

*\*\*\*scene one\*\*\**

If I remember correctly, it was a Sunday, in 2005, when Morgan suggested that we celebrate. It was barely light when her alarm rang out, this disturbingly loud trumpet ringtone she had just downloaded for her new Razr flip-phone. Already awake and somehow coherent, she told me about this installation going up in the Park. “An exhibit for the people.” “A tribute for the everyman.” And, that it was orange. And seeing that we were stuck in the Northeast in dreary bleak February, it would do us some good to see some color. A cup of coffee and a couple tickets later, we were off with, I admit, some measure of expectation and excitement. The PATH rattled along. The B-line screeched ahead. And soon thereafter we exited on 81st and found ourselves in the shadow of our world’s Natural History.

Now, the wind was ferocious and it was darned near freezing, such that when we got off the subway and began to walk, we both took turns wiping the tears out of each other’s eyes. I distinctly remember bemoaning that my feet were already cold and tired, and that it would have been better if we just had stayed back in the comfortable nest of our status quo. And so, lacking the graces of awareness and pleasantry, I began turning what was our grand celebration into my bitter complaint, and my mood only darkened when we finally stood in the presence of our, strike that, her destination. This installation she had heard about. These Gates she had gone on about. These dull orange gates, with their cold steel, hard right angles, and flimsy bits of hanging laundry she called flags.

“This is it?” I asked “We came here for these? They’re as drab as ordinary can be!”

She took my hand, and said, “I think that’s the point, silly. And yet somehow they’re beautiful. Look at all these people here. Laughing, taking pictures, smiling. No matter the cold, no matter their difference. All together in this ember glow. Honestly, I think they’re pretty neat.” I furrowed my brow, about to challenge her once more. But she preempted me and said: “I know what you’re about to say, Brian, but stop. No, seriously, stop. I’ve come to think it’s the simple things, those things as basic and bland as the law, that more often surprise and inspire. That’s how I settled on you, anyway. So, honestly I don’t really care what you think right now. I’m happy we came.”

*\*\*\*scene two\*\*\**

“This is it?” the congregation asked. This is the guy we’ve been hearing so much about? We waited all this time *for him*? But, he’s so short. His beard is so unkempt. And more, isn’t this Joseph’s son, the carpenter’s boy? Why are we listening to him? He’s a zero from a nothing family. All this pretense of wisdom and power he was quoting about, is merely that: pretense. No, no... we will not have this. Let’s drive him from our town, or better yet, just throw him off that cliff over there!”

“For how dare he speak to us this way, in our synagogue, with this fake good news? Liberty for the poor? Release for the captives? Naaman the Syrian? Zarephath of Sidon? Lepers and widows, all of them! What blasphemy! So no, no thank you, little man. We like things the way they are, where there is a clear division between the haves and the have-nots, the righteous and the unrighteous, the rich and the poor. You can take that socialist hogwash back to Bethlehem and the swine from whence you came. Be gone with you, O false prophet, O uninspired one! Away from us! Now!”

*\*\*\*scene three\*\*\**

“This is it?” Paul wondered aloud. “This is the message you want me to give them? All of them, together, without bias, without distinction? I mean sure, you’re God, so I guess I’ll trust you on this, but, do you really think they’ll want to hear it? That they’ll accept it? I mean, these are the same Corinthian people who are embattled by partisanship, lawsuits, and idolatry, lest you have forgotten. And just the other week, I received a letter about the chaos that has overtaken their worship, where some receive your Holy Communion, while others are shoved away and shuttered from the sanctuary. Truly, these people couldn’t be any more divided, even if the Evil One had wished it.”

“Just leave everything to me, Paul. Remember that you were once dumb and blind and indeed separate from me, and look to your amazing transformation! And lest you forget, you are merely the vessel. The mouthpiece. My Spirit will take care of everything. You just move your little lips.”

“Alright...” Later that morning, Paul made his way up to the Acrocorinth. The square, there under the Temple to Aphrodite, was littered with dung, art, and bodies. It was so hot and uncomfortable that everyone should have been inside, or cooling on a rooftop somewhere, he thought. He stepped over a couple of street-sleepers. He gave a sideways wave to the guard and nobility. He took note of the gentile and the rabbi, and the prostitute, standing there just arms-length from each other. “Well, this will surely be a Divine test,” he imagined. “For **everyone** is here, both the rabble and the royal and together at once.”

“...Hear ye, you people,” Paul cried out. “The Lord declares that you are all the same. Though you might look different, you all bear similar gifts. Gifts of and from the One God. Our God. Yes, this refers to you, Crispus. And even you, Gallio. For one of you here might be lame, and you over there might be blind, but it matters not. Yes, you there have lots of money, and you here are quite handsome. But again, it matters not. Look around and see who stands next to you. Look at them and realize that they are you, and you are them. The learned and the unlearned. The washed and the unwashed. Alone, you are weak. Alone, you are severed limbs. But together we are one healthy body. Children of the One who first unified us in creation, and, who has unified us again in Love. And together, we are stronger than any wall, stronger than all nations and all armies. Stronger than anything our feeble mortality could ever conceive of!”

(silence)

“Well... salutations and love, Paul.”

\*\*\*scene four\*\*\*

“This is it?” The Man demanded. “You sound trumpets for us to assemble at first light, to blindly rustle through the darkness of a moonless night, to meet you *here*, in *this* place? In the *lower* city? Just above the sorrow that is that Valley; just a gate removed from that horrible odor down there? Why couldn’t Ezra summon us at the East Gate, the beautiful gate? Near the Temple where we could have dressed and met in a civilized and respectful fashion and at a proper time?”

“Just listen,” the Priest whispered, trying to quiet The Man down. “Just listen.”

“I don’t want to listen to this. What, I’m supposed to cry like the rest of these idiots? This rabble? These unlearned, self-loathers? Truly, the law is as tedious as it is old. Listen, I’ve made a good life for myself, and living rightly dare I say, so I don’t need to disrupt the status-quo and be made to feel ashamed over my state. My place. Over a perceived sin. Over what has surely been their sin! But...maybe I should cry though? Maybe I should groan like them? After all, Ezra’s been standing up there for nearly half a day-- just shut up already! ...Look, Priest, my feet are calloused, and I can still smell their dung coming from that awful southern gate, so do you really expect me to suddenly start waving my hands and celebrate that I’ve been relegated to the same lecture as them? Come on...”

The Priest, shaking his head, and, the dust off his sandals, moved on through the crowd, where suddenly a Woman in what he thought to be hysterics reached out for his robe.

“Teacher!” she exclaimed. “Thank you, Teacher, thank you! For today, you have set me free! Do you see these? My tears? Do you see how wet my face is? It’s like it’s been washed away. All of it. It’s like I’ve been made new. For too long I’ve been down in that valley. For too long these hands have blistered making their cheese for them. And yet, I believed all along that God was still here, in my midst. But I was told that I was a fool. That there was no meaning to any of this, besides what those in them walls give to us as meaning. But here you are telling me that there is in fact an Order to be made out of all this chaos. Here you are, with Ezra and Nehemiah both, telling me that God had, has, and will have, a book of Law. For all of us. For me. And that if we are just to listen to it, to follow it, then God’s promise will be for us and our children’s children! And more, what was that you just said? That we will even drink and break bread together, and have enough left over to share with everyone in kind? Teacher... isn’t it all so marvelous? For, here, at this Gate of Water and Life, God has made me into one of them. My broken limb fused into their healthy body. Our body now. So, amen, Amen, I say. Amen, amen.”

The Priest, with a smile, took her by the hand and said, “Yes, my daughter, I think you’ve got it. For with God, there is no distinction. With God, there is no separation. For see, we are all here. Together and one. As it’s always been. As it’ll always be. So live into hope, my child. Live into that hope and live into love.”

Amen.

Amen.

The Gates in Central Park, NYC (2005)



A Map of Nehemiah’s Jerusalem

