

– Tea at the Plaza –

What is important to an adult and what matters to a child are so often at variance that it is a wonder the two ever find themselves on the same page. Parents may feel an occasional urge to spend money extravagantly on their offspring, only to discover that it means very little to the children themselves. You buy an expensive antique Raggedy Ann doll for your kid that she tosses in a corner, thinking it ugly and musty, meanwhile being enthralled by the shiny plastic action figure they give out free at McDonald's. And yet, if you're like me, you keep falling into the trap of costly, unappreciated presents, perhaps because they're not really for your child but for the child-self in you who never got them when you were growing up.

I remember, when my daughter, Lily, was four, my wife, Cheryl, and I sprang for a family carriage ride through Central Park in the snow. We had such an idyllic Currier & Ives image in our heads, and it seemed such an ideal treat for the holidays – all the more special because we were dyed-in-the-wool New Yorkers and usually stayed clear of what the tourists went in for. 'Let's just do it!' we cried impulsively, determined to play at being tourists in our own city. Yet

I could not help noticing the reluctant, even alarmed expression on Lily's face as she climbed, or was lifted, into the barouche, behind the bewhiskered coachman with the tall shamrock hat, stationed across from the Plaza Hotel. We started off at a slow trot; the carriage entered the park, my wife and I entranced by the vista, and Lily beginning to whimper and complain that she was cold, until she spotted a merry-go-round, the prospect of which excited her far more than an actual horse giving her a ride. As we neared the merry-go-round, Lily became so insistent that we had to ask the coachman to stop the carriage. I forked over what felt at the time like major dough for a fifteen-minute trot, grumbling as she ran to the carousel.

I vowed under my breath that I would never be such a patsy again. But we had not yet gotten out of the business, my wife and I, of manufacturing exorbitant 'perfect memories' for our daughter to cherish all her days. So we took her to Broadway shows, and to the *Nutcracker* ballet (where she fell asleep), and we began – at first vaguely, then with more urgency – plotting an afternoon's high tea at the Plaza's Palm Court. Somehow that corner at Fifty-Ninth Street and Fifth Avenue was the Bermuda Triangle that kept sucking us into fantasies of civilized luxury. You must understand that this was not a case of passing on some proud family tradition: my father took me not to Brooks Brothers for a fitting of my first suit but to the back room of a Gypsy shop that probably trafficked in stolen goods.

I grew up in working-class Brooklyn, and never entered the Plaza when I was a child, nor did Cheryl, who hailed from hardscrabble upstate New York and might, if she were lucky, get to order a hot chocolate with whipped cream at the local luncheonette. But our child was a middle-class New York child, thanks to our fatiguing efforts to claw our way up the social ladder, and, by God, we were bound and determined to give her all the social graces and sophisticated experiences that befit her, if not our, station in life.

So, with somewhat grim if hearty countenances, we got Lily and ourselves all dressed up, and took her into Manhattan for the thrill of a lifetime. We did not ride the subway from Brooklyn, mind you, as that would have spoiled the general effect, but drove in and, unable to find a parking spot on the street, left our car in a garage a few blocks east of the Plaza, in what must be the most expensive parking area in the planet. But hey! Who cares about the expense? We're treating ourselves! We entered the regal steps of the Plaza, which had on powerful electric warmers, and stood in line at the perimeter of the majestic Palm Court.

I had already called ahead and knew they did not take reservations over the phone; but fortunately the 4.00 p.m., midafternoon line was not that long, and we were assured of seating. In fact, business seemed relatively slow, for a treasured landmark. We oohed and aahed at the fabulous high ceiling, the palm trees, the piano, the marble floor, and the fashionably or

laughably costumed Ladies Who Lunched. Lily nodded, smiling and looking dutifully about, but seemed a bit cool toward it all, as if she were indulging her parents' naïve enthusiasm. Once seated, we took up our menus stiffly. The waitress wrote down our orders – three specials with all the trimmings, O spare not the clotted cream, the crème fraîche, the clabber, or what have you, the peach cobblers, the jams, the crustless cucumber sandwiches, the savories, the petits fours, the works! All that centuries of human ingenuity had found to include in this cozy English tradition of High Tea, we wanted. 'Think of it, Lily, Eloise herself ran through this very same room!' I said.

'But she's not real, is she?' said my knowing six-year-old.

'No, but still –'

'Of course she is!' insisted my wife, ever eager to prolong childhood credulity, be it about Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, or Eloise. She darted me a scolding look, warning me away from shortening our daughter's childhood with my 'realism'.

So we kept it Nice; we were all on our best behavior, and commented favorably, when the food came, on the beautiful tea service, the exquisite arrangement of edibles, the deliciousness of everything – in short, it was a dull conversation, but appropriately so, duly dull. We were proud of ourselves for adhering to the parts assigned us in this civilized ritual, for coloring within the lines. No one would ever guess we lived

in Brooklyn. We had stuffed ourselves, and now Lily began getting restless, as children will in that postprandial moment. Enough with the talk, she wanted action. I commiserated with her squirminess – more to the point, I felt childishly restless myself, and so I volunteered to take her for a walk about the floor. ‘Should I come, too?’ asked Cheryl.

‘No, stay and enjoy the last of your tea.’ (I was already deep in the throes of performing a Good Deed.)

It was fun to walk around with Lily and stick our noses into every corner of the nearby bar, the cloakroom, and the lobby. We pretended to be spies; she picked a person to trail after, then darted away madly in the opposite direction and hid, giggling. In our last go-round we came upon a family – a mother and her three young daughters in dresses, the youngest of whom was holding a clutch of balloons. Probably she was celebrating her birthday. Lily was instantly enchanted – not by the birthday girl, by the balloons. They were plump, filled with helium, and had marbled patterns outside and little silver jingling bells inside. How she wanted one of those balloons! I could tell it meant everything to her at that moment; so I went over to the mother and asked her if my daughter might have one. The word *borrow* would have been dishonest, as we had no intentions of ever returning it. No, have it for free, just like that, is what I meant; it was a brazen request to make of a perfect stranger, and fortunately the kind woman understood what was at

stake and acquiesced. ‘Which one would you like?’ she asked Lily. Stalled between the pink, the blue, and the red, Lily finally chose the red. The woman then turned to her daughter and asked ceremoniously, ‘Would you mind giving this little girl one of your balloons?’ The girl, obviously a well-brought-up child, gravely assented, and Lily walked away holding its string, happy – in ecstasies – as happy as I’d ever seen her.

We were both pretty high, delighted with our luck, when we sat back at the table. There is something marvelous in a place like the Plaza about getting something for free, even if it’s just a twenty-five-cent balloon. My wife wanted to know the whole story, and Lily began telling it, with her usual dramatic flair and embellishments. As she was gesticulating to make a point, she lost hold of the end of the string and the balloon floated up to the ceiling. How many seconds it took to make its ascent, I could not begin to tell you, but the subjective experience was one of quite extensible duration: just as in a car crash your whole life, they say, flashes through your mind, or just as a glass rolling off the table takes forever when you can do nothing to arrest its fall, so my accumulated past of error, catastrophe, and missed opportunity fluttered before my eyes while I watched the balloon drift up, up, languidly taking its time. Was I passing on my destiny of disenchantment and lost illusions to my daughter? It was too horrible to contemplate. What is even more unconscionable is that a part of me wanted to laugh.