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The Men of the Vale

By Thomas Roma October 10, 2015



I FIRST became aware of the Vale of Cashmere in Prospect Park one summer evening in 1976, when a dear friend of mine, Carl, asked me for a lift. He said he was meeting someone, and I ended up dropping him off on a quiet stretch of Flatbush Avenue halfway between Grand Army Plaza and the zoo, where he entered the park through a hole cut in the fence. I came to learn that it wasn't the first or last time he would go through that fence, and I later got to know some of the men he met on the other side.

I again stumbled upon the Vale in the spring of 2001. Late one afternoon while my son was at baseball practice in the Parade Grounds, I crossed Parkside Avenue to take a walk in the park. I found myself wandering down a lane that led to a sunken, overgrown

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fountain. I thought I knew every inch of the park, but suddenly I was in a place I'd never seen before: a secret garden crisscrossed with a maze of hidden paths and roadways. Not until I followed a dirt trail to the top of a ridge and saw the fence below me, with the hole still in it, did I realize where I was. Ten years had passed since Carl had died. I sat on a bench trying to take it all in, and decided to take photographs there in his memory.

After a few false starts, I committed to working between late afternoon and sunset three or four days a week, walking the paths with my medium-format camera mounted on a tripod. I photographed the landscape between 2008 and 2011 and introduced myself to the men I encountered. I'd ask them if I could make a portrait for a possible book, explaining that the long exposure I had to use, between 1 and 6 seconds, meant they'd have to stay very still. Many declined, but many said yes, and I was grateful every time they did.

The resulting photographs are about a time and place — a meeting place, where black, Latino and other gay and bisexual men have long sought one another out to fulfill their wish for community and to satisfy sexual desire.

