
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Theresa Corigliano: “Bowakawa”

Theresa Corigliano · Saturday, December 4th, 2021

I can feel myself morph into someone I used to be when I lived here. I rise up and out of the subway station at 42nd Street. My whole body stiffens, my shoulders ratchet up to my ears, and I start to bullet through the crowded streets. The city is a morass of construction, interrupted only by the cleaned-up Times Square pedestrian mall with its bistro tables, chairs and bleachers so people can sit and chat in the middle of Broadway even in December, which is more obscene to me than the vanished peep shows and porn palaces I used to know. I can barely move. It's my own fault. I got off the train early so I could walk through the Theater District and connect to something I used to love, and this indulgence will make me late.

It's Christmas time in the city. There is no room on the sidewalk for me unless I make it, but this is what I know. New York City is where I learned defensive walking. We who were born here do not dawdle. There are always more people coming at you than behind you. You can't give in and step aside to let others pass. This is a pedestrian version of chicken—the first person to defer is immediately disarmed. People will move so quickly to claim that sliver of space you've left for them that you'll find yourself pinned, going nowhere.

There's something insidious about calling Times Square family-friendly now. Neither the holiday-lit mall nor the fake Muppets who patrol the sidewalks make it so. I look to my right and spot an Elmo impersonator who thought highly flammable red fur and googly eyes would do the trick. Could it be the same guy who, on a steamy long-ago discounted summer day, slipped his hand under my filmy skirt and squeezed, so fast I was able to convince myself it never happened. He's covered in filthy shag carpeting, demanding five bucks from a tourist for a selfie souvenir. He ignores the little kids who gawk at him and instead, he wraps himself around another attraction, a very tall woman in a blond Afro wig and a thong. Just a thong. In December. I see his hand drop from her waist, on a downward crawl, and I flinch.

I step off the curb against the light. Jaywalking is not a crime here, it's a religion. A voice cries: Hey, look out. I am not thinking about the crush hour, only about the husband who has disappeared, leaving all of me. A hand jerks me out of the bike lane where I don't belong. *Bitch*, the messenger screams at me as he smashes into a wire trash bin. He seems disappointed I've been pulled out of his path. I never see the person who saves me.

I move on, number than I thought I could be, skirting the phalanx of armed police officers on every corner. They're the added bonus of this holiday season, brought to you by man's inhumanity to man. Specifically, they are insurance against another truck mowing down unsuspecting tourists,

which happened just a few days before. They are bulky with body armor and they carry assault rifles. I have never seen a Kalashnikov until today. Their cold stares slide across my face, focused and unfocused at the same time, and dismiss me. They are not asking for a nod of approval. I look away.

When I turn my head, I see another impersonator. He has little round glasses and he looks like Double Fantasy John Lennon. He sings “Whatever Gets You Through the Night” but slowed way down, transformed into a painfully sad ballad on his guitar.

He sounds remarkably like John. I am meant to be somewhere else, yes, but I carve out a place to stand, compelled to listen because I will tell you, especially lately, I have been thinking a lot about how John would live in this world. I miss him in the world.

Unlike the NYPD, fake John looks straight at me and latches on. He has the same eyes as the Avedon print that hangs on the wall of my office, where I hide. It’s a black and white portrait of Lennon that has always made me happy and made me sad. His squint seemed to follow me wherever I moved in the house. On his way out, my husband tried to reclaim it, a gift he’d given me when we were new. He put it on the list of things he wanted, though he knew it was worth nothing, except to me.

Fake John tunes the guitar, and strums a few chords. People want to hear festive songs. Of course they do. *So this is Christmas, and what have you done, another year over...* Lennon always knew how to bittersweet the music. This is not the season for the sad songs, the ones I considered the essence of John when I was young and didn’t have the words for lonely. But inexplicably, he seems to know I what I need and he pivots: *Is there anybody going to listen to my story?*

It is about twenty degrees. There is a kind of dankness in the air, a hollow that works its way under your coat, into your shoes and into your soul. But I can’t move. His eyes find mine again, and I see something there that makes me shiver harder than the wind chill, and I know now I am looking at a ghost. He knows that I know it is him. Measuring eyes behind those glasses warn me, this is between us.

Involuntarily, I start to backpedal, looking for a hole in the crowd big enough for me to run through. I always imagined a moment like this, when we were both more alive and shared the city. John and I, waiting on the same corner for the light to change. I would fumble my words, in search of the right way to tell him what he meant to me, and he would be gone before I could.

Now, I cannot escape. He sings softly as he walks toward me, the one about his mother. *Half of what I say is meaningless, but I say it just to reach you.* I think he is about to speak to me, but he brushes past. Surely I just *think* I feel him. He finds a sliver of daylight in the crowd and threads his way through it, his long black coat open and flying behind him. He takes such long strides I can barely keep up. Suddenly, he pulls up short and turns to look at me, that gaze I know. He’s close now, and bends to my ear, in a whisper. Then he pushes his glasses higher on his nose, whirls away, and the maw of pedestrians descends on him in the crosswalk.

Just before he is swallowed, I think I see Yoko moving toward him, young Yoko, with that thick curtain of dark hair, her face lit from within, and her smile breaks my heart as she wraps herself around him.

I know I am supposed to walk when the flashing light tells me to, but suddenly I don’t have to. I

stop fighting the city, which has always been about forward momentum. Now I am buoyed by the crowd, lifted past bell ringers and their kettles, from this corner to the next, and the next until I find my footing, and make my way where I need to go.

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