

The time-travel game

BY SUSAN KAMIL

I am sitting on a bench between 72nd and 73rd streets in New York City, my back to Central Park, playing the time-travel game. It is high noon on a brilliant day in April, but I have played this game here in many seasons over the past thirty years, whenever it seemed important to reconfirm the past, the way people do when they show a child or a lover where they went to elementary school or lived for the first time on their own. Yet no member of my family nor any of my friends know about this place; I come to be alone.

The previous time I found myself here, staring across the street at the apartment building where I grew up, was two years ago, in winter, when I separated from my former husband. Today I am here because I have fallen in love again and am thinking about remarrying.

* * *

A black limousine pulls up to the entrance of the building and a well-dressed woman emerges carrying a big, beautifully wrapped box. The liveried doorman rushes to help her and, just like that, the time-travel game kicks in. The limousine melts away and in its place idles a black 1956 Cadillac. The elegant woman evaporates and in her place stands a dark-haired child wearing a navy blue sailor suit and a matching hat with ribbon streamers that fall to her shoulders. Her father waves and slowly slides the big car into uptown traffic. A valuable piece of Chinese porcelain he has just purchased awaits him at Parke-Bernet; it is too delicate to be entrusted to the moving company unloading the rest of his family's belongings upstairs.

The little girl—me, of course—watches the car drive away,

then turns and marches past the doorman and disappears into the lobby. I am about to learn at age six that there are few days more filled with dread than the day one moves.

When the elevator clanks shut on the third floor, the door to Apartment 3A is thrown open by my mother. She is a spirited woman under any circumstances, but today her natural vitality has been charged by a newfound pride of ownership. Under a thick mop of dark hair, her brown eyes are flashing, and when a smile spreads across her lovely face, the heat of her considerable fire gathers on me, the surly one, the recalcitrant child who was happy to stay right where she was. I sense myself weakening, but the steel rod of my stubborn nature lets me dig in my heels. My mother, standing in the doorway, gets it immediately.

"What a little terror you are," she says, amused, and sweeps me down the long tiled gallery past a swarm of moving men and into a small room strewn with cartons. My room. "Time to unpack," she says, then promptly disappears. A trace of Chanel

No. 5 lingers in the air. I realize that she expects me to cope with this mess alone. My mother is the daughter of immigrants, a seamstress and a housepainter. She grew up in the Tremont section of the Bronx and is now a successful fashion executive, wife and mother of three, as well as the dazzled owner of an apartment on Fifth Avenue. If she can manage, so can her daughter.

Through the wall of the room comes the soothing voice of my governess, Betty, crooning next door to my two little brothers, made hysterical by the noise and disarray. Echoes of the loud army of movers are punctuated by mysterious thuds and thumps, the occasional sounds of splintering crates and, once, the shattering of glass. The moon is where I want to go, as far away as my imagination can take me. Little Rocketgirl hurtling through space. But just as I am about to blast off, she is there again at the door, my mother the field marshal. "Come with me," is the command now. "I have something to show you."

Back down the gallery we go, past castles of cartons, past the admiring looks of strong men hoisting furniture out of our way, through a maze of dark, still corridors that lead, finally, to the master bedroom. There the white alchemic light of late morning streams through huge leaded windows >



The skyline comes into focus across the dreamy trees of Central Park. "This, dearest, is New York," my mother says

overlooking Fifth Avenue. Across this vast space, the skyline of Central Park West comes into focus through the dreamy trees of Central Park. "This, dearest, is New York," my mother says, her palm on the glass. "This is what I want for you."

My mother has more drive than the others in her family. My stout, dour Romanian grandmother refuses to leave the kitchen table when she comes to visit, her lips pursed around the rim of a glass of tea, resisting all efforts to draw her into our lives. ("Nana, come see my room." "I'm OK here.") And the top of my aunts' mountain is no higher than the second-floor window of a split-level in suburban New Jersey. But does my mother discuss the deprivation of her childhood with me? Never. I believe she cast away the last piece of baggage from that time the moment her fingers closed around the keys to her new home.

Now my mother's hand rests lightly on my shoulder. "Look," she tells me, and my eyes follow hers across the boundless, shining oak floor to the only object in the room: a tiny child's chair upholstered in bright orange silk standing in the far corner. It is my size exactly. "This is a gift," she explains, coaxing me toward it, "from the nice people who sold us the apartment." She lifts me up and places me in its little lap, then stands back, hands on hips, taking stock of what she sees.

"Princess," she says, "this is definitely a throne made for you. May it be the first of many." Her enormous exuberant laughter fills the room with gaiety and delight, gutsy laughter that challenges all comers. And from the moment that laughter rolls over me, I am anchored back on earth. Little Rocketgirl on her orange throne. I give up. I'm home.

The formal little Louis XVI piece remains in the very corner where it became mine. Growing up in its Lilliputian embrace, I participate in the mornings and evenings of my mother's days: watching her dress for work

("Always wear bright colors, Princess, they go with our skin"), sharing her breakfast tray of coffee, pot cheese and dry toast ("Never be a pig, Princess, you'll get fat"), listening to her give phone advice to her many friends ("I know it's hard, but whatever you don't want to do, do it *first*"), watching her dress for a night on the town ("Wear simple gowns when you grow up, dearest. People should look at *you*, not at your clothes").

I adore her, of course. How could I not? We all do, my father most of all. Like her, he is a Depression child. The son of Austrian immigrants, he still has strong ties to the Lower East Side where my fearsome, humorless grandfather lives. Every Sunday my father piles my brothers and me into the car and soon we are ambling happily through bustling Hester Street, Ludlow Street, Stanton Street. Here we will duck into a wholesale dry goods store to pick up a new bedspread or towels or sheets. My father gently reminds the owner who my grandfather is and, like magic, the price drops.

Then on to the fish market, where the merits of this or that side of smoked salmon are debated with the cousin of a cousin. Downtown, my stolid, impassive father comes into his own, liberated by the resonance of his past—so unlike my mother, who lives for the present and the future. They are opposites, to be sure, but on the many evenings that my parents sail through the front door en route to the Copacabana or the theater or the fights (my mother loves the fights), his eyes sparkle, his essential reserve overcome by his wife's enthusiasm for the high life.

Beside my mother, my brothers and me, my father's only visible passion is collecting. Anything, everything, and our new place gives him wondrous license. One day a Louis XV desk arrives. A vast dining table is brought in and assembled leaf by leaf until the huge proportions of that room seem to shrink. Returning from school one day, I discover the library >

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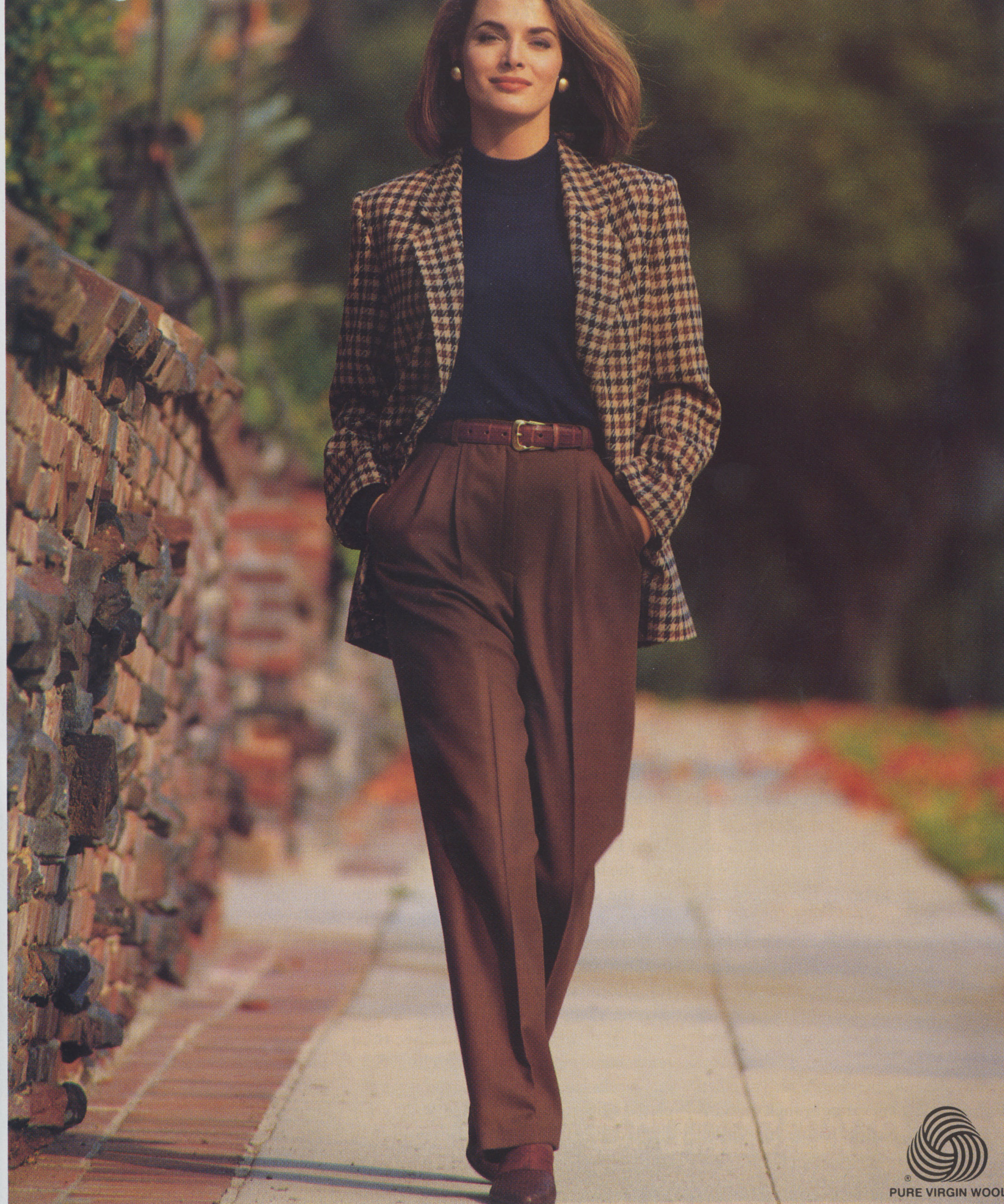
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*Even after decades, the time-travel
game can call up snapshots best left locked away.
But not today. Today I win*

shelves filled with leather-bound books: the collected works of Shakespeare, Arthur Conan Doyle, Brett Harte. Old familiar furniture from our previous apartment vanishes, gradually replaced by sofas and chairs of rich brocade, velvet, silk. A man of few words, my father speaks through the objects he chooses.

Furnishing their lives somehow slip-covers, for a while, the widening rents and tears in their marriage. Six years pass. I outgrow my little chair and learn that the perils of moving day are nothing compared with the complexities of approaching adolescence. The axis of our household shifts. My mother, who made certain she was home in time for dinner every night, is out more at client functions. Business trips frequently call her away, and Betty takes primary responsibility for running our daily lives. My father prowls antiques galleries and auction houses as if the act of bidding and winning empowers him in ways his marriage no longer can. He buys new andirons, another three paintings for the living room, more vases, lamps, statuettes. His romance is now with things, until finally even they cannot substitute for a partnership long since dissolved.

They divorce when I am eleven, my father moves out, and the next year my mother decides to marry the rugged, energetic man I am certain is the love of her life. I try to accept him because he is kind to my brothers and me, in a distracted way; we are ancillary planets in his new universe. And I see from my mother's behavior—the way her fingers lace through his when she greets him at the door, the way she puts her feet in his lap when they read the *Times* after brunch on Sunday—that her restless nature has settled down at last.

Their wedding ceremony is to take place in our apartment, and several of her close friends have congregated in her bedroom to partake in the joyful women-only rituals of matrimony. Paralyzed by

ambivalence, I lean against a wall in the corner watching her luminous face as the double strand of pearls is clasped around her neck, the buttons of her satin evening suit securely fastened. By my side, knee-high now, stands the little orange chair, and in its lap sits a perfect spray of white roses. Is this really happening, I wonder. Then there is a knock at the door, cries of "It's time! It's time!" and the crowd begins to move.

"Wait! My daughter! The flowers!" My mother knows just where to find me, too. And when she turns in my direction, the radiant smile on her face seduces me from the shadowy corner of my confusion just as it always had, just as she knew it would.

Two years later, cancer takes my mother from us. Her last months are spent between the hospital and the hospital bed that has been set up in her bedroom by the great leaded windows overlooking Fifth Avenue. When I return home from school every afternoon I read to her—from J.D. Salinger or Saul Bellow—words that serve more to tamp down my terror than to anesthetize her rage. In the evenings my stepfather sits by her bed, talking quietly or holding her hand until she sleeps. Once when I go to say good-night I open the door to see him leaning over the bed bars singing softly in her ear, and the sight of this drives me to the bathroom to bury my face in the towels.

During this time I have my thirteenth birthday and instead of the pink princess telephone she knows I long for, my mother gives me a typewriter. "You'll need it, dearest," is all she says, then holds her arms out to me for a hug. Several weeks later, after the hospital gurney clatters down the long tiled gallery for the last time, I understand the gift. My mother has imagined the unimaginable—my future without her.

When the apartment is sold, my brothers and I move with our father to more basic quarters. The new space is too small to accommodate the prodigious amount

of furniture we own, so much of it is sold too. The Louis XV desk remains, though, and several of the paintings, lamps, side tables and sofas. And, of course, the little orange chair. For the twenty-five years that our governess remains with the family, she keeps it in a corner of her room, covered with plastic. "A shrine," my brother once calls it. Then she, too, dies, and I take it for my own.

Today the little chair stands by the piano bench in the living room of my country house in Connecticut, amid the cheerful disarray of antique American quilts, old rugs and Shaker blankets I have collected over the years. When friends come to visit I watch as their young children, awkward at first in a strange place, run straight to it. One afternoon my neighbor places her fidgety four-year-old in its seat. "This," she says to me as the child relaxes, "is a throne for a princess," and my heart cracks.

* * *

The first time I found myself on the bench on Fifth Avenue was the first anniversary of my mother's death, but the grief was still too raw and I had to leave. Gradually over the next three years I stopped crying myself to sleep, stopped avoiding the fully parented homes of my friends, and began to heal. So when I was about to take my maiden voyage to Europe, or when I was accepted at the college of my choice—times when it's important to know you are walking into the future on solid ground—I returned to the bench and fared better and better.

Yet even after three decades, the time-travel game can call up snapshots best left locked away. But not today. Today I win, and walking uptown to meet the dear, dear man in my life, I consider the notion of white roses at our wedding. I am sure that white roses will be perfect. ■

Susan Kamil has worked in book publishing for the past twenty years, most recently as an editor at the former Random House imprint, Turtle Bay Books.



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