

Tracy Daugherty

an excerpt from

Bern

Every evening at 5:30, Bern walked from the storefront office of the small architectural firm he worked for on West Eighth Street to Glasco's, a bar one block north of the Cedar Tavern on University Place. There he had a sandwich and a beer. After dining alone in the melancholy comfort of noisy anonymity, he strolled along West Eleventh in the direction of the river, taking in the mild midwinter night. The steel gratings in the walls of the old brownstones emitted blasts of hot air smelling oddly of hair oil. Through the street-level basement windows of the First Presbyterian Church (sooty Gothic Revival), he glimpsed women sweating over an industrial stove.

A few paces later, Bern pricked at the bland modern facade facing the street where anarchists blew up their 1840s-era town house in the 1970s. These days, the front window of the first floor showcased a teddy bear dressed in a yellow slicker, holding a black umbrella—the occupant's wink (Bern assumed) to the Weathermen, the group that had built the bomb.

A young man marched past Bern, hoisting a boy onto his shoulders. "Mommy's *stressed*," the man warned the boy. Mommy was nowhere in sight.

The sidewalk, a mix of new and old concrete squares, displayed slopes and dips. In the bare little garden of PS 41, a black and broken umbrella lay on the ground. A bearded man in a heavy coat and a Mets cap climbed over a rail fence onto the school property, gripping a plastic trash bag, and began searching for scraps among the garden's twigs.

Usually Bern stopped at the end of the block to contemplate the Wall of Hope and Remembrance on the south side of St. Vincent's hospital. Hundreds of notes and photos commemorated people never found after the attack on the World Trade Center. On the sidewalk, someone had left a child's light-blue

sweater and a pair of baby shoes. Pigeons cooed in the building's concrete eaves.

Bern was startled to find the brick wall blank, emptied of its elegiac icons. A siren shrieked. An ambulance pulled up to the curb. From the rear, two paramedics unloaded a man on a stretcher.

Still dazed by the hard, cold wall, Bern turned from the hospital's emergency entrance. Across the street, in the front window of a shop called Fantasy World, faceless mannequins lounged in sheer pink lingerie. Down the block, wind ruffled the red canvas awning of the Village Vanguard. Bern shuffled up the street to the White Horse, where he stopped for another beer.

At a table next to him, two women were in conversation:

"How's her father?"

"Which father?"

"I know, I know. . . ."

Someone had left part of the *Times*, wet and rumpled, on a chair. Distractedly, Bern raced through the paper. Why did the hospital's cleared wall disturb him? He had not known anyone who died in the attack. From the beginning, he had resisted the media call to public mourning and the government's shameless fear-mongering.

Here, now, was a headline declaring that Governor Spitzer had signed off on the Freedom Tower. A mistake, Bern thought. Who would occupy the thing? It was terribly designed.

He finished his beer and paid. His agitation—over what?—was too great for sleep, so he walked some more, retracing his steps. He ducked into the Strand.

"Was Ishmael the whale," he heard someone say, "or the guy that tried to kill the whale, or—"

On the table of New York titles, Bern found a reprint of E. B. White's *Here Is New York*, a volume he had loved twenty years ago as a fresh arrival on the island, straight out of college . . . though even then the book had had a musty air about it. White's New York was that of the Beaux-Arts urban canyons of the 1920s and '30s, full of brick buildings with cozy window ledges and niches that sheltered restless doves: a city long vanished. Since 9/11, White's book was spoiled for Bern because its prophetic conclusion—"A single flight of planes no bigger than a wedge of geese can quickly end this island fantasy"—had been quoted so often in the press and the blogosphere.

On the shelves Bern found a pristine paperback entitled *A Hut of One's Own* by a woman named Ann Cline. On impulse he decided to buy it. He liked the cover illustration: a black-and-white photo of a simple square table, a kerosene lantern, a pitcher, and a pan, all in a small wooden room. Like most old-school (i.e., middle-aged) architects he knew, Bern was fond of huts—of the *idea* of the hut.

He hiked to Seventh and caught the subway, then darted over to West Twenty-third Street. His apartment was on the fourth floor of a building with wide glass doors, next to a new thrift shop called McGee's whose sign was painted to appear beat-up, old, and faded. In the lobby of his building, a worn blue carpet that had once been plush—ten, fifteen years ago—kinked like popcorn beneath his shoes as he moved toward the elevator. A dull, gassy odor filled the lobby, rising from the sofa squeezed against the far wall between two potted ficus plants with cobwebs stretched among their leaves. The smell came from old leather that had been too much in contact with soiled clothing over the years—the sweaty dresses and slightly damp bottoms of long-forgotten visitors to the building.

A hand-drawn map of Paterson, New Jersey, now mostly faded, hung framed on the wall above the sofa, next to a chipped mirror whose smoky, yellowed glass flattered even a weary Bern after a trying day. Its smudged spots smoothed the lines under his eyes and seemed to straighten his mildly crooked nose. On the sofa slept Mrs. Mehl, about whom Bern knew little. Widow. Third floor. Light snorer, often asleep here in the evening. Tonight there were two bags of groceries—cat food and chocolate cookies sticking out—on the floor at her feet, as if she had made it just this far, surviving the bustle on the streets, and could walk no more.

Gently, Bern nudged her shoulder, nearly lost in the padding of a purple coat. "Mrs. Mehl. Dear," he said. "You'll want to go up now. It's getting late."

"Oh yes, yes. Certainly," she said, primping her sparse white hair as if she hadn't been napping but was prepping backstage, somewhere, for her moment in the klieg lights.

"Can I help you with your bags?"

"No, no. Well, just the one, perhaps. Thank you," said Mrs. Mehl, and they rode the lift together in mute dignity. When the doors, heavy wood with copper trim, sighed apart, Mrs. Mehl wrestled the bag from Bern's arms, thanked him again, and swiftly turned the corner in the dim, greenly lighted hallway. Bern smelled leaden fried foods—perhaps pork chops and onions? And he also detected . . . some rare Asian leaf? Was it kaffir lime?

In his apartment, he added water to a blue vase on his kitchen counter that held a single moss rose—a reminder of his East Texas childhood, just outside of Houston, where moss roses grew in abundance. He switched on his bedside radio. Another car bomb in Baghdad. Another condemnation by the vice president of war critics, whom he implied were traitors to our brave and steadfast republic.

Before turning off his light, Bern flipped through Ann Cline. “St. Anthony in a hut, immobile in the face of worldly temptations,” he read. The hut, he read, was the “tap-root of inhabiting.”

Bern closed the book and lay in the humid dark. Cline’s remarks reminded him of Carlo Lodoli, an eighteenth-century Venetian architect he had learned about in grad school. Apparently, Lodoli had much to say about wood, stone, and bone, and their uses in construction. Bern remembered that, in addition to promoting radical building designs, Lodoli was suspected by the Inquisitors of the Republic of spreading seditious ideas. Upon his death, officials confiscated his papers, including his architectural jottings, and locked them away under a leaky roof in the Piombi, where they rotted. Only through the subsequent, and much embellished, writings of his students, Algarotti and Memmo, did Lodoli’s thoughts survive, as rumor, hint, and innuendo.

Back in school, Bern had deduced that the master’s teachings, if they could ever properly be known, argued that the point of architecture was to understand the nature of the materials it employed. Perhaps this is what disturbed me earlier, Bern thought now. Isn’t the aim of all human activity—violence, remembrance—to plumb human activity? Taproots. First principles. So damnably hard to trace.