

"When I first saw you, I thought you were handsome.

Then, of course, you spoke."

— Helen Hunt as Carol Connelly, *As Good As It Gets* (1997)

Marsh walking in the city is fun, plodding along buckled sidewalks in sneakers and sunglasses with no sense of danger barring human alligators. The breeze sings against my face, seagulls punctuate the blue sky, babies dribble smile from their strollers, beaming moms radiate their infants' smiles. A kaleidoscope of color. My hat almost blows off around the next corner, this time I won't let one get away. The new cap says U.S. Submarine Service. People ask about that almost every day. 'What boat were you on? Were you in Viet Nam? What's it like on a submarine?'

Dixie and Lady are on leashes. They know the routine and lead us east. A small man appears in black, hunched over. He's got huge yellow rubber gloves hanging out of his back right pocket. Don't tell me he's a dishwasher. Could he be a clown car unloader?

An elderly woman we recognize slumps far down in an electric wheelchair. Her entire estate seems on board. Bags, sacks, newspapers, towels, a large black blanket over everything. She's enjoying her 40th cigarette of the day. Give or take.

It's finally Sunday, May 19 and it stops raining. Sort of. We are swept to our seats like yard debris in an Oklahoma flood. Seats just above the home team dugout, the Red Sox and Astros scrunched into Fenway. Jack and I sit behind a young couple. Melodia is an attractive blonde with a statuesque figure. She smiles, her laughs drifting above the crowd, shakes her golden tassels so that each strand glows in the emerging sunshine. She's the belle of the ballgame. Her date is knife thin with a hard, hatchet face. Full head of brown hair in a buzz cut, slightly distracting from the lumps on his arms. Hatch never once talks to Melodia or smiles. Eventually he orders popcorn and doesn't offer to share. They leave together after the eighth.

The Sox hustle from behind to beat the Astros 4-3. Happy weather, happy day, happy crowd.

We drift out of the park in an avalanche of Red Sox hats, jackets, shirts, smiles. The parade continues past a row of buskers. One guy is playing drums, the next one alto saxophone. They're supposed to have cups out or an open instrument case. Maybe I should offer to share the rules with them. Or maybe just keep going.

It's later, three finicky spring days. Whole Foods is right across the street from my place. It's the Smithsonian of food stores. I lose track after eleven types of tuna. A 350 pound middle aged white woman waddles around pushing her cart. Each step looks like it could be her last. She's gasping a little. Twenty feet behind her shops an athletic looking young man; lady joggers hustle over to the juice bar. Can't somebody here help the big lady in aisle two? Jiminy Cricket whispers, 'hey back off unless she asks for help.' Right before jumping back into his oatmeal box starter home in the back of my head. 'Easy, little buddy.'

The girls and I stop later for a break. A pretty young brunette at our coffee shop reminds me of Cher. I say hello and show her a photo; she smiles with the largest teeth I have ever seen on a human being; very white teeth, impossibly white. She says people often mistake her for Anne Hathaway.

Back at Whole Foods the next day, a 2 year old darling girl in a grocery cart wriggles in the produce section. I say she looks like Shirley Temple. Shirley's father Jack says we love her. Shirley smiles like a sunny New Year's Day and says to me, "we love you too!"

Twilight the following week we see a young white man dressed all in black: hoodie, backpack, pants, shoes, with a red ball cap poking out. Mr. Black is teetering around 120 pounds, using a cane, his head down. A penny for your thoughts, sir? Make that a dollar fifty for a feeling. Can we help you with anything? ('Not now, Jack.' OK, Jiminy, okay!)

Friday night comes on May 24 this week. Walking the girls on Washington toward Mullins, we see an elderly black man dressed in filth, collapsed on the sidewalk. My first reaction is a flashing 'danger. Let's take a detour.' Then I notice people going around him. I have no cell, so stop John who works nearby and force him to call 911. John keeps telling me that "he's ok" and I keep repeating *he is not ok*. 911 says they're sending an ambulance. An EMS vehicle with siren blaring appears in three minutes.

Two EMTs, white male and white female, mid-thirties, talk to him and try to get Art in a sitting position. No dice. He is bone thin. His right hip bone sticks out. He can barely speak as they ask Art his name and age. I take the girls up the block further and then we turn around for an update. One of the EMTs says his blood pressure is 165 and I ask about his diastolic. 'We can't let you hear that kind of information, sir. Would you please move along?' I say yes of course and we push home.

Will they take him to the hospital? Is he salvageable on any level? How many more like him collapse like that every day? What will happen to old Art? What's going on? Substance abuse? Stroke? Seizure? A combination? Is it easier to just walk around or get involved? The correct response seems obvious.

The next day gleams like clover honey on waffles. We walk past the spot where the EMTs tended to Art. No sign of activity and the sidewalk is clean. We pass all the usual places until one throws us a brushback pitch. Ming-Lo's Supermarket has many customers and the door is often open. It's hard to lean back far enough from the smell of rotting fish. This is our second time around with them. *BALL TWO* Relax, Jiminy, it was only a metaphor. But here, take this scented handkerchief.

Around the corner grins a box of tulips in full bloom. The trees lining every street are laying forth their new leaves. The birds chatter like an Italian family at a wedding. Baking bread dusts the air. Up ahead lies a street that is ablaze with blooming magnolia trees. The Lowcountry beckons.

The pretty sights remind me of Jane. She adored flowers and little kids. From California to New York to Connecticut to the Lowcountry.

This *is* a fine day for love. Right, Shirley?