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THE OUT OF TOWNER

All Those Great Stories, Crying to Be Overheard



Damon Winter/The New York Times

A.J. Sapolnick, left, little Digby and Mark Kirby, at the High Line. They have been to Petra, Jordan, and to Venice.

By RUTH PENNEBAKER
Published: October 20, 2011

COME here to sightsee? It's fine, I guess. You can catch the towering buildings, the store windows, the stunning bridges, the leafy parks. And yes, they're impressive and staggering.

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But to me New York is most of all a city of people and their stories. Here you rub up against your neighbors everywhere. You see the books they're reading, the newspapers and magazines they pore over. You listen to their cellphone conversations, the wheedling lectures they give their dogs. You hear tantalizing snatches of

conversations that threaten to turn you into a voyeur, but, really, it isn't your fault, is it? These half-heard intimacies are all part of the eternal city parade.

"Look over there!" a man tells his two gangly children. He spreads his hands out toward the blue autumn sky above the 30th Street Cut-Out and Viewing Platform on the [High](#)

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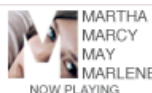
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[Line](#). “See those apartments? See those buildings? That’s New Jersey!”

“You sound like a tour guide,” the older child says.

Overhead a pair of helicopters hover lazily in the sky, and a mother leads her young child to the northern edge of the park. Beyond the chain-link fence, weeds sprout through ladder rungs and piles of plywood and an overturned shopping cart, and birds peck listlessly in the dirt.

“Look at that!” the mother tells her daughter. “It’s overgrown and yucky. That’s what nature is really like.” The daughter says nothing, but at least she doesn’t accuse her mother of sounding like a tour guide.

Farther south on the High Line, an adult says to his mother: “The question is why you continue to cling to AOL. Unless you really love it, of course.”

Nearby, an elderly couple amble along, her arm in his. They are bent forward at the same angle, as if they’d been facing the same fierce wind for a long, long time.

And then I encounter one of those New York stories that begs to be listened to, exuding a combination of star power, eccentricity and enormous eagerness. Two men of a certain age, dressed identically, recline on a park bench. They are with a third similarly clothed family member who might uncharitably be called a doll by an unenlightened observer.

“Please! We don’t use the d-word,” Mark Kirby, one of the men, says with a faint shudder. “We call him a vinyl person.”

Mr. Kirby and his partner, A. J. Sapolnick, found their infant-size vinyl person at a Paris flea market 21 years ago. They named him Digby and, as a family, call themselves the Digbys. Together they have traveled the world and have the photo albums to prove it. You can see the smallest Digby sitting on a camel in Petra, Jordan; mugging with a 350-year-old tortoise on Galápagos; lingering over pasta in Venice. The three are professional *bons vivants*, Mr. Sapolnick says.

Today they’re hanging out at the High Line, and a crew from NBC’s Peacock Productions is filming them. The men wear Roberto Cavalli jeans, black patent-leather Gucci loafers, Panerai watches and Hermès belts with an H at the buckle that’s so large that it can’t possibly be silent. Digby fils is dressed the same, except his watch is a Cartier.

Maybe today’s filming will result in a television show, the Digbys say. After all, people have begun to notice them more and more recently. (They were featured in the digital publication *The Daily* in March.) And, really, it has been an excellent year, what with their trip to Egypt and Syria shortly before the uprisings of the Arab Spring.

“I think we may have started those revolutions,” Mr. Kirby confides. “People see Digby — and he always has such positive energy. Don’t you notice that? People can see he has such a free life. It makes them want to be free too.”

The Digbys depart with the film crew, arguing about where they should go to lunch. Patis, in the meatpacking district next to the High Line, seems to be a serious contender.

Later that evening, after the sun has set on a beautiful autumn afternoon, I find my last New York stories of the day. Down a treacherous series of depth-defying steps, at the Theater Under St. Marks, the storyteller and comedian Adam Wade is hosting his monthly “Adam Wade From New Hampshire” show. Using a combination of videos and



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talk, Mr. Wade recalls the amorous habits of his college roommate and his own first job in the city, working as a waiter. His stories have a rueful sweetness to them, as told by a guy who’s often too nice to go for a devastating zinger in life.

“When I was first starting out, I was a caricature of myself,” Mr. Wade says after the show. “But now, I’m just trying to be myself – to tell stories that are personal and universal.”

It figures. In this city stories have become more than a diversion; they’re a profession too. Only the vinyl persons, mute and inscrutable, keep their stories to themselves.

Ruth Pennebaker’s latest novel is “Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakthrough.” She blogs at geezersisters.com.

A version of this article appeared in print on October 21, 2011, on page C33 of the New York edition with the headline: All Those Great Stories, Crying to Be Overheard.

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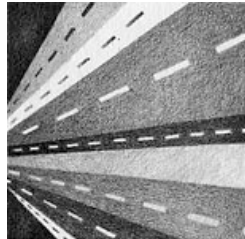


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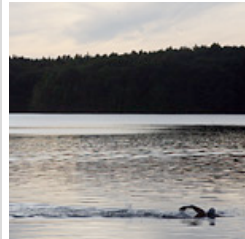
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