

Letter From Central Park

Here's a New York story: one night long ago the Statue of Liberty lay down her torch, picked up a rake, and gathered all the green grass of Manhattan into a neat mound. She sang of the need for a quiet, peaceful retreat. She dug a few lakes, carved a few trails, and called it Central Park. By dawn she was back in the Hudson River, welcoming the huddled masses.

Liberty's rake has never been found. But even streetwise skeptics would concede that most of Manhattan's parkland is bordered by Central Park West and Fifth Avenue, beginning at 59th Street and stretching for 60 city blocks.

A gated pasture, the park is free of any urban sprawl. No fumes or sirens, or towering skyscrapers that cage the sun. One transplanted New Yorker says it's the only place in the city where she can see the seasons change.

"You Gotta Have Park" a popular T-shirt insists. You can hear the New York inflection behind the phrase. Like everything else in the city, it's a declaration. And so they come, 'cause they wanna get outta the city without leaving it. Runners circle the reservoir. Newlyweds pose in the conservatory gardens. Lines of school children snake through the zoo. Tourists travel like royalty in horse-drawn carriages.

The park is a garden of landscaped moods. The Mall, a wide corridor of arched trees, leads to a bandshell for outdoor concerts. At the Sheep Meadow, a radio-free zone, you can read in peace. A small boat trip in the Lake is all that separates the winged angel atop Bethesda Fountain from the Ramble's wooded paths.

You never know who you may run into while out on a stroll. Romeo and Juliet embrace by the Delacorte Theatre, where Shakespeare is staged beneath the stars. Beethoven, Mother Goose, Simon Bolivar, a dancing goat: they're all in the park.

So are the muggers. The Central Park Jogger, as she became known, was savagely beaten and raped after she ran through a part of the park that others stalk, at a time of night when violence flourishes.

Following an earlier tragedy, a tear-drop patch of Central Park was turned into a Garden of Peace. Strawberry Fields, financed by Yoko Ono, was inaugurated five years after John Lennon was killed in front of his 72nd Street apartment, just across from the park. At the hub of a circle of black and white tiles on a park path is a single word: IMAGINE.

On the first Sunday in November, Central Park's role as an oasis, as urban promised land, is underscored when 25,000 runners take to the streets in the New York City marathon. They come from around the world to run 26 miles through five boroughs.

Fittingly, the race ends in Central Park, a welcome respite after a grueling journey. Families gather at the Great Lawn to greet the tired masses. Ashen runners limp on blistered feet, replenish lost fluids, knead sore muscles.

The morning after this year's marathon a homeless man slept on a bench in Strawberry Fields, shrouded in a discarded foil blanket given to warm every runner at the end of the race. His face was masked by his sweater, his personal belongings stuffed into a garbage bag.

That's another New York story: a story about jarring contrasts, a lesson in moral geography that's difficult to grasp. Somehow, you can forgive all that is wrong with the city after a few hours in Central Park. Somehow, these few acres of land and water define New York, and redeem it.

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