupid!" I murmured against myself. But in another moment the door opened and I stood face to face with a woman whose smile and air of expectation assured me that I had gotten it right. In an inquiring tone of voice she said my name, and when I nodded and replied with, "Yes—Mrs. Larke?" she smiled a little more comfortably, opened the door fully, and asked me to come inside, into the foyer, where she shook my hand.

"Did you find your way alright?" she asked, as she closed the door behind me.

I told her that I had—that I had asked a few people along the way and they had directed me.

"Good—glad to hear it. Some of these streets are a little confusing if you're not used to them. Please, follow me: we'll go out back. We can talk there."

I followed her through her home. To say it was tastefully furnished would not be saying enough, for what really struck me was that it was *genuinely* furnished. In an age when so much in the way of furnishing and architecture was for economic considerations artificial, consisting of veneers and plastics and glass, here the furniture was of real wood, the fireplace of real granite, the silver plate in the hutches of real and solid silver—a burglar's dream. Everywhere here the sense of old, solid, beautiful quality flared out at me, which only goes to show that so long as one has a modicum of taste even a lifetime of lower middle-class contentment and pride in faux things is incapable of wiping out the sensibility that detects the real and better article. The paintings on the walls also impressed me. I am sure that if I knew more about painting I would have found in the signatures at the bottom of those canvases the names of artists admired by connoisseurs. One of them was a full-length portrait of Mrs. Larke and her husband when they had been young, perhaps in their thirties; a large painting of some five feet tall, it dominated the wall it hung upon. Telling from the style of

Mrs. Larke's dress and hairstyle it had been painted in the early '60s. Its solid, heavy frame gave it an extra measure of splendor.

We passed through the living room, through a kitchen with a marble floor and sparkling new appliances, and through sliding glass doors to a solarium, an addendum to the back of the house. It was nothing but a skeleton of aluminum beams, for the glass panels they ordinarily held in place had been removed for the summer and replaced with screens. Just beyond it grew banks of flowers: red roses, white and purple lilacs, and deep pink azaleas. They perfumed the warm air, and their brilliant colors lured intermittent bees that alighted on them and probed their meretriciously exposed cups in search of nectar. Beyond this stretched a very green and recently cut lawn interpolated with several large trees whose branches spread out to offer shade to most of the ground beneath them and to host the birds chirping away in their midst. It was almost hard to believe that such peaceful, gracious prospect lay only a few minutes' walk from the car-choked, filthy bustle of the rest of the city.

Mrs. Larke invited me to take a seat at a white wicker table here. Apparently she had been having breakfast when I had rung the doorbell. On the table were an insulated carafe of coffee, a small plate with the remnant crumbs of cake or toast, and her own half-emptied cup. A copy of the New had been hastily thrown aside when she had gotten up to answer the door. She was just about to resume her seat when she hesitated and asked, "Would you like some coffee?"

"That would be great, thanks."

"Let me get you a cup."

She returned only seconds later with a cup and saucer, and poured my coffee for me. It came out hot and steaming from the carafe. She sat down.

"Did you take the train?" she asked.

"Yes. The local, the M train."

"You came from Sunnyside, right?"

"Yes. Right off Queens Boulevard."

"Oh, that's not so far," she said, as though pleased that I should not have had too much inconvenience. "There's the milk and sugar, just help yourself," she said, nodding to them.

I helped myself to each, and marveled at the small ornate ceramic pitcher and bowl in which they were contained: finely made

items with little gilt splayed feet and exacting tendrilous decorations that must have taken some time to produce and paint. It struck me how even such small and unimportant articles could be beautiful, and I admired Mrs. Larke for having had the taste to pick out and purchase them, for they made even the otherwise indifferent act of having one's morning coffee that much more pleasant.

"It was pretty easy to get here," I said. "It only took me about forty minutes. I've never been here before. I mean, I've been to Forest Hills before, and I've even walked out this way a little, but never this far back. The houses are amazing."

"Yes, some of them are nice, aren't they?"

"They're amazing," I repeated, putting down the spoon with which I had stirred my cup. "It's like a whole other place—a whole other world. It's like not being in New York at all."

Mrs. Larke smiled in appreciation of this roundabout compliment on her own house.

She was not as I had expected her to look, but then again one always has such strange ideas of how people look by just talking to them on the phone. Earlier that morning I had imagined her to be a woman of perhaps fifty years old, of medium height, with dark features and a plain, kindly face. The only thing I was right about was the kindliness; in all other things not. For she was a tall, slender woman in her late sixties, her complexion fair and her hair dyed to maintain what had once been its natural blonde. She was still attractive "for her age," as the phrase goes, but less because she was well-preserved (to use yet another phrase) than because she had been so pretty to begin with that even age hadn't been able totally to compromise her features, which were still, as they had always been, aristocratically fine and sharp. The nose was small, severely straight, ending in delicate nostrils; the eyes were large, bright, hazel; the well-shaped ears stood close to the head; the lips formed a thin, bowlike curve; and the high cheekbones gave a glamorous curve to her face when she turned it ever so slightly this way or that. Her hands were remarkable for the long, slender, elegant fingers ending in short, polished, tapered nails. That morning she was wearing a light-colored, summery, cotton outfit of slacks and blouse. She wore no jewelry aside from a pair of tiny diamond-studded earrings. In her movements, in the way she looked at you, in the way she nodded slightly when you spoke as though agreeing

with you, everything about her was quiet, refined, and—one felt—sympathetic. She spoke good English, enunci-ating her words precisely. She seemed to be fairly well educated. There was no question in my mind that she had had a charmed, privileged life. She had undoubtedly seen a lot of the world, had stood amid the famous, storied places the likes of which someone like myself had only read about. My sense was that if she didn't "go anywhere" these days it was only because she had already gone everywhere worth going to. I remember suddenly hoping that she wouldn't ask me whether or not I had "traveled," had visited Europe, say, or the Far East, or knew German or French, for that line of questioning would have soon enough revealed to her how circumscribed my life had been.

Despite my insecurities I was also sensible that she was respectful, even somehow deferential, toward me. And I knew the reason for this. It was because I had published a few novels, a fact I had disclosed to her earlier that morning when, during our initial conversation on the phone, she had asked me for my credentials. That had been the first time I had ever tooted my horn about my "accomplishments," and I had only done so in the hope that it would help me land the job.

"So, you have a few books out," she said, smiling, leading into the subject that had most recommended me to her. "That's very nice. I checked on the computer"—she meant the Internet—"and saw them listed on a few sites. Very impressive. I'll have to get them."

I thanked her for the kind remarks even as I hoped she didn't expect me to talk about my books. For the first had been published by a small company of questionable repute, and two more had been published at my own expense. And yet the fact remained that my books were available to the public and had even been stocked by a few public libraries. If someone were to ask me why none of my works had been published by a large, well-established company and in a big way, I could only have replied that it hadn't been for want of trying. For almost two decades I had tried to place my work with mainstream publishers, only to have it consistently returned unread, or under-read. (I knew this, by the way, because in those days I used a simple but infallible method by which my returned manuscripts always revealed the extent to which they had been handled.) In the meantime I had watched and wondered at men

and women of lesser ability having their inept or moronic scribbling spread across the country, across the world, and give them some kind of income and notoriety, while my efforts left me as anonymous and poor as ever. Constant disappointment is a harsh taskmaster;—eventually it whips the naiveté out of you. I had come to understand that the literary world could be ruthlessly hit or miss, and that someone with the title of "editor" could very well be a dunce. And in general the world is less eager to recognize and promote talent than to applaud that which has already somehow made its way. In light of this reality one sees that the only door likely to open for you is the one that you yourself kick in; and even then it will probably not open more than a crack. At any rate, I had never made any real money with any of my books. The proceeds from my latest novel—the work of a year—had enabled me to buy a pair of shoes, and not an especially good pair at that.

I thanked her for her compliment, and added, by way of humility and truthfulness, that the sales rankings for my books were all low. "Nobody buys them," I said.

"Oh? Well, I hope you haven't gotten discouraged," she said, kindly. "I read parts of them on the computer and they seem very good, very well-written. I'm sure you're talented. You know, when I was younger I was a writer myself—a journalist."

"Really?"

"When I left college—oh, a long time ago now!—I was hired by the Boston *Herald* as an assistant editor and helped to write articles. I could have had a career in journalism, I suppose. But I met my husband ..."

Her husband, as I would later learn, had come from a wealthy family, from "old" money, and at only twenty-six years of age had been through his family's connections comfortably ensconced in a well-paying position in a large bank, the first of many powerful positions which would result in his becoming a chief executive in a major Wall Street firm in which his responsibilities were indeed weighty but recompensed by a yearly salary of tens of millions of dollars. After marrying him there had no longer been a financial reason for Mrs. Larke to work, and she had been too intelligent to buy into the notion that there is something intrinsically noble in pursuing a "career" when one could be pursuing life itself. Undoubtedly too her five-month stint as a reporter-in-training had been enough to convince her that having one's nerves rattled into wakefulness by an alarm clock each morning, then having to knock oneself out eight to ten hours a day for only enough money on which to survive, wasn't exactly a civilized way to live. Instead she indulged in her love of reading, she traveled, she learned of the world firsthand and enriched her life. She had a child, a daughter, whose son it was that now lived with her and for whom she was seeking a tutor.

"I've often thought of taking up writing again," she continued. "Actually, I think I'd like to write my auto-biography. I've seen some interesting things in my life—done some interesting things—met some interesting people."

"You should, then."

"Oh," she said, modestly, shaking her head, "I'd probably botch it up. You just can't sit down and start writing like that."

"It's true that you can't do it all at once. But you can do it little by little—a paragraph, a page at a time. You'd be surprised how much you can get done in a couple of hours a day so long as you're consistent. Just take your time. You'll see—you would get it done. It might be very good. It might be wonderful."

"Who would publish it?" she asked, in a way that was, I felt, fishing for information.

I told her that that was always the hardest part, but if she had something to say, and it was unique, or even just uniquely expressed, it wouldn't matter whether or not it was published in a large or a small way. Books were strange things, I said; if they were worthy, they had a way of taking on a life of their own. There were obscure books that had survived for centuries, revered by a small discerning audience, while the majority of the bestsellers of the day made their world-rattling splash and seemed to be in the hands of every other person, only to sink into obscurity in a few years, and be utterly forgotten by the next generation.

"Just write it and see what happens," I said.

She smiled appreciatively at my encouragement and no doubt too at my confidence in her literary ability. Like so many people who have been blessed with wealth, she wanted to believe that there was something about her—in herself and apart from her financial standing—that made her special and worthy.

We began talking again about the area. Or rather, I brought it up again, mentioning again how impressive it was.

"Actually it's ironic you say that," she responded. "It's gotten

pretty bad over the last ten years or so. Not around here so much, maybe, but you know—out *there*," she said, moving her head in a way that was almost a nod, as though to say every other place round about this one. "I used to enjoy going shopping so much, not even to buy, especially, but just to get out—to look, to walk. Now, I go out there and"—she shook her head—"I can't stand it for more than a few minutes at a time. I don't like what I see and hear. People aren't ..."—she struggled for the words to express precisely what she wanted to say; and, not finding them, settled on the general and tepidly imprecise explanation—"... they aren't *nice* anymore. Do you know what I mean?"

I nodded. I knew what she meant. She was referring to the rising tide of vulgarity which had over the last few decades begun to overwhelm New York. What had once been only scattered, clearly-defined pockets of the utterly benighted and violently coarse had metastasized even into areas once considered "good" and "safe." For a long time things had been changing in the city. To a large degree the traditional middle class, which had always been the backbone of the city's social stability, and had infused it with an ethos of politeness and law-abidingness, had vanished—run off to find their cleaner, safer American Dream in the suburbs of Northern New Jersey or Long Island, where they could at least raise their children without having to worry about them being shot on the street, stabbed in their schools, or associating with hoodlums. All that remained were those who were either too poor to move, or could find work nowhere else, or who still clung to the belief—this despite the evidence of their own eyes—that New York City was the "greatest city in the world." And yes, there was one more group that had remained: the wealthy. They could live anywhere they wanted, and they lived in New York only because they did not have to live in it the way everyone else did. Their home was some luxury condominium on Park Avenue, guarded by doormen round the clock, or a house in some exclusive borough enclave, such as Forest Hills Gardens, and wired with an alarm system that went directly to the local police station. They rarely if ever rode the subways, and their pampered skins crawled at even the thought of taking a cab, its back seat the site of unimaginable tawdry events or persons, and its driver perhaps an aromatic fellow from a place where American notions of personal hygiene (a daily shower and underarm deodorant) were regarded as ridiculously degenerate.

Mrs. Larke frankly mentioned how she too had wanted to flee New York. She had wanted to buy a home upstate, perhaps in the Adirondacks, in some beautiful place where merely looking out of one's window was a pleasure. But her husband had always kept her in the city on account of his job, though repeatedly assuring her that they would move out "soon." Yet even after his death she had remained in New York. Probably she hadn't moved for the same reason that most of us stay where we are: because we convince ourselves that things aren't so bad after all, or because we have learned through experience that every place has its drawbacks and that in moving to escape one set of problems we find we have only exchanged them for another.

We finally got around to the reason why I was there. She spoke to me about her grandson for whom she wanted to find a tutor. She said that he was her daughter's son and that she had taken him when her daughter had died five years earlier.

"I'm sorry to hear it," I said.

She smiled sadly and nodded in thanks for the condolence. She went on to mention that the boy's father was "out of the picture"—alive but (to tell from the whiff of contempt with which she mentioned him) extremely persona non grata. Obviously there had been in this family, as there are in so many others, great and irreconcilable rifts. It was not my place to inquire into them, though these too, in time, would become known to me.

She got up from her chair and walked a few steps into the adjoining kitchen from where she called out, "Joseph! Joe! Joey, dear, where are you?"

Very faintly, from elsewhere in the house, a boy's voice responded that he was "up here."

"Come down here! I want to see you!"

She glided back into the solarium and resumed her seat with the slightest of embarrassed smiles, as though to apologize for having raised her voice before me. In another minute her grandson was standing before me

Let me confess that I spotted it at once in the boy: the inherent, the essential, the (one might as well be blunt about it) genetic and therefore irretrievable vulgarity. Nature had stamped it unmistakably on his frame and face. Everything about him was thick, clumpish, coarse. Easily twenty pounds overweight, his face was round, his forehead sloping, his jaw prognathic, and he had full hu-

mid lips of the sort that never come together and therefore give their unfortunate possessor an expression of stupid wonder. His small dark eyes were dull, sluggish, and unresponsive. As it was summer he was wearing short pants, a short-sleeved shirt, and sneakers. His heavy thighs touched each other long before they reached his torso, and the lower part of his legs looked a little bowed and ended in large, floppy-looking feet. He was carrying a basketball.

"Darling, come here!" Mrs. Larke said, waving him over.

He duly entered, keeping his eyes on me all the while. He stood beside his grandmother and, in doing so, presented such a complete contrast to her that one wondered how it was possible for them to be so closely related.

"This is Mr. Sullivan," she said, introducing me to him. "He's a very nice man. He answered the advertisement I put into the paper about being your tutor and he might be helping you with your English lessons!"

She had spoken enthusiastically as though she were doing him a great favor, but the last thing a child wants to hear about after the almost mortal tedium of a school year is that he will, no matter to how small a degree, be plunged back into hateful studies. Moreover the boy was understandably appre-hensive about a stranger who had been foisted upon him without his consultation. It wasn't just that I might become his tutor (with all its onerous implications) but that I was, just as regrettably, an old man with whom he could have nothing in common. For he was a boy of thirteen and I was thirty-five years old, and I have never been so divorced from my childhood as not to know how children regard grownups—as creatures fundamentally apart from themselves, and with whom they can never have important things in common.

"Go on, Joey," she told her grandson, "shake Mr. Sullivan's hand!"

He would have preferred to keep his distance, but he did as he was bidden, putting his basketball under his left arm, then reluctantly leaning his body forward and extending his right hand.

"Pleased to meet you," I said, shaking his hand.

He nodded and uttered a begrudging, pro forma, "Me too."

Shifting my eyes to his basketball, and wanting to make a connection with him on some personal level, I said jovially, "So, you like basketball!"

He nodded again and after the slightest hesitation ventured, "Yeah ... do you?"

I didn't—I loathed it—but out of deference to his interest in the sport, and wanting him to like me, I temporized by saying that only times I had ever played the game were in high school during gym class, and that since then I hadn't really followed it. The boy indifferently accepted my indifference and proceeded to tell me about his favorite teams. There were two of them, he said—one from New York and one from Chicago. His eyes took some light, his voice became animated, as he told me about the games they had played the night before. He had watched one on television while he had recorded the other. He mentioned half a dozen names of basketball players, whom he described as "awesome." He used the same word (it was one of his favorites) when he related how they had played—how they had eluded the "blocks" of this one, "passed" the ball to that one, "sunk the ball" from a great distance, or had "flown" up to hoop despite several members of the opposite team crowding in on them and trying to claw them down. He related how "at least five guys" were "all over" a particular player who had nevertheless "sunk the ball" after freeing himself from an impetuous congress of the opposing team. (I could just imagine the frenzied collision of sweaty, evil-smelling armpits.)

"You should have seen it!" he exclaimed. "It was awesome!" He had taken the basketball out from under his arm and was passing it from one hand to the other.

Mrs. Larke had been smiling politely as the boy spoke, but there was something in the way she avoided my eyes—in the way she resolutely kept them on him—that told me she was conscious of how looking at me at that moment might betray something she would have been embarrassed to let me see. I knew what it was, even then. For though she didn't look at me, I now and then glanced at her, and her expression of grandmotherly tenderness was incapable of fully masking a tinge of disappointment. She knew as well as I did what a bad impression the boy made—she for whom impressions were so important, so much an indication of who and what one was. After he had gone back to his room, she resumed her easy and gracious manner and began telling me all her grandson's good points, all his "talents." He drew pictures, she said—wonderful pictures; and for the next two minutes she recounted half a dozen examples of his wonderful imagination. To