

A walker of the local waterfront reflects on the sights along her path.

The River's Side

by JESSICA RAIMI

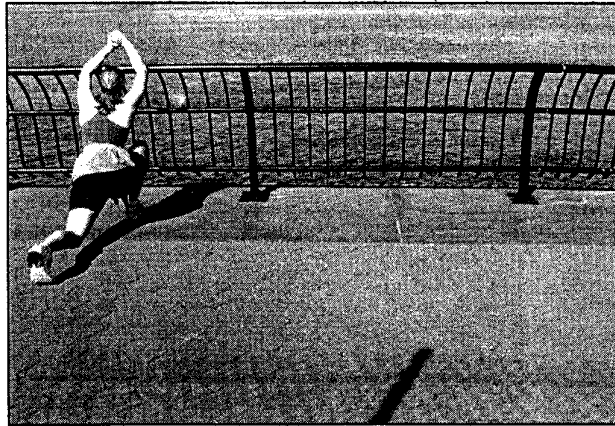
A PSYCHIC ONCE told me that I should live near the water. Shortly after that I moved to a place near the East River, and the vibrations proved beneficial. The location brought love and creativity—that passes for happiness.

Now I live near the Hudson, and I often walk or bike by the river, from Chambers Street down toward the Battery, or uptown along the track to 13th Street. They say one can't step in the same river twice. The moods of the water reflect those of the sky, and one never sees the same sky twice, nor the same colors in the lines and angles of the city's surface, as the sun strikes them from a different direction each day.

In mid-March the noble little trees on the Battery Park City promenade have a green aura when seen from a distance, though up close they are black and brown. The newly replanted lawns are still fenced off. The pile drivers clang as the real estate rises around us.

Yet nearly everyone seems to find peace near the water, except perhaps a few of the regulars: the skinny, scowling young man who spends his days striding urgently along the promenade, and the man in sunglasses who used to fly his elaborate kites grimly, as though landing a shark, or keeping an escaping soul tethered to earth.

Soon the man who winters on Grand Street will be back in his spot north of the Downtown Boathouse on the running track, sitting cross-legged as though meditating, shirtless, thin, dirty, bushy-bearded, listening to his Walkman and bronzing in the sun. Maybe the other shirtless man will return, the clean one with hair combed straight back, who reads



the paper through half glasses and looks like a lawyer with a suntan.

There is always something to see by the river.

Once, walking on the promenade, I saw a helicopter flying over the water begin to descend, banking toward me. At first I thought I was being paranoid, then I saw that it was coming straight at me, like the crop duster menacing Cary Grant in "North by Northwest." I was about to dive into the bushes when it missed me, swooped toward Stuyvesant High School, then circled back toward the water. Before I had stopped trembling, it came at me again. Then I saw people videotaping the helicopter's dance—it was nothing personal.

Whenever I pass the yacht basin, I reread Frank O'Hara's words spelled out in the iron fence, and reflect on how profoundly right he was: "One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes. I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store, or some other sign that people do not totally regret life."

On Sundays, tourists take each other's pictures with the river as background, unaware that the light from the setting sun will make their faces indistinguishable silhouettes. There are always young Asian couples having wedding photographs taken in an unvarying format: the bride in white satin, the bridesmaids in pink holding her train, the groom and his men in tuxedos with red cummerbunds. Beyond the seawall, invisible under the water, the river's floor is littered with wedding rings tossed into the waves by women embracing change.

At ten on a weekday morning, if the weather is mild, the promenade is one long outdoor gymnasium, a trickle of runners, cyclists and walkers intersecting the parade of trench coats to and from the New Jersey ferries. Unafraid of looking silly, the pursuers of fitness do crunches on the lawn, or hold onto the river wall, one leg extended behind them with foot flexed, stretching their plantar fasciae.

The older children are in school, except for those cutting class, but the tiny ones are outside, some with their West Indian nannies, some with

their Chinese grandmothers, some in huge red wooden strollers seating eight, being wheeled by day care workers. A few lucky babies ride at running speed in sport utility strollers pushed by very fit mothers.

Of course, we are all lucky to be in the park at this hour—to improve our bodies and soothe our minds, to gaze on the boats moving past us while we stay safe on shore, propelled by the waves of time.

The yard at the boathouse is full of people launching their kayaks. Some people have a craving to be afloat, as though they were born too soon and needed that sensation again. And they want to be alone, to escape.

I used to go rowing on the Hudson, though never alone. I can't imagine wanting to go alone, because it is frightening to sit on the surface of the water, dipping a hand in it, with only a thin sheet of aluminum separating you from its vastness. The ferries and barges go back and forth, and being out in a small craft is like navigating West Street on a tricycle. My rowing companion always planned to row across to Weehawken to visit his sister. He worked out a timetable according to the tide charts so that the current would carry him. But he never did it.

In the last light of a January day, I heard some notes I knew coming faintly from the direction of Pier 25, where the giant iguana stands—Charlie Parker and Miles Davis playing "Scrapple from the Apple." As I walked toward the pier the sound faded. Then, on the pier itself, I heard it—it was coming from a huge loudspeaker on the deck of the houseboat moored there. A woman was on the deck, polishing the portholes, listening to Bird and Miles just as the sun broke through the clouds and fell into the river.

Jessica Raimi lives in Tribeca.



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