The Sidewalks of New York

by NocturnalRites

Summary

Dépaysement [\textipa{də-pɛiz-mɑ̃}] (French) (n.) 1. Disorientation felt when one is in a foreign country or unfamiliar surroundings. 2. The sense of being a fish out of water. 3. A change of mental state or feelings as a result of any major life event. 4. (anthropology) The experience of reseeing, to leave one's culture to face something unfamiliar and upon returning home, finding it has become strange, but can also be seen with fresh eyes.

See: Steve Rogers on the first Veterans Day after his return from the ice.

Notes

Prompt: Veterans Day, Steve/Peggy

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With respect and gratitude to all those who have been in or are in military service, and with deepest appreciation for the sacrifices you've made.

Song Title: The Sidewalks of New York (written by James Blake and Charles Lawlor - 1894, various performers)
Steve hesitated at the entrance to the walkway of the Brooklyn Bridge, his hands resting on the handles of Peggy's wheelchair. She appeared to have nodded off, as she had a few other times during the day, her head bent so her chin tucked into her scarf. Against the red wool, her softly wrinkled skin looked like fine, well-worn linen. She sat so still he held his own breath until he saw the slight rise and fall of her chest.

After the initial shock when he'd first seen her again, he'd stopped noticing the physical changes. Instead he focused on his Peggy, the strong, vibrant woman beneath the brittle shell. Days like today, when she was sharp and entirely herself, he could almost forget her age and frail health, how little time they had left. Reminders always jarred him, but today, it was a sucker punch.

Just then, she snapped awake and straightened, alert once more.

"Why have we stopped? Surely I've not worn you out so soon," she teased.

"Just got to thinking, is all," he half-lied. "You know, we've already hiked all over the city today. It'll take us a while to get across. Maybe we should let you get some rest and do this tomorrow."

"Absolutely not." Despite the crackle of age in her voice, she was as crisp and decisive as if she were drilling the SSR recruits. "You might be called away on assignment between now and then and we'll have lost the chance to go. And it is a lovely night. One would hardly believe it's November."

"Fine," he surrendered. "Your chair's gonna bounce like popcorn on those planks, though. Could I carry you, at least? Should be a lot more comfortable for you that way."

"I do appreciate the thought, but I've never needed a man to carry me anywhere. I'm not about to start now." The playful quirk to Peggy's lips robbed the words of any sting. "My bones can survive a few bumps. If you persist in finding objections, Captain, I'll conclude you don't wish to walk out with me after all."

He forced a chuckle past the thickness in his throat as he gently squeezed her shoulder, frail as a bird's wing beneath the padding of her wool coat. "You know that's never gonna be the case."

"Then you'd best get to pushing, hadn't you?" she retorted.

"Yes, ma'am." He set off at a moderate clip. The planks were more level than they had appeared to be, but as thin as she was now, she still jounced against the chair arms. Knowing she'd never admit to any discomfort, he surreptitiously lifted the chair so the wheels barely touched the surface. What she didn't know wouldn't hurt her.

"You going to at least tell me why you're set on this?" he asked.

"Eventually." When he looked down at her, he saw a hint of amusement deepening the soft folds and creases around her mouth and eyes.

"You've been here before, though, right?"
"Yes, though not for years." He wondered at the slight catch in her voice, but she continued as if it was something she didn't want him to notice. "The view has changed so much since I was last here. I suppose it's even more of a difference for you. Stunning, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is."

Objectively, she was right. As long as Steve thought of it as some foreign city, it was beautiful, in its way. Sunset washed the backdrop of clouds and sky with shades of scarlet and gold no painter could match and lights sparkled on one by one in the dark towers until the city was a diamond-studded silhouette.

What he couldn't do was think of it as New York, much less as home. He'd seen the city from this angle every day of his life until he'd left for the war and had sketched it so many times he could have drawn it in his sleep. The New York in his memories was smaller, shorter, a city of stone and concrete, each skyscraper unique as a fingerprint. The blocky towers of glass and steel which dominated the scene now were more like a crowd of strangers wearing identical blank masks. If he looked hard, he could still see a few relics of his time hiding among them, but they seemed as out of place as he felt.

With an effort, he shook off the melancholy that threatened to settle over him.

"Street level's changed even more, especially after the post-invasion rebuilding," he said. "Guess it's a good thing I wasn't the one leading the Veteran's Day parade today, huh? We'd've all ended up in Jersey. No one would've forgiven me for that."

Peggy's laugh hoarsened into a cough. Steve tensed, but she regained her breath.

"As delighted as the Brooklyn boys were to have you walk with them, I don't think they would have cared. They didn't even object when you wanted to include me, last minute addition though I was."

"Can't imagine why anyone would object, but it's a good thing nobody did." Steve tried and failed not to bristle on her behalf, thinking of all the small slights he'd witnessed when they'd served together and the few stories she'd shared of her time in the SSR. "You're a veteran and you served longer than I did. By the way, the VFW post commander said his father used to work with you in the SSR. You remember an Agent Ramirez?"

"Yes, I remember him." Peggy gave a small, ladylike snort of contempt. "Fortunately, his son's attitude about women in the service appears to have evolved beyond that of his father. Proof not all change is bad."

"Yeah, I guess." Despite his best efforts, the words sounded as hollow as he felt. Peggy turned slightly in her chair and tilted her head to look up at him, dark eyes intent and watchful.

"How did you meet them? I don't recall any of them from the war."

"Doing volunteer work after the Chitauri invasion this year. I haven't seen them since I got transferred to Washington, though."

His dissatisfaction deepened. Talk about expectations not meeting reality. He'd looked forward to coming back to New York, to marching in New York's Veterans Day parade with Peggy and the vets who'd befriended him after the invasion. S.H.I.E.L.D.'s PR director had butted heads with him over his plans, though. If he wasn't going to stick around with the politicians after the morning ceremonies in Arlington National Cemetery, she wanted him to be the parade's Grand Marshal and show up in his Captain America uniform to get good press for the Avengers.
Steve, however, dug in his heels. He was there to respect and honor those who'd served, not set himself apart from everyone else. If he was marching, he'd damned well go in his old Army uniform like all the rest. It was the one he was proudest to wear, anyway.

The PR director grumbled, but subsided after Fury sided with Steve. He suspected Peggy had a hand in that one. Peggy had definitely been the one to arrange the trip up in the Quinjet with him from Washington, overriding her doctor, Fury and probably God himself, if Steve knew her. Why she'd insisted, though, was still a mystery to him.

"They seemed quite happy to see you." He had the feeling she was watching him for a reaction, but he didn't know what. "Although I got the impression you felt a bit awkward."

"That obvious?"

A small smile played at the corners of her mouth. Steve felt his own tug upward in reluctant response. "Only to me."

He raised his eyebrows in acknowledgement and shrugged. "I didn't expect it to be different than it usually is when I get together with them, is all. Guess I should have."

The VFW was one of the few places he'd started to feel at home in New York. The Red Hook post in Brooklyn had a number of soldiers from divisions who'd fought with the 107th, and they'd made him welcome. When time permitted, he'd go over to play pool or cards, have a few beers and swap stories. Like the signs of Peggy's age, it was easy for all of them to look past differences to what they had in common.

But today, they'd had their families with them. It was harder to ignore the difference in his apparent age or appearance compared to theirs, nor the different points they were at in their respective lives. Hell, he'd looked younger than some of their grandkids. He hadn't meant to stand out, but he had, anyway. The men who knew him hadn't batted an eye, but there were also a lot of men who'd never met him. From them, he'd drawn curious glances and outright stares of thinly veiled envy, the sources of which he guessed from overhearing a few less than whispered comments.

For some, it was his youth and health. He'd spent enough of his life with sickness and pain to understand that one. Others, because he'd come home alive and whole when their friends and brothers hadn't. After what had happened to Bucky, he definitely understood that one.

But most envied him for having what they perceived to be a priceless opportunity. He was where they'd once been, starting a new life after the war, while their lives were winding down. That one was hard not to resent. He didn't want a new life. The life he wanted was one he couldn't have, the one he should have had with Peggy.

He wondered if they'd ever believe how willing he'd be to trade places with any of them, to have had the chance they had when they'd had it.

Probably not.

Peggy slipped her hand over his and squeezed it, breaking him out of his thoughts.

"What is it?" she asked.

If she'd been anyone else, he would have pushed it all back down again and denied anything was wrong. But this was Peggy, and as always, what would have been unthinkable for him to say to anyone else poured out like water.
"When I was overseas, I always thought about what it would be like to come home. Then I did, and it's like a foreign country. I keep thinking I'll get used to it eventually, but even the things that should be familiar aren't. It's just not the same." He shrugged, trying to make light of it. "Guess it's true what they say. You can't go home again."

"Some of that is quite normal," she said, unruffled. "Dépaysement, the French call it."

It wasn't a term he remembered from Gabe's lessons. "What's that again?"

"Dépaysement. No English equivalent, but much like what you've described. Being a fish out of water, as it were. A feeling you're in a foreign land, that nothing's familiar, though it should be, sometimes. Disorientation, really, not homesickness, though the two often go hand in hand."

"That's not all of it but..." He exhaled, the relief of being understood like a weight slipping away from his shoulders. "Yeah. Some."

"You're not alone, you know." She squeezed his hand again. "Your case is more extreme, of course, but all of us in the war felt that way when we came home. Some of it is how our homes changed while we were gone. My old neighborhood in London was flattened in the last days of the Blitz. I couldn't find my way round at all when I went back. But we changed, too. We want different things from life. We don't deal with people or situations as we once did, or look at even familiar things the same way. One can't do what we've done, see what we've seen, and be the same people we were when we left. But one adjusts, given time."

That was part of it, though he hadn't looked at it that way. He wasn't the same man who'd gone into the ice, he knew that much.

"You've a bigger problem, though," she went on. "I've noticed it happening for some time now, and it's not gotten better. It's why I wanted to come here, to talk to you. I've something to tell you that I've told no one. Something that might help." She paused before continuing, her tone newly brisk and matter-of-fact, brooking no sympathy. "I wanted to do it now, while I still could."

While I still remember, she didn't say, but he heard it anyway. He bit back the reassurances she clearly didn't want and tried to match his matter-of-factness to hers.

"Well, you've got me and I'm listening. So what is it?"

"Well, you'll hear me, anyway. Whether you're likely to listen is something else," she said with a touch of humor, then sobered. "You've said you're moving on, Steve. All I've seen you do is work yourself to the bone or try to squeeze your way back into some pocket of the past and being frustrated when it doesn't fit. I know what it's like not to want to let go, but you must, or you'll have no life at all. Accept that things are different. Stop dwelling on everything you've lost. Focus on what's here for you in the present. That is moving on."

Annoyed and disappointed, he set his jaw to keep himself from saying something he shouldn't. He hadn't expected that from her, of all people. What was wrong with seeking out things that were familiar and refusing to accept substitutes for what he wanted? He'd never accepted anything in his life, not being told he couldn't live through some illness or the other, not that he couldn't find a way into the Army. Acceptance sounded too much like defeat.

Besides, he was sick and tired of people telling him to put things behind him, as if his life before he'd been awakened had meant nothing. As if he could just shrug off everything that had mattered to him. What did they know? None of them had ever lost their entire lives and everything that was dear to them. If he let go, he'd lose those things for good.
"Easier said than done," he said at last, more tersely than he knew he should but unable to help himself.

"Mm, that it is." She didn't seem surprised by either his attitude or his answer. She turned to face forward again and let her hand fall from his. He wished she hadn't, but her words rankled too much for him to ask for it back.

They went on without speaking for several dozen yards. Music drifted up faintly from beneath the bridge, getting louder as they came closer to the midpoint. Some kind of brass ensemble from the sound of it, ta-ra-ra'ing its way through a patriotic sounding march, which wrapped up to a polite round of applause.

"Stop here," Peggy said suddenly. "By the rail."

He pushed the wheelchair over a popped-up board and set the brakes. Thinking she wanted to listen to the performance, he peered over the side of the bridge to find where it was coming from and to see if he could get her closer. Moored to one of the bridge supports was an old coffee barge, the kind that used to come to the Red Hook docks when he was a kid. Red, white and blue bunting festooned the railing, the small stage upon which the ensemble sat and the small wooden building at the barge's end. A casually dressed crowd milled around the rest of the steel deck, listening to the performance and enjoying the unusually mild evening.

As he watched, the trombonist stepped to the microphone.

"We're closing with two songs to honor our veterans from New York. Sing along if you know the words." He turned to cue the ensemble, which bounced into the brassy strains of "New York, New York." One by one, the crowd on the boat joined in, making up in enthusiasm what they lacked in expertise.

When Steve looked back at Peggy, though, she didn't appear to be listening. Instead, she was looking out over the rail to where the river met the ocean, her lips pressed together, a liquid gleam to her eyes.

"Peggy?" he asked, worried.

"This is where I said goodbye to you," she said, so quietly he could barely hear her above the music. "Here, at sunset."

He wondered for a moment if her memory had lapsed, but saw none of the vagueness he associated with those episodes.

"I don't understand," he said cautiously. "The last time I saw you --"

"Yes, I know. But it's not where I last said goodbye." She sat still, hands curled around each other in her lap. A breeze swirled up from the river and blew a silvery curl against her cheek, but she didn't seem to notice.

"Peg..." Not knowing what else to do, he held his hand out to her. After a moment, she reached up and took it, weaving her fingers between his.

"I was here in New York the year after the war, working for the SSR. I could have gone to Washington, but I couldn't pass up the chance to be someplace that was such a part of you." Her mouth trembled a moment, then set, bowed in a quick, barely-there curve. "I went round to all the places you wanted to go in Brooklyn, places you or Barnes had mentioned, even places in your file. Anything that let me hold onto you a bit longer."
Guilt and loss knifed deep into his gut. Guilt that he'd caused her so much pain, loss at the thought of her walking alone through all the places he'd imagined them being together, seeing by herself all the things he'd wanted to share with her. He'd felt guilty for letting her stay with him on the radio as he went down, but he hadn't thought of what she'd been through afterwards. Somehow, he'd never thought of anyone mourning for him, nor had it ever occurred to him that she'd also lost a piece of her life when he'd gone into the ice.

Her gaze stayed on the river as she continued.

"During my work, I discovered Howard had the last vial of the blood you gave the day after Dr. Erskine was killed. The Army had wasted the rest, trying to recreate the serum. In the end, a very dear friend passed it on to me. He said I was the only one who had any right to decide what should become of it."

"So what did you do?"

She met his gaze squarely, unflinching.

"The Army wanted the serum. Howard wanted vaccines and medicines and a profit. I thought you damned well deserved a little dignity and to have someone who loved you say a proper farewell, since you'd not had one. So that's what I did. You were out there in the ocean somewhere, so I poured the vial into the water here and said goodbye to you." Tears rose to high tide behind her lashes, but didn't spill over. A crack flawed her voice. "I watched for the longest time, you know. Thinking where you might be, fancying it might find its way to you." She shook her head and swallowed, resolute once more. "I knew it was the right thing to do and that it was the only way to keep you away from the Army or Howard...but Steve, it was the second hardest thing I've ever had to do in my life."

His throat closed to a pinhole, too tight to talk, but it wasn't necessary. He didn't have to ask what the hardest thing had been. She put her other hand over his.

"So I do understand what it's like, not to want to let go. I wanted so much to hold onto that one last trace of you. To keep you safe, I suppose, silly as that sounds. But I couldn't bring you back by doing that and all I was doing was thinking of everything that might have been, what might have done to save you, something I'd overlooked. Running round in circles to no effect, the same as I had been all the past year. I finally had to accept that you were gone and nothing could change that fact."

Words crowded behind the lock in his throat, but he couldn't choose among them. That she deserved better than him and he'd never known what a dame like her saw in him, anyway. That he'd never meant to hurt her. Most of all, that he wished more than anything he hadn't waited too long.

All that managed to escape was, "Peggy, I'm sorry."

But the warmth in her eyes told him she understood all he hadn't said, too. They'd always communicated in layers of meaning, after all.

"Don't be. I wish we'd had our chance but I'm not sorry I made the choice I did." The force of her conviction was absolute. "I found I could let the past go without losing what meant most to me. I could carry you with me as I went on. But I did go on, and because of that, instead of seventy years of regrets, I've had a good life, a full one. That's what I want for you. And I'm so glad you weren't cheated of that opportunity, Steve. If I'd had one wish, just one thing I could put right, that's what I would have chosen."
His perspective shifted abruptly, as if he'd been staring at a painting for months and never before realized it was upside down. All the stir and hullaballoo around his return had centered on Captain America. He hadn't thought what his return as Steve Rogers would mean to people personally any more than he'd considered anyone mourning for him.

How would he feel, if he found Bucky was alive and could live the life he should have had? There wasn't anything he wouldn't do to give his friend back that chance, especially since he'd given up his life to save Steve. He owed Buck for that and for all the times Bucky had been there for him when no one else had. And Peggy -- he could never have lived with the guilt if he'd returned only to find her life had been trapped in the ice along with him. Even if he couldn't have her, he loved her too much not to want her to be happy.

"Not gonna promise any miracles, but I'll try." Ignoring the sting behind his eyes, he forced himself to smile. Tough guys from Brooklyn never cried.

"That will do, I suppose." She arched her eyebrows and returned his smile with a tiny, playful one of her own. "Nobody's perfect."

The ensemble had segued into another song, he noticed, one that made his smile real. The theme song of his New York, played in slow waltz time, the way it used to be played by the small bands of musicians who occasionally wandered through the old neighborhoods when he was a kid. They'd set up on one block, play for a while, and move on to the next. People would open their windows or sit on their front stoops to listen, he remembered, tossing the players tips of pennies wrapped in bits of newspaper to entice them to stay, singing along or sometimes taking a dance turn or two on the sidewalks, self-conscious but laughing.

Focus on what he could have. Accept what was different. Maybe, one day, he really could move on.

But for now, he did have his best girl in Brooklyn, as he'd always wanted. It wasn't the Stork Club, but he was a street kid, after all, not the swanky club type.

"Ma'am, I got a rain check I'd like to turn in. Think your dignity could stand a dance with an old soldier?"

She laughed. "Only if it's you."

Carefully, he helped her to her feet, his hands feeling huge and clumsy as he settled her against him. Holding her was like holding butterfly wings or an ornament of blown glass, light as a breath and irreplaceably fragile. But it was still Peggy, and they’d both made it home. The rest didn't matter.

She tucked her head under his chin and rested her cheek against his chest. Closing his eyes, he tightened his arms carefully around her, swaying gently in time with the music that floated up from the water, the voices that echoed like memories.

...they're all just like me
They'd give all they've got
If they could once more walk
With their best girl and have a twirl
On the sidewalks of New York.
To Miko for all the beta, encouragement, hand-holding, off-the-fic-ledgetalking and general butt-kicking! Thank you so much. :)  

VFW is short for Veterans of Foreign Wars, a veterans social organization. Also, Bargemusic does exist and is right there under the Brooklyn Bridge. NYC natives, please forgive me a few liberties - I know they usually perform inside, but apparently they DO perform outside on a few occasions, so.

This incident is a part of the AU-crossover-verse of Felicity and the First Avenger (or will be) but at this point, the Arrowverse isn't a part of the story and since it does involve a different 'ship I thought it would be better posted separately from the side stories. This is set not quite a year before the beginning of F&TFA.

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