The Hot Dog Eater
(December 24, 2006)

by Joseph Conlin

Neither Brian nor I want to go into Manhattan. It's a Sunday, it's Christmas Eve. He wants to sleep late, leaving the day to happenstance. I want to rest, being tired of rushing around for the holidays. He came up from Maryland with Paul and Kristin, who were married in October. Kristin wants to see the two-hundred-fifty or so paintings, mosaics, and glasswork in the Louis Tiffany exhibit being run by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in Manhattan. It's called the Laurelton Hall Exhibit, named for Tiffany's eighty-four-room, Long Island estate. Tiffany's mosaics and glasswork fascinate Kristin, probably because both of her parents—Karin and Timothy Martin—work with ceramics, her mother throwing pots and her father creating sculptures. Paul wants to go because Kristin does, and Linda wants to go because she loves Manhattan.

I presume it will cost about $70 to drive, including tolls and parking, $30 less than the train for four of us. I presume that by leaving early that we will miss traffic. I presume that I will park in a lot on East 87th, only a few blocks from the museum. I want the convenience of driving even though it's bad for the environment. I have not traveled well since a surgeon removed my seminal vesicles, bladder, and prostate, saving me from cancer and eliminating forever the pleasures of peeing normally and having an erection, not that peeing normally or getting erections have anything to do with travel, but my urostomy pouching system, as the experts call it, has all to do with the uncertainty of travel—at least that is what I presume because to this day I don't understand my post-surgical anxiety about travel. I know that when I do travel, I plan every step, knowing as best I can where I can pee or—if the need arises—where I can replace the pouching system (two parts: a flange that attaches to my body and a 500 milliliter pouch that attaches to the flange and into which my urine flows). I always presume that the pouch could leak or that the seal for the flange could crack, leaving me wet and smelly. (It has happened more than once during the past seven years.) Not that this is on my mind during an entire trip. I have it easier than most—at times. When I drive, I plug the spout from the pouch into a hose that leads to a two-liter plastic bag, enabling me to urinate whenever I want. When I park, I disconnect. Once out of the car, I don't need to find a bathroom, but I need to have an idea of where I will pee because I'm not supposed to let the pouch fill up more than 250 milliliters (about one cup).

So I plug in and we leave at 8:30. Brian sits next to me in the front seat, and Linda, Kristin, and Paul have crammed into the backseat of my 1996 black Saturn SL2. Brian, Paul, Kristin, and Linda talk, but I hear so little. I'm one of those drivers who doesn't talk. I enjoy driving, and the roads are wide open even on the Cross Bronx Expressway and the Tri-Borough Bridge. I fly down FDR Drive. I park in a garage on 87th off Third Avenue.

It's the Upper East Side, one of the most exclusive neighborhoods in the Northeast, an area where people spend millions for co-ops and condos in former mansions of families who once were the primary customers of Tiffany's works a century ago. Then as now, the residents of this

neighborhood think of and use money in ways most Americans cannot fathom. And yet, there is a grimy, sterile feeling in the neighborhood. Only a few people are walking. It's as if everyone is hibernating for the holiday weekend. All that seems alive is the wind, blowing its way up the street and wrapping itself around the five of us. I am wearing a Polar fleece vest over a button-down collared dress shirt. Even though Kristin warned me not to, I left my barn jacket in the trunk of the car, thinking that with temperatures going up to fifty that I would be warm enough. It had been a while since I was in Manhattan, and I had forgotten about the cold winds coming off the water from the south, east, and west. Within a few hundred feet of the garage my arms feel cold. I complain to Linda; more precisely I chastise myself for ignoring Kristin's recommendation. When we reach Fifth Avenue, the sun—no longer blocked by the relics of New York City's Gilded Age—shines and warms me. From the corner I see the museum, and there's no line. I had expected lines. When Linda and I saw the DaVinci and the Picasso exhibits several years ago during the winter holiday, the lines stretched down the museum steps onto Fifth Avenue.

Kristin bounds up the stairs and disappears into the museum. Linda and I follow, but Paul and Brian trail, finishing off a coffee and bagel Paul picked up in a shop along 87th. I purchase three adult tickets and two for students, since Paul and Kristin are in grad school, Kristin for history and Paul for engineering. The recommended fee is eighty dollars, a meager sum if you roam the entire museum for a day but expensive if you see only the Laurelton Hall exhibit. Running a tally of the day's expenses, I wonder if walking through halls and studying Tiffany's work would be worth the hundred-fifty dollars that I would drop. I don't understand why I am running the day's tab. I am not thinking oh this is what we could have done for a hundred fifty. It's mostly a habit. Money has always been tight, primarily because of my career choices: writing and later teaching as a university adjunct, the latter taken to augment the income of the first. My choices, while never regrettable, always generated guilt about those things that I denied my family—although we live better than most because of Linda's work—she being the primary wage earner for more than half of our family's existence. Even with women's lib, that great familial and financial benefit of Linda's employment always tickles its share of guilt. I, the man, should earn a healthy sum so that Linda has the choice to work or not. She has no choice, although that's hyperbole for we always have choices, but under the circumstances it probably seems to her as if she has no choices in regards to work—as my father, the only wage earner, felt as if he had no choice. Men not having the choice is the way it's suppose to be—at least in my consciousness (or is it my imagination?). It's probably a common feeling among men in my generation—the baby boomers, the generation coming of age when women's lib struck its hardest knell for the once perceived righteousness of a male-dominated society. It's not the fault of the freedom and equality women sought and still strive to attain. It comes because we, the men of that generation, cannot wipe clean the paradigm of family structure that we witnessed in our homes, in our textbooks, on our television screens, and in the movies. Logic and reason play no role for if they did, there would be no guilt—for if logic and reason had played a role in our society, there would have been no reason for the Women's Lib movement, the Civil Rights movement, or even the peace movement of the Sixties.

Today most men find themselves living in situations where both partners must work to maintain their style of living, and because these men come from a generation where their family models resemble mine, there's guilt from the failure to provide for their children and their wives as well as their

fathers had, all the while ignoring the fact that our fathers didn't own houses as large or two or three cars, and didn't have cable television, Web access, three or four cell phones, and all the other trappings of suburban necessities. So I run the tab for the day because I feel guilty that I haven't provided enough. The tally symbolizes an expenditure, a sense of giving, of accomplishment, even though that is not what the trip is about. It is about art, although I would prefer to call Tiffany's work craft, ingenious craft but craft nonetheless, for what distinguishes his work is its mere function of decorating a room without offering an insight into who we are or what we were, and ideally both.

We climb the large stairs from the main hall to the second floor. It's an expansive stairway, intended to hint at the classical architecture of the ancient Greeks and Romans that were meant to evoke homage. On the second floor we pass through a variety of exhibits, seemingly turning left at the end of each hall until we reach Cantor Exhibition Hall.

Once we start through the exhibit, we separate—not physically but psychologically—as each of us stares at a piece of work and reads the posts next to it. My pace slows as I look at the works. The stained glass, shining with its back lighting, draws me closer, my hand reaching towards it, then stopping. I lose sight of Kristin and Linda, and I haven't seen Paul or Brian after we entered the Hall. Within minutes of entering the exhibition, one or both of them, sought distraction—probably in the form of a 23-year-old Brian distracting 28-year-old Paul with some kind of comment, but I neither saw nor heard this, I presumed it. It's not as presumptuous as it may sound. Linda and I had dragged them to more than a few museums, and boredom seemed to hit them as soon as we crossed a museum's threshold. It's not that I thought they could not appreciate that Tiffany and his craftsmen painted with colored glass as opposed to painting on glass and created dimensional effects, such as using “jewels” of colored glass or sculpting the glass to appear as a drape in a woman's dress or the flow of water. Maybe I knew that Paul and Brian could see these decorations as accouterments for the living space of the wealthy, an atmosphere, giving a room, a space, a romantic sense of nature's adornments, providing a place only with a sense of extravagance.

One piece stops me, an intricately hand-carved door from India, which Tiffany used as the front door to his apartment in Manhattan. He purchased it at a time the British ruled the subcontinent. I see one, then two, then three men working with dark hands, calloused and cut, and they had no way out of the work for which they were underpaid. They considered themselves the lucky men, men with crafts, unlike the others who had less fortunate *karma-phala*. They had no guilt for needing to work for they had work, but did they imagine that this one door, taking months to make, would travel across the world's major oceans to New York, presuming they even knew of the city's existence, and that more than a century later, it would stand in a museum without their names and only the name of the buyer, who did nothing but admire their craftsmanship? It's as if the talent of these men was stolen.

Louis Comfort Tiffany was born in 1848, a time when the nation was torn between free and slave states, when Manifest Destiny was thought of as the God-given right of an America on the verge of the Industrial Revolution, which would create a new and unimaginable wealth as found in the likes of such robber barons as Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Vanderbilt. Tammany Hall ruled the city, the rich not particularly caring about the political graft so long as they became richer and their neighborhoods remained safe from those

with less fortunate *karma-phala*, namely the lower-class of English descent, African-Americans or freed blacks, and the immigrants, primarily the Irish. He was fifteen when the draft riots overwhelmed New York City during the Civil War, which the rioters, mostly Irish, called the rich-man's war because one could commute the draft with a fee of $300 or pay another individual to serve in one's place. The rioters invaded the neighborhoods of free blacks and killed, and when the army left and when the fires subsided and when the bodies were laid in the streets for their loved ones to claim, the wealthy of New York cared only for their safety. Manhattan, as it remains today, was a place of the uberwealthy and uberpoor, many of whom lived in or near an area called Five Points (near present day Foley Square and setting for the movie *Gangs of New York*). Charles Dickens wrote of Five Points in *American Notes for General Circulation:*

Poverty, wretchedness, and vice, are rife enough where we are going now. This is the place: these narrow ways, diverging to the right and left, and reeking everywhere with dirt and filth. Such lives as are led here, bear the same fruits here as elsewhere. The coarse and bloated faces at the doors, have counterparts at home, and all the wide world over. Debauchery has made the very houses prematurely old. See how the rotten beams are tumbling down, and how the patched and broken windows seem to scowl dimly, like eyes that have been hurt in drunken frays. Many of those pigs live here. Do they ever wonder why their masters walk upright in lieu of going on all-fours? and why they talk instead of grunting?

The man who wrote gently of the England's poor in Oliver Twist apparently lost his empathy as he crossed the Atlantic, or was it because now the poor were of Irish or African descent?

As Tiffany toured Europe during the 1870s and studied painting and glass, the poor were pushed from Five Points to the lower East Side, the Bowery, Hell's Kitchen, and Harlem.

I didn't know any of this during the 1960s when my father would drive into Manhattan. He was a structural engineer for the federal courthouse being built on Foley Square. I can still hear the clanking of the pile drivers, pounding enormous I-beams into the ground. My father explained to me on one trip that most of Manhattan lay upon a bedrock, mostly granite, making it possible to build the massive skyscrapers on the island. The courthouse was being built on land near what was called Collect Pond, a source of water in 18th Century Manhattan, later polluted, and then drained and filled in. But it was never filled well, and the bedrock was elusive. My father's job was to make sure that the foundation, unlike that of the original Tombs Prison that once was located nearby, found bedrock or a way for the foundation to work. In the site manager's trailer, a man with large hands gave me a cup of vegetable soup. It tasted different from a paper cup, much like a Sabrett hot dog tastes different from a vendor. I didn't know about Five Points then, or that Collect Pond—filled in—would form a southern boundary of sorts for Five Points when it became the neighborhood of movie legend. It was however then that I realized for the first time just how connected people are to their own history and to the history of others and of a place.

My social realism disappears—for just a second—when I see Fountain Court, which the white tabs on the wall say was Tiffany's homage to the fountains of Alhambra, Spain, and in the middle of the fountain Tiffany had placed a four-foot-high teardrop-shaped vase made of Fabrile glass, which

he created by mixing molten colored glass, creating an iridescent effect. Yet there is no mention that Alhambra was designed by the Moors, who used slaves from the conquered Spain to create and design the work. And it seems that most art, even today with the wages most artists, dancers, actors, and writers are paid, develops in societies unwilling to pay a fair price until some “expert” declares it art.

How did Tiffany treat employees in his glassworks factory in Brooklyn and Queens, probably mostly Irish and German immigrants? It was a time when workers hadn't unionized so toxins wafted in the air as these men molded the molten glass and their shifts were too long and injuries were seen as inconveniences. I walk around the vase that these men made, studying the effects of light on the glass, which was as Tiffany once described remnant of the colors found on the wings of butterflies or the necks of pigeons. I am bored, the exhibit not being in a real place but more of an academic setting or more appropriately a zoo of art where one gets the impression of seeing something for what it is or was but only seeing a representation of what it is or was.

“It's weird,” Brian says from behind me.

We are standing in front of a painting by Tiffany. It is a procession to a garden nymph or something. I cannot remember the name of the painting. “I wonder if he was gay,” I say.

“No look. See how the people in the picture clump together as they approach the throne. At the same time, the younger people appear the closest, and as the characters become younger they are wearing less and less clothing.”

I hadn't noticed. The older two characters, the last in the procession, also appear faded, lost to the background compared to the younger characters in the front. The older women characters are fully dressed in gowns that reveal only the skin of their hands and their heads while the ones closest to the throne expose their hands, heads, arms and portions of their chests, and they have a sensual nature to them as opposed to the older women who appear asexual.

We move through the exhibit, he catching up with Paul, I staring at the works, looking for some piece that will distract me. Finally I am standing at the end of the exhibit, Paul, Kristin, Linda, and he waiting for me.

“Paul wants to see the armor and Egyptian exhibit,” Linda says.

“Sure.” I am not sure. I had seen the exhibits several times during the past four decades. I didn't want to see the engravings, statuettes, the Tomb of Perneb, or the Temple of Dendur—leaving one wondering upon the backs and lives of which slaves were these monuments to ego built, but I again walk the alleyways of exhibits, walking into the tomb and standing by the fountain that hemmed the temple. I am not interested in the armor, swords, and single-shot pistols and rifles in the Bloomberg Exhibit Hall. Why study again how people found new and more efficient means of killing? I stumble through the exhibit, looking not so much at the weapons and armor but at the designs etched into the metal and the jewels attached and the precious metals inlaid, and each item becomes proof that conspicuous consumption began long before the 20th Century, when it became an art form of America's

middle class as well as its leisure class. Before I realize it, I am walking through the gift shop, and I could not see Kristin, Paul, Brian, or Linda. Brian comes up from behind. There are sales signs on most of the displays. He picks up something. “Still overpriced.” We walk through the aisles, finally coming upon Kristin and Paul who are looking at a Japanese print that they are calling the Wave. It's actually called *The Great Wave of Kanagawa* painted by Katsushika Hokusai in the early 19th Century. In a series of 38 paintings Hokusai captured the grace, wonder, and power of an every day occurrence—the rolling of a wave to shore. They want it for their living room, and I wonder how much of their liking of the print has to do with their passion for sculling, which they did each morning or evening around six. Or do they find it fascinating because they live near the confluence of the Patuxent River and Chesapeake Bay, a region once dominated by people who made their living on the water? Brian and I continue to walk. Finally, I say that I have to get outside. Without waiting, I walk for the front doors and down the steps and I stand in the chill of Fifth Avenue, watching the stairs, enjoying the cooler and less dry air of the outside, having found the inside of the museum to be overbearing, draining -- as if it were sucking away moisture.

He and Linda stand at the top of the stairs, looking around. I wave initially in a simple one arm pendulum style, but they don't see. I bounce up and down, and flail both arms. He points and starts down the stairs.

“Do you want anything?” he asks as he points to the Sabrett vendor some fifty feet uptown. “No.” He runs over. “He wants to get a dirty-water dog,” Linda says. There's something special about a Sabrett dog on an autumnal day—even though Christmas is tomorrow. He surprises me though. For the past several years, he has become increasingly careful about his fat intake and the amount and types of meat he ingests. He balks at butter and even two-percent milk. He still loves eating mac and cheese, mashed potatoes, and French fries, but he rarely eats ice cream or even dessert. Hot dogs, once a favorite, had years ago slipped from his menu of preferred foods, and yet when I see his powerful back waiting in a line with three kids, I remember the boy standing in line with me, holding my hand, so anxious for the sliver of mixed beef byproducts that he lets go of my hand, moves up in line until someone says, “Hey,” and then he retreats back to my side, again holding my hand.

I no longer look at Paul that way since he found Kristin. He has something special with her, enabling them to guide their lives better than any parent could, but I feel that Brian still needs a parent to watch over him, even though he is living on his own 310 miles away from home and doing a good job of it. He trots back, holding two hot dogs and a pretzel. He hands a dog to Linda. He immediately unwraps the wax paper from his and begins eating it as if he were competing with Linda. Within six bites it's gone. Then he bites into a “pizza” pretzel, a warmed soft pretzel with a marinara sauce loaded with oregano. “This sucks. You want a bite.” He holds the pretzel in front of my face. In the center of the pretzel that he pulled off is a streak of red with some green flecks. It looks odd, mostly because I had eaten my share of pretzels along Fifth Avenue during the past five decades, preferring the ones warmed over chestnuts, it creating a wonderful semisweet and salty taste. When I look at him, I cannot tell if he wants to spit the masticated pretzel from his mouth. “Sure.” It does suck and I almost spit it out.

I feel cold waiting for Kristin and Paul. “She's getting her coat from the cloak room,” Brian says. When the newly-weds come down the stairs, I look at the

line of yellow cabs stretching up Fifth Avenue. I ask if we should take a cab to the Christmas street fair at Columbus Circle that Kristin had read about. When we realize that we'll have to take two cabs, the group decides to walk. We start, initially Linda, Brian, and me walking behind Paul and Kristin. We move slowly, so I pick up my pace with the hopes of staying warmer. We pass vendors, most selling framed photographs of the city and a few selling clothes. Linda suggests that I stop and buy a sweatshirt. Without breaking my gate, I study the stalls. The men, mostly Asian, are selling overpriced light-weight sweatshirts with touristy images of New York printed on them. Thinking that I would never wear one again, I decide to pass.

As we walk along Fifth, I point to one of the old mansions, saying to the group and actually no one in particular that these buildings, now offices and condos, once housed single families. I mention that what is now uptown Manhattan was not always the desirable city address, it being a place for the nouveau riche of the later 19th Century, and that the old rich of New York had lived downtown. Even today in Greenwich Village you can see homes that long ago were converted from the stables for the horses used to pull the wealthy's carriages. There is a counterpoint that I ignore—the homeless sleeping or sitting near the wall separating Central Park from the sidewalk. Suddenly I sound boring and I feel cold.

We reach 72nd Street. I notice people running, men and women walking dogs, and families strolling along the walkways in the park. I suggest that we cut through. I hear only Kristin agree, and I walk into the 72nd Street entrance and look for a path that will take us on a more or less diagonal line to Columbus Circle. I stop myself from talking about Frederick Olmsted usually credited with designing the park, from mentioning that Calvert Vaux was the park's actual architect, and from explaining that 585-acre Prospect Park, located about two miles from where I grew up in Brooklyn, also was designed by Olmsted and Vaux. I thought of the Vanderbilt Biltmore estate, in Asheville, NC, which Olmsted landscaped. In designing the two parks, Vaux and Olmsted had one goal—to draw New Yorkers from their homes, to walk, to regain a connection to nature. Theirs was similar to Tiffany's, with a difference. Vaux and Olmsted created the parks as an egalitarian space, uniting classes of people, but they never unite and remain separated by a space that I believe human beings shove between themselves and those things or people they do not understand.

As we walk deeper into the park, the shadows from brick and mortar and glass and steel retreat, and I feel the warmth of the sun. We reach the Husky monument. I ask why a husky is commemorated. Brian recalls the husky from the movie *Six Degrees of Separation* , which was based on the play with the same title. The movie starred Will Smith, Donald Sutherland, and Stockard Channing, and it somehow seems appropriate. In the play and the movie, Sutherland's and Channing's characters, Flan and Ouisa Kittredge, are pseudoliberal Manhattanites living in a condo overlooking Central Park. They are obsessed with their art collection and are oblivious to the fate of the homeless, as represented by Will Smith's character, Paul, who's based on David Hampton. (In the 1980s Hampton convinced several members of Manhattan's high-society that he was the son of Sidney Poitier.) The Kittredges are probably no different from the wealthy clients of Tiffany, Tiffany himself, and Olmsted, at a time when the Irish, Jews, African-Americans, Chinese, and Italians were living in squalor in their ghettos in Hell's Kitchen, Mott Street, and Bowery. Only minutes earlier we walked passed a dozen homeless individuals, so how I am different from the Kittredges and are we all like them to some degree or another? I claim that

I'm nothing like the Kittredges, and in many ways I'm not, but I'm still ashamed of my obsession for the trappings of a middle class life while forgetting those who struggle not to live well, just to live, whether in America or in Darfur.

The Paul from the movie and the play is fascinated by the husky, and so remain I. It has no place in the park, even though it's located just north of the Children's Zoo. It seems like a Kittredgian representation of the facts but facts blinded from what is real. The statue is of a husky named Balto, which today can be seen stuffed and mounted in the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. The statute was erected in 1926, a year after Balto and several others saved Nome, Alaska. In the winter of 1925 a diphtheria epidemic hit the city, and physicians were running low on serum. Officials in Anchorage arranged for a chain of dog sled teams to deliver a 20-pound canister containing the serum from Nenana, the last stop on the train route, to Nome. They divided up the 675-mile route, now called the Iditarod Trail, and the famed dog-sled race—the Iditarod—commemorates annually that same run. Different sled teams would take a leg. Balto was the lead dog of the final two legs, a total of 50 miles. The mushers and their dogs delivered the serum in slightly more than five days, five to 10 days faster than usual. Balto, which was owned by Leonhard Seppala who considered him at best a freight dog, received the glory only because he was the lead dog of the sled in the final leg. Yet it would seem more significant to have honored Gunnar Kaasen, who drove the Balto team. Or what of Leonhard Seppala whose team was lead by the more skilled racing dog Togo? They traveled more than 170 miles over the most difficult leg of the journey. Then there were also Wild Bill Shannon, Edgar Kallands, Victor Anagick, Myles Gonangnan, Henry Ivanoff, Charlie Olson and Ed Rohn, who braved temperatures 50 degrees below zero (F), some arriving at the relay stations frozen to the grips of their sleds or with cheeks blackened from frost bite. (And I'm complaining about it being chilled even though New York this winter day is more than 100 degrees warmer.) We overlook so much in life, maybe even some of the most important parts of life, searching for the sentimental so we can reinforce those beliefs that we hold most true but that we doubt most often. Because when we delve into the life of Balto we know that we will not find a drunk or a wife beater or a fortune hunter. There's only a dog. In that quest for the sentimental we forget that Balto, Togo, and the other dogs did only what their masters' taunts and shouts demanded.

We continue along the trail, actually a path, and exit the park at Central Park South between Sixth (Avenue of the Americas) and Seventh avenues. I see the Essex House hotel, and I point it out to Linda. One of her aunts worked as a chambermaid in the hotel during the Sixties, and she would return each night tired, not of cleaning, making beds, or vacuuming rooms, but of picking up the mess that people left, such as feces in the bathtub, peanut butter and jelly between the mattress and box spring, and used condoms under the sheets. Linda had seen the hotel, but we don't talk about the hotel or her aunt. Is she thinking about her aunt, thinking about how the woman gave her a bedroom and helped her find work about a month before Linda's family relocated from Long Island to Florida, remembering the woman's cooking? Her aunt's meals, even snacks, were feasts—each having a touch of something extra, especially in regards to presentation. She was so proud of the family dinners during holidays and especially at Christmas that she would ask Linda's cousin Joe to take a picture of the table and the food before everyone sat down to eat. There was an artistic quality to her work that would be “destroyed” as soon as the first person took a portion, and she seemed torn between maintaining the presentation and hearing the

inevitable sounds of pleasure that everyone uttered after taking but a bite or two, transforming even the pickiest of eaters into gourmands for the duration of a five-course meal that would last more than three hours. People rolled from the table, sank into chairs or went outside for fresh air or a long walk.

Columbus Circle has changed. I remember my father taking me to the New York Coliseum, now gone from the circle, for a trade show for inventors. In grammar school I was doing a science project on sound, and either he or my mother read about a man who reproduced the sounds of bronze church bells using hand-blown crystal tubes and electronics. At the show I listened under a headset as a needle thin gold-plated rod slid from side to side hitting the crystal. The inventor, whose name I have forgotten, fed the sound through an amplifier. It was astounding. I didn't know when we left but my father arranged a visit to the inventor's home and place of work in Massachusetts, where I heard the sound without a headset and it was deafening to me as the bells of Notre Dame were to Quasimodo. I returned decades later to the New York Coliseum as a reporter for a business magazine called *Successful Meetings*. It was the last year of the coliseum, it being replaced by the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center, located a few avenues over and 25 blocks south. As a place for meetings and conventions, the once state-of-the-art coliseum had become an antique shortly after it opened. Standing in its stead now is a glass-skinned tower with what appears to be a mall decorated with neon tubed lighting, a passé commercial decor calling in passers-by—just the opposite of Tiffany's intent to remind visitors of the outside.

Brian asks the name of the building standing on the site of the coliseum. I don't know, and I realize that there is much of Manhattan I no longer know or could pretend that I know. I have lost even a pseudo-expertise, I no longer being the guide to this urban canyon as I had been when Paul and Brian, as children, visited my 43rd floor office, eating Zabar knackwurst croissant sandwiches for lunch with a Dr. Brown's soda, and asking endless questions about the silver eagle heads on the Chrysler Building standing only a block away. Feeling lost for the first time in Manhattan since I was ten traveling to the city with my mother, brothers and sister from Brooklyn, I could see Brian, Paul, or Kristin leading Linda and me, showing us around, pointing out the fascinating.

The Christmas fair is set up along the plaza off the park. There are five aisles of displays of jewelry, clothing from Tibet or the Andes, and I don't remember much else. We walk through once, and Linda again suggests that I buy a sweatshirt. I pass again. Paul, Kristin, and Linda walk through again. Brian and I stand on the corner. A peddie cab offers us a ride. We see some kids dressed in Santa outfits bopping up and down on the plaza across from us. Brian and I look at each other. “They're break-dancing.” Without saying another word, we walk to the corner. As we cross the street, the crowd disperses. The dancing has ceased, and Brian and I, somewhat disappointed, return to the fair entrance.

As we wait, I notice the Spanish-American War Memorial, dedicated to the sailors who died when the *USS Maine* exploded in Havana's harbor, launching the war. Three seahorses pull a woman, presumably Lady Liberty, in a seashell chariot, made entirely from the bronze of the ship's guns, now covered with gold flaking. It commemorates a war triggered during Tiffany's heydays and marks the colonial intents of a nation, which had more or less vanquished the Native Americans and had established footholds in Asia, mimicking the colonial ambitions of the Spanish, French, Germans, and

English in Asia and Africa. The monument was completed in 1913 with donations sent by New Yorkers to William Randolph Hearst's *New York Morning Journal*. It seems fitting since Hearst through his newspaper, as well as those of Joseph Pulitzer, ignited the fury over the *USS Maine* in New York even though it was never proven that the Spanish actually attacked the ship. By 1902, the United States gained sovereignty over Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, and was to oversee the independence of Cuba. The war lasted less than 150 days, and as such it reminded me of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and the subsequent "victory" about a month later. The major difference: During the Spanish-American War, military leadership, more fascinated with glory than ingenuity, failed to prepare men for the demands of the tropics and used frontal assaults—both idiocies leading to the needless deaths of thousands of men. For the Iraq War, the military had prepared but the politicians hadn't. Now more than 3000 service personnel have died in Iraq and many others injured, and the justifications for the Iraq War or Second Gulf War, whichever term is preferred, on this December Sunday morning are as lacking as those for the Spanish-American War. In both wars, the United States claimed that it was protecting its national security from outside influences and securing the independence of a people (Cubans, Kurds, and Shia) subjugated by dictatorial regimes. There's another similarity: Neither Spain nor Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. Has the United States created an opportunity for another nation to become a thorn in its side, much as Cuba has been for half a century?

Paul, Kristin, and Linda emerge from the aisles of the fair. Linda walks up to me quickly. She points to a stall selling sweatshirts. The sun is shining, the wind has died, and the sweatshirts again are those touristy types. I tell her that I'm fine. I suggest that we walk to the Stage Deli for lunch, but I'm at a loss. Is it on Seventh or Eighth Avenue? What are the cross streets? Paul thinks that it's closer to Grand Central than Columbus Circle, and he adds that the deli had been charged with health violations but that it had fixed them. Even so we start walking towards the intersection of Broadway and 57th. I spot a policeman and ask for directions. He told me that the Stage Deli is on Seventh around 54th Street. I lead the group down 57th to Seventh. Amid the towers, there's a neon sign for the Brooklyn Diner. I presume that because of its location the restaurant is good, and Kristin notes that it could be a tourist trap. I want to try it not for any reason but because it is named for Brooklyn, and it reminds me of the different places to eat near Flatbush and Nostrand Avenues—none a diner though.

It's crowded, and we have to wait 15 minutes. Feeling claustrophobic, I step outside. The wind has picked up again, and there's a man walking in the plaza adjacent to the diner. His gray coat is grimy. His face is marked with stubble. His hands are stuffed in his pockets. The soles of his shoes are strapped on with duct tape. I imagine that I see his hunger, but I stand in the plaza as if the wind has frozen me to this place on Christmas Eve. Paul and Brian come out. They talk. The man leaves. I join Paul and Brian, not wanting to appear to be unfriendly and not wanting to be alone. I feel uncertain, and in my sons, there's that confidence possessed by young men in their twenties, no longer kids, earning money, and the future still remaining far off, and that seems comforting, hopeful. Our conversation rambles, driven by our desire to laugh at something, a form of entertainment for them, and for me a way of forgetting the dour thoughts that have traveled with me all day.

By the time we enter the diner, a table is ready. Kristin and Linda lead the way following the *maître d'*. He passes out five plastic coated menus, and as

the light bounces off the sheen, I wonder what type of restaurant it was going to be. Paul and I immediately order chocolate egg creams. Kristin, Linda, and Brian ordered sodas. We're talked out so we study the menus. I dicker with ordering a salad, but the menu claims that the diner's cheeseburger—made with Vermont cheddar, which seems wrong for a Brooklyn burger—is the best in New York, according to *New York Magazine*. Brian wonders aloud if he should order the 15-bite hot dog with onion rings and homemade sauerkraut. When the waiter appears, I order the burger, Brian the hot dog, and I don't recall what the others ordered. After the waiter takes the menus, I glance out the window looking for the man with the duct-taped shoes. He's gone, but at the table across the narrow aisle are a man, I presume the father, and a boy of eight or nine. The man is talking on his cell phone, and the boy is eating. And I remember when Brian was only a year old, and thinking that I was giving Linda a break, I would take Paul out for lunch. We went to Burger King, which was near our home, but Paul would complain, preferring McDonalds and its Happy Meals—until we stepped inside Burger King. And there he is sitting across from me, a man with a wife, holding down a full-time job while working on his Masters in mechanical engineering.

The egg cream doesn't taste particularly interesting, and I wonder if my memory of egg creams at Kennedy's Candy Store on Glenwood Road had elevated the drink to some metaphysical experience. Kristin tastes Paul's, and she is unimpressed. Paul never comments on his. Was he influenced by my memories of the drink, especially when I would wax poetic about the concoction as I tried—when he was eight or so—to replicate it with seltzer water, milk, and Hershey's syrup, saying that it was never quite as tasty as that made at a soda fountain where the seltzer squirted from the faucet foaming the milk as the soda jerk stirred up the chocolate syrup?

The food arrives. Everyone stares at Brian's 15-bite hot dog, more of an eight-inch long and 1.5-inch wide knackwurst on a bun. It sits there. Brian sits there. The rest of us sit there. In that silence, Brian decides he will eat the entire thing, as if the chef has issued a challenge. He takes a bite and we start to eat our meals. (By the way, the best New York City cheeseburger tastes good but much like any well-prepared, grilled cheeseburger that I have had -- even in Hong Kong.) We eat with little conversation. We, at least I, are hungry after the morning's hike, and we, or at least they, had talked aplenty during the drive into the city, during our walk to Columbus Circle. Suddenly everyone—either finished eating or almost finished eating—notices that Brian is slowing down—a rare experience during a meal. Paul teases him about not finishing. Linda immediately reminds Brian that he does not have to eat the entire hot dog, and I know immediately that to Brian they too have issued a challenge, a gauntlet thrown onto the table for all to see, and Brian will never let it lie there. He picks it up and takes another bite, knowing or believing that he will not be undone by a mere hot dog. We all watch, ignoring what is left on our plates. He complains at one point of tasting only the salt in the hot dog but he continues, chewing slowly, and the size of each bite shrinks as the swallowing becomes increasingly difficult. His complexion pales and hints of perspiration emerge from his brow. Linda says something again, and Paul reminds her that her plea only encourages him. His stomach seems distended. And we watch as he masticates each bite. We're waiting, waiting for the outcome, waiting for him to beat the dog. He has decided on a task and he will finish that task, and as ridiculous as that task is, we're silently cheering for him. He knows that we're cheering for him. He's the center of attention, he's making something of the moment, making it memorable in an absurd and incongruous manner, a manner the

four of us would not attempt—at least on Christmas Eve. There's silence for the last three bites. He chews more slowly, and we watch his laryngeal prominence bounce each time he forces down the mushed contents of his mouth. He pauses, and we wonder if he will take another bite, and we refrain from cheering when he picks up the hot dog from the plate and bites into it again.

When he finishes, we don't cheer. It's over, and he smiles, brightening for a moment the pallor of his complexion and even that of my own consciousness for in that moment there seems a point to absurdity, a point missing from all that I had seen in New York on that eve of Christmas.

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