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THE HEARTS OF NEW YORK: NEW YORK'S COLLECTIVE LOVE STORY

By Sam Anderson – June 6, 2018

MAY 19, 2018, was a Saturday. It was rainy in New York. Out on the streets of Manhattan, tourists tried and failed to hail occupied cabs. Overhead, airplanes dropped through the storm to deposit further loads of drivers and pedestrians. At Citi Field, in Queens, after the tarps were finally rolled away, the Mets eked out a precious win on a sacrifice fly in the bottom of the ninth. In London, five time zones east, Prince Harry and Meghan Markle pledged their eternal devotion to each other in a fizz of international splendor; New Yorkers set their alarms to gather at the crack of dawn and watch the ceremony on their various screens. The day was devoted to the spectacle of love, famous and anonymous. It filled the city's streets and the trains under the streets and the air-conditioned rooms hundreds of feet up in the sky. Open love, secret love, proud love, tainted love. Physical love and spiritual love, self-love and selfless love. Love on every point of the continuum between requited and unrequited.

If you have been to New York City, for any length of time — if your body has occupied space on any of its sprawling islands — you will have been immersed in this enormous civic love-fest. The romance drifts around like fog. Not "romance," of course, in the old-fashioned, idealized sense of the word — perfectly appointed young couples twirling blissfully through the streets while doormen and butchers erupt into song. Real-world love does not require youth or choreography or even necessarily couples. Love is ambient and omnidirectional, as tough as lichen and as flexible as a flock of pigeons; it finds its own forms. Stroll for 20 minutes anywhere in the modern city, and you will pass human beings engaged in love in all its many phases: kindling, growing, surging, peaking, stalling and receding.

Even if you happen to be totally oblivious to all of this, walking around with your earbuds in, you are still a part of it, a member of the supporting cast — one thread in the tight weave of bodies and voices and gazes that make up the city. You will be an unwitting witness to good dates and bad dates, to the fluid beginnings of relationships and their solid, absolute ends. Perhaps you will be the woman at the hardware store looking at ⅜-inch screws at precisely the moment that the kid carrying the skateboard makes his 13th terrible joke in a row, causing his date to turn abruptly and walk away, never to return. Maybe you will be the man at the next table in the crowded restaurant who overhears the embarrassing revelation that leads to the embarrassing counterrevelation that leads to the end of the affair that saves the teetering second marriage. Or you will be standing under your umbrella near a fountain when a young man in the distance suddenly kneels, on the dirty pavement, inside a heart of plastic roses, to propose. For someone, somewhere, you will be trapped in the amber of a relationship's earliest moment. You will be a blurry face on the edge of a photo. You will be a part of someone's lore.

One of my favorite New York love stories, Edith Wharton's novel "The House of Mirth," begins in the middle of the city's defining crowd — "the afternoon rush of the Grand Central Station." Two acquaintances see each other there and decide to escape the congestion and walk up Madison Avenue. Everywhere they go, new crowds surge around them, drifting and dispersing and clustering. "He led her through the throng of returning holiday-makers," Wharton writes, "past sallow-faced girls in preposterous hats, and flat-chested women struggling with paper bundles and palm-leaf fans." The two exist in a tiny bubble suspended in a sea of others. The crowds hardly see them, and they hardly see the crowds. This is one of the strange luxuries of living in a major city: this public privacy, the privilege of selective attention, the ability to navigate masses of people without quite seeing them as individuals but as something simultaneously more and less — a kind of humanoid weather. When the novel's final tragedy arrives, it is preceded by another walk through the same Midtown streets: "Night had now closed in and the roar of traffic in Forty-second Street was dying out." No matter how private your love feels, New York will find a way to participate, always.

IN NEW YORK, love tends to attach itself to the cityscape. It infuses the concrete and lingers in particular places like ghosts: buildings and awnings and outcroppings of rock in Central Park. Every staircase and streetlamp is alive with infinite histories. My personal New York love story includes some things that still exist and many things that don't: a saintly dachshund, the blizzard of 2003, a particular bakery's chocolate muffin, a Russian barber in Queens, couples therapy, ice cream in winter and a huge pink cocktail at the Algonquin Hotel. One spring evening, through a hospital-room window, my wife and I watched the sun set over the rooftops of the West Village; by the time we watched it rise again, our daughter had been born. In the decades before that night, in the same hospital, thousands had watched lovers and acquaintances and family and friends die of AIDS. Love stories beginning, winding, unwinding and ending. The hospital has since been torn down, and luxury apartments have risen in its place.

Last summer, the singer St. Vincent released a ballad called "New York" — a lament, over sad piano, about a lost New York love. It is a type of song that has been popular for many generations, since at least the days of Tin Pan Alley, and one that will exist as long as the city exists. The song includes this lyric:

New York isn't New York

Without you, love.

Too few of our old crew

Left on Astor.

If you played that verse to a thousand different people, throughout the history of the city, they would fill in all of its variables — you, love, our old crew — with a very wide range of specifics. Astor Place is a tiny stitch of a street, two blocks long, between N.Y.U. and the East Village. Today, its defining features include a subway station, sidewalk tables full of used books, a Starbucks and a huge black sculpture of a cube that will rotate if enough people lean against it at once. This is the landscape the St. Vincent song conjures in my mind — populated by graduate students, late at night, laughing too loud on their way to St. Mark's Bookshop. Play the song in 1850, however, and it would have been a lament for the death of the old ruling class, including the street's namesake, the real estate mogul John Jacob Astor. Play it in 1900, translated into Yiddish, and it would have spoken to Eastern European garment workers who had seen friends die of diseases and hardships too numerous to name. Play it in 1950, and it would have been about tough men and women who had managed to survive the Depression in abandoned buildings.

But those worlds, and the people in them, are gone. Even St. Mark's Bookshop has closed, and the grad students I knew have scattered across North America, and new waves of shops and students have swept in to replace them. I am confident that not a single one of these faces overlaps with the faces St. Vincent is singing about. The sentiment, however, is roughly the same. Our vastly different joys and regrets attach to the exact same landscape.

A city both oversees you (it never stops looking) and undersees you (there are just so many of you to be seen). Individuals inevitably get lost in the abundance. Don DeLillo, who grew up in New York and went on to become the poet laureate of American crowds, once described the place as "the city of overflowing faces." His work is, among other things, a sustained chronicle of New York's overwhelmingness:

"The rush of things, of shuffled sights, the mixed swagger of the avenue, noisy storefronts, jewelry spread across the sidewalk, the deep stream of reflections, heads floating in windows, towers liquefied on taxi doors, bodies shivery and elongate, all of it interesting to Bill in the way it blocked comment, the way it simply rushed at him, massively, like your first day in Jalalabad, rushed and was. Nothing tells you what you're supposed to think of this."

Nothing tells you what you're supposed to think. It can be profoundly lonely. And so we look for one another.

The culture teaches us to think of love as an eternal, universal, formless thing — the shimmering essence at the heart of every Disney movie and medieval French poem and pop song and rom-com. And yet, when we encounter love in real life, it is always hyperspecific and local. Love is not some great abstract principle; it is not an airbrushed fantasy. It exists out in the world, always, as deep particularity. It is about wallpaper, face creases, a paisley blanket, a lisp, a smell, the particular yield of particular flesh. It involves old-growth forests of body hair, asymmetrical teeth, eyebrows, puffiness, discoloration. When love comes for you, it comes not for a cartoon princess or any other kind of cliché — it comes for you, all of you, as you actually are.

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

This special issue of The New York Times Magazine is about love in all its glorious specificity. More than 20 photographers traveled around New York City to document its grand passions and quiet affections and exploratory glances. The aim was to parse the city's anonymous crowds, to separate them into their component parts, to look at individuals instead of just masses — to see the particles that make up the waves. All of the photos were taken on a single day: May 19, that rainy Saturday, while the Mets were winning and the royals were wedding and the taxis were honking at one another. One photographer went back and forth on the Staten Island Ferry, chronicling moments of love that bloomed on the water. Another rode in a bus that carried people kissing. Another went from home to home capturing couples in bed.

Think of the issue as a kind of core sample: a way to measure the precise state of love on Earth in a very specific place and time. We see couples staring into the camera together — a double presence, projecting their relationship frankly out into the world. In other cases, we see one lover staring ahead while the other sleeps or looks away — a study in shyness and boldness, presence and absence. Kisses land on cheeks, lips, necks. Beards commingle. Some pairs joyously push their affection right to the edge of public decency. Some have hairstyles that subtly rhyme. We see whole folded architectures of hands — touching or delectably not-quite-touching or with fingers elaborately interwoven. It is a collection of public-private images that I find tremendously optimistic. Even the heartbreak — the removal, for instance, of an old tattoo — is, in its way, encouraging. Someone is moving on.