

In the City of K.

by Joseph E. Lerner

I had never been to the city of K. before, having just flown in on business the other night, and so imagine my surprise at seeing my parents, waiting at a bus stop just a few blocks from my hotel.

They looked older and frailer than the last time we had met. They huddled against each other on the bench, their clothes too thin for the cold climate.

After we kissed I said, "Mom, dad, you can't possibly be here on vacation."

"Of course we'd never leave Florida ordinarily," my mother said through clattering teeth. "But your brother is in town on a stopover—you know how little we see of him!—and he bought us plane tickets so we could meet."

Another coincidence! But I felt slighted and angry that he hadn't also told me about his plans. My father, guessing what I was thinking, said, "Look, son, how could your brother possibly know you also would be in the city of K.?"

"Can't you join us for dinner?" my mother said.

I replied that I had an important meeting tonight as well as other appointments throughout the day, but that I would try to see them for dinner if at all possible.

"Yes, please try," my mother said acidly.

I didn't have time to explain or apologize. I said good-bye and hurried to my first interview.

When I arrived I learned the meeting had been postponed. I used my cell-phone to reschedule my other appointments, but I often could leave only messages on voice mail. I began to fear that this trip—arranged with such difficulty and for which I had such high hopes—would end in failure.

It was while nursing such thoughts at a sidewalk cafe that I looked up and saw two more relatives—an aged uncle helped by his young granddaughter, my cousin—step into a cab.

I was too surprised to run after them. Besides, I reasoned, after the cab sped away, I must have been mistaken—what were the odds of meeting my parents and an uncle and cousin on the same day in a city that—as far as I knew—no one in my family had connections with?

I left for my next appointment, the success of which could redeem the entire trip. On the way I stopped at an Italian deli to buy a Zamponi sausage, a favorite, I knew, of the man who I'd be seeing next. The young woman behind the counter looked a lot like my niece, my brother's daughter, but she did not recognize me and (again) I did not say anything.

Throughout the day such coincidences multiplied (my "Zamponi" interview, while not a complete failure, would necessitate further negotiations whose outcome was by no means certain). In a bank line, for instance, the woman behind me resembled one cousin, and at a rest room washstand the man standing beside me another. And out on the street I imagined glimpsing more aunts, uncles and cousins, and even a great-grandfather or two who I thought was dead.

No one, however, recognized me, and I felt too embarrassed to go up to them; it had been years since most of us had met, and I must have been mistaken about who they were. My family possessed a common

physical type, and, after all, how much variety could there be in the human race?

Around six o'clock I called my parents' hotel room. I explained that while I could not meet them for dinner we still could meet for dessert or drinks.

My mother said, "I'm sorry, dear, but our flight's been moved up! All we have time for is dinner."

"Well." I sighed. "Perhaps next time."

"Yes. We must plan better."

"Mother," I began cautiously, "is there another reason why you and father have come to the city of K.?"

"What do you mean?"

"A Cousins' Club meeting? A Family Circle convention?"

"Are you joking? In K.?"

"Mother," I now said more boldly, "Am I the only relative you've met by accident on this trip?"

"Relative!" She laughed. "You're my son!"

We said good-bye and hung up. I finished packing and headed for the lobby—after my next and last meeting I had to race to catch my own flight (at a different airport than my brother's and parents').

After checking out I hurried to the revolving door. A man pushed it simultaneously from the other side. We both glowered at each other. Then he smiled, waved and beat against the glass. He even shouted

my name, but, having no idea who he was, I raced into the street and jumped into a cab.

