

Just Passing Through

A tribute to the brief but affecting moments that can be shared between polite acquaintances and even people unlikely to meet again.

BY SIGRID NUNEZ APRIL 12, 2021



For the essays in this issue, we commissioned and chose works about friendship; the images are not meant as literal reflections of the text. Above is “The Bittersweet” (2021), made exclusively for T by the St. Paul, Minn.-based artist Julie Buffalohead, who said: “As I’ve gotten older, I’ve gotten better at accepting the fact that relationships have ups and downs, and that it’s OK to accept them for how they are at any given moment. That’s something children are good at — I see how present my daughter is as she moves through life — and you can see it with the animals here, who are being playful with each other.”

I ONCE MET two girls whose friendship began when they were babies living on the same street. All through childhood they saw each other almost every day. Classmates from preschool through high school, they are now determined not only to go to the same college but to room together. Four years of separation is out of the question, they say: They would die.

At least one of their parents thinks their daughter is being unreasonable. But I, who lost touch with every childhood friend long ago, envy them. As does one girl’s mother, a woman who has always “failed” at female friendship, she tells me. She just hopes no man ever comes between them. I hope so, too, though I can’t say I’d be shocked if that happened.

The oldest friend I have is someone I met on my first day of college, as each of us was moving into the same dorm. There is nothing like the friendships people make when they leave home for campus. “One single, endless, smoky conversation, interrupted by classes and a little sleep,” is how I once described it, in a novel for which I drew on my own freshman year more than half a century ago. Ours was a women’s college, and the friendships I’m talking about were among women. (With men, sure enough, coming between: If your roommate invited a man to your dorm room, it was understood you had to leave; if it was bedtime, you had to find somewhere else to spend the night.)

But as everyone past a certain age knows, the kind of ardent friendship common to youth rarely happens once youth is gone. Too much other life — marriage, children, work — is in the way. Even in grad school I would not form attachments with the same intensity as those of just a few years earlier — or, I should add, with the same demands. It still amazes me to recall what we women expected of one another: staying up all night, however early your first class the next morning, to help see your friend through some (usually romantic) crisis.

It’s not just a matter of no longer having the time or energy to dedicate to serious friendship, though. In middle age, becoming too buddy-buddy with another person can frankly seem puerile. So new friends are kept at arm’s length — even those with whom, as you are wistfully aware, you’d have been joined at the hip had you met, say, in that sophomore poetry class, where of course they would have recognized your gift.

A LONG, HARD year in isolation has given me a keener appreciation for the kinds of social connections that are lower in the hierarchy of friendships. I mean that outer circle we usually take for granted — people we see regularly but never really get to know, such as neighbors, doormen, shopkeepers, baristas, beauticians, fellow gym members — and even those we’ve never seen before but with whom we nonetheless share something, if only for a moment. Though never as important to us as our intimates, such acquaintances and how we interact with them can make the difference between a good day and a bad one.

I especially like the rapport that can spring up between people who meet in passing. I’m not talking about the kind of meeting that leads to better acquaintance. I’m talking about the kind that takes place between people who know their paths will never cross again, who often part without ever learning each other’s names.

“What are you reading?” I don’t remember the particulars of the conversation that followed, beginning with the Ian McEwan novel I’d just bought at a Denver airport newsstand and moving on to a discussion of other books and writers and a range of things having nothing to do with literature. I do remember that it was warm and lively and how grateful I was to the man who’d initiated it, and for his companionship as delay after delay increased our wait into the night. It may sound inconsequential, but if it really had been so, why would I still recall that experience with pleasure more than two decades later? (Though now I wonder: How less likely would this be to happen today? Who would interrupt a stranger to ask, “What are you scrolling?”)

ACCORDING TO THE Polish-American author Isaac Bashevis Singer, when you’re a doctor, God sends you patients, and when you’re a writer, he sends you stories. Tell a stranger you’re a writer and often they’ll tell you a story. It is remarkable how open many people are willing to be with someone they don’t know, especially if they’re traveling or somewhere far from home. You might never get their name, but you very well might get a confession. (And, alas, more than once I’ve had someone pour into my ear all the bigotry and resentment normally kept bottled up in public.) It’s possible that people are more forthcoming with a writer because they pick up on a certain heightened attention. They can see that they’re being listened to not just politely but intently.

Once, in a Chicago hotel bar, an elderly man, a widower, told me he suspected that his son had become involved in some type of criminal activity. His son denied everything, he said, and given how high the stakes were, the man was reluctant to discuss the matter with anyone else. He couldn’t even trust family. But apparently he could trust a stranger. From the way he talked, I could tell that what this tormented man wanted to hear was that it was OK for him to stay silent, that he was not obligated to report his suspicions about his son to the police. I couldn’t give him that, of course, but I hoped that by merely listening to him, I might help him figure out what to do.

And what about all the people we don’t get to meet in real life but whom we befriend through books? As a child, one of the things I loved most about reading was discovering that, though it was a solitary experience, it was never a lonely one. (I sometimes think I had as strong a bond with David Copperfield and Scout Finch as I had with any of my childhood companions.) And of course, one of the main reasons for writing is to communicate with people you don’t know — as vast an audience as can be hoped for. Dear, gentle, beloved: Why are these the ways writers have traditionally addressed total strangers? Because we want to make them feel welcome, we want to hold them close — even if we are also sometimes brutal to them.

A popular view has it that reading fiction can teach us empathy by making us understand that other people, including those who are completely different from us, are real. I believe the same possibility arises when we give a stranger our full attention. To be curious about another person is one of the highest forms of respect you can pay them. It’s a shame that this virtue is often seen as the vice of nosiness, commonly discouraged in our behavior from the time we are small. “The writer should never be ashamed of staring,” said the American author Flannery O’Connor. I, for one, am always seeking ways to stare at people without drawing their notice — or ire.

Besides, who hasn’t now and then enjoyed being the object of someone else’s curiosity? A chance to be anonymous, a mystery, if only for a short while. How refreshing to be looked at with new eyes, perhaps to see them light up with genuine interest or amusement at something you’ve said a million times before. The spontaneous flirtation that causes the friend you were on your way to have drinks with to say, “You look great!” How many of my encounters with strangers over the years ended with the thought, “How terrifyingly easy it is to fall in love.”

And so, while I sorely miss being with the people I know best, I also miss being with those I don’t know at all. I miss their chitchat, their anecdotes, their confessions and their grievances. I miss our mutual attention and inquisitiveness. I even miss that mix of sadness and regret for the deeper affection that — if I haven’t mistaken a certain spark — two of us might have shared, could we have met another time, in another place.