

Saturday, September 25, 1999
Washington, D.C.

Prepared to spend another homesick weekend moping around my rented rooms, I stayed awake too late, so the phone woke me when LuAnn called at nine. She interrupted my lament. "Half the people in the country would be delighted to have a free weekend in D.C.," she said. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself and go do something touristy. Go for a walk. Just don't overdo—you don't want to get your arthritis started. Wear your good shoes." Obediently I dressed, pulled on my beat-up walking shoes and drove to the Metro station.

Gabbling, snickering high school kids were packed into the cars like Vienna sausages. Colorless old couples filled the seats, nervously consulting their miniature Metro Rail guides. I heard snippets of German, too fast for me to render, and long musical conversations that might have been Portuguese. Without knowing why, I swapped from the yellow line heading for the Smithsonian over to the blue line going to Arlington Cemetery station.

I found directions that pointed me out of the train station toward the memorials—if I were to have had a plan, it would not include wandering among graves. The pale haze had burned away and the stark sunlight made a scene from a Titian painting. I stopped every few hundred yards and looked through my binoculars at the mildly psychedelic foreshortened vistas. The river was already swarming with a hodgepodge of boats.

Through the binoculars I watched a girls' crew team taking warm-up runs. Their narrow racing hulls appeared insectile, oversized water-walkers on the glassy Potomac. A hefty bustling woman with an electric bullhorn began to organize the crew teams into racing formation, her amplified voice drowned occasionally by a construction helicopter passing overhead.

The helicopter descended until I could see only the tail rotor past the trees beyond the river. Soon it rose, this time trailing a cable attached to a lifting harness. I tracked its movements with the focus as it swung to face another direction, then lowered again. I waited for several minutes to see what it would raise, but nothing happened. I decided to cross the bridge for better view of the construction site.

At the traffic circle at the foot of the bridge I walked between two enormous bronze figures of men on horseback, each flanked by a huge muscular woman. The symbolism is powerful and obscure. I felt the need for a guidebook, something to tell me, "The basket held by the woman on the east represents..." To my left, a second matched pair of bronzes appeared to be part gryphon, part satyr, part Pegasus. I followed the road around to the bridge, stopping a couple of times to check the magnified version of the setting.

I strolled over the bridge, skirted the Lincoln Memorial, and headed down the shaded lane that parallels the Reflecting Pool. It was still well before noon but children were already contentious. Soon, I imagined, the whining would turn to crying, and the American family ritual would be repeated. "We've been walking all day," a small one complained. "It's not even lunch time," the father answered to no good result. I came out of the shade onto the grounds of the Washington Monument. There to my left I saw full-size teepees grouped in a rough circle, and I headed down the grassy mound to investigate.

As I came closer, a familiar accent boomed over the makeshift public address system. It seemed to be the old Navaho grandmother I heard this spring while visiting a Native American festival in Florida. She was making the same disjointed plea for fellowship and drug-free reservation schools, telling the same tales of the sad fates of all but a handful of her descendants. I stopped, then turned back to path that wound around the monument, with dark thoughts of how perverted the rituals of the American Indian had become.

Strangers sat on bales of wheat straw and listened not to tales of bravery and personal conquest, but to shameless pleas to purchase the trinkets for sale in the nearby stands. I realized that I had ceased observing and had begun to ruminate. It came to me that I did have a plan after all—I planned to look a great deal while thinking as little as possible. I could hear another amplified voice ahead, out of sight beyond the gentle rise surrounding the Monument.

People were standing in a loose company, or sitting in lawn chairs or on blankets, mostly clustered in the spare shade of the cherry trees. Some were sitting under four artificial arbors made of grape vines and olive branches held up by poorly constructed frames of white pine. From these branches hung small net bags of fruits and vegetables. On a stage with enough amplifiers and speakers for a minor rock concert a solitary male sang unaccompanied.

A smiling Asian woman pressed a program into my hand and nodded to direct my attention to the stage. The singer finished, and then spoke a prayer in English, followed by a prayer in a familiar sounding language. When he ended that, he spoke “Will the readers please assemble on the stage?” then immediately started liting a song in the strange tongue. A mental connection clicked, and I recognized this as Hebrew. I read my pamphlet and discovered they were celebrating Succoth, the festival my King James Bible called the Feast of the Tabernacles.

The symbols swam into focus for me. Succoth began as a harvest festival, thus the grape vines, the olive branches, the fruits. The readers gathered, more prayers were spoken, and men filed down from the stage led by a severe middle aged man wearing an elaborate robe and intricately embroidered skull cap. He carried the large Torah through the waiting crowd. People reached to touch the fringe of the cloth cover, some with their fingers, others with their prayer shawls. The speaker struck up a hearty song in Hebrew, and most knew the words by heart.

The procession wound its way among the singers toward me. I wondered for a moment if I should touch the Torah. I know the practice from my one visit to a synagogue. I moved to a point the procession would pass, then remembered that my head was not covered. In that instant, the leader’s eyes darted to me and his dour expression became forbidding. He turned his back to me, moving to another group on his way to the stage. I found myself smiling, almost chuckling aloud. I resumed my walk to the National Mall to sort out what was so pleasant in this tiny drama.

I was passing fewer people, and more were passing me. I thought of my hip, and found it was in fact hurting. I slowed some, and trudging up the last hill to the Mall itself I had understanding of what had happened at the Succoth celebration. My uncertainty about touching the Torah—that was because I held the Law in sufficient respect to get comfort from the ritual, yet felt enough of an outsider to be hesitant. Then the flicker of recognition by the man in the robe—that was a mirror of what had been in my own mind. I had seen myself as one of the crowd, he had seen me as Goyim. I had mentally removed myself just a split second before he did so.

I had escaped shame by an instant. How easily I was caught up in the ritual, merely because I was raised with some Old Testament knowledge. I decided that today was a good day to cut a some slack for an old Navaho and her travelling tent show.