IF GETTING LOST MEANS LOST IN SPACE, unable to find a direction, a path, a destination, then it is almost impossible to be lost in Grand Central Station. Everything flows towards the main concourse that connects the streets outside the station to the tracks within it. Enter from the west and a grand stairway designed to echo that of the Paris Opera House allows you to survey the main concourse before joining the fray. From above you can see that in this bustle, although people move at different paces, almost all move like missiles pointed fiercely at their chosen targets: Track 24, Zaro's Bread Basket, the 5:38 to Ardsley, the free public bathrooms on the lower level. The ceiling of the main concourse soars so high that to look up and see gold stars on blue heavens seems logical, though it should be disorienting—the sky indoors?

THIS MURAL OF A MEDITERRANEAN NIGHT SKY is a contemplative object, not a utilitarian one. Its Zodiac constellations, painted backwards, will guide you nowhere fast. Instead, they may tempt you to dream.

BUT DON'T YOU HAVE SOMEWHERE TO GO? The light that streams down through three arched windows directs you to tracks on the lower level. The rays from clerestory lunettes tucked into the curves of the ceiling lead straight to ticket windows and the track information posted above them in enormous white characters. In the center of the room sits a round information booth topped by a golden clock whose four faces are everywhere visible, compass points for travelers ruled by time. At the information booth, people will tell you what train you need; at the ticket window, the track you want. Signs and arrows abound to show you quickly and clearly where you are and where you are headed.

YOU HAVE TO WORK TO GET LOST HERE. Legend has it that a fugitive evaded police for two years without once leaving Grand Central Station. Did he secrete himself in forgotten nooks and crannies, burrowing his way into the twenty-one buildings that can be reached through the terminal’s circulation system? Or did he use camouflage to deflect detection, hurling himself forward ceaselessly, in mimicry of commuters pushing blindly through the station? To refuse to look at others is an excellent way to avoid being seen.

It used to be easier to get lost in Grand Central Station. Not because the station ever failed to show passengers the way into the physical and social channels it deemed proper. In 1900, the station housed both local commuter trains and express transcontinental railway lines such as the Twentieth-Century to Chicago, a “Limited” in more ways than one. The station swept the poor down to the lower level, to an immigrant waiting room with brick walls and concrete floors, so workers could hose it down every night. Those possessed of steamer trunks, travelling costumes, American accents and pale skins waited for their trains upstairs, in a magnificent room studded with seating and pleasant with the glow of five bronze chandeliers. Today that waiting room sits empty, barred from all by tall metal gates.

In former days Grand Central Station was full of places to lose yourself, stop time, and forget that you were in a train station, in a place of arrivals and departures, appointments and destinations. Spaces proliferated: a post office, an emergency hospital, an attic that served as a painter’s studio, an art gallery, a betting parlor, a storefront stockbroker, a broadcasting station, a movie theater. Those grottos of distraction no longer exist, but if you follow the stairs opposite the Campbell apartment—once a pied-à-terre, then a police superintendent’s office, now a bar—you can still make your way to tennis courts, MTA offices, and an ancient shop that repairs timepieces. Someone has to keep all those station clocks on course—there are over 158 in the terminal alone.

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SHARON MARCUS

I wanted to get lost in Grand Central Station. Not an easy task, given my inclination always to know where I’m going and when I’ll get there. And a wish almost certain to be denied, given the spirit of the place I had chosen.
GRAND CENTRAL STATION presents itself as a preserver of time. It saves people time through accurate schedules easy to read and legible spaces easy to navigate. It keeps time, its many clocks ruled by an immense one called “the Glory of Commerce,” 13 feet in diameter, embedded in the station’s southern façade on 42nd Street. A reference book or art buff could explain that its statues are Mercury, who represents commerce; Hercules — moral energy; and Minerva — mental energy. The clock’s message, though it varies with each individual who needs it, requires no interpretation. Hurry up, it says. It’s okay, there’s still time. You lost your chance. Better find a phone. He’ll wait.

The station also preserves time through its very substance, which promises permanence: a façade of Stony Creek granite and Bedford limestone, Tennessee marble floors, Botticino marble wainscots, Guastavino terracotta vaulting. These enduring materials and the station’s neo-classical style create the illusion of great age, the aura of a monument that has always been there and will last through time. Yet the current station is not the original depot, commissioned in 1869 by Cornelius Vanderbilt, his surname now memorialized in the avenue to the station’s immediate west. And at the time of construction of the present-day Grand Central, the building stood not for antiquity but for modernity and new technology.

THROUGH A CENTURY, GRAND CENTRAL station has held on to its gods, money and time, with a tenacity that makes it an inhospitable place for those who want to get lost. Last March I searched for loss in Grand Central Station.

Having no temperamental inclination for loss myself, I tried to find it around me. I started at the Lost and Found. The Lost and Found at Grand Central Station: the words smack of fantasy, poetry, suspense, system. The careless leave things behind, the conscientious gather them up. Sometimes they change places.

THE LOST AND FOUND is on the station’s lower level, past the food courts and just before the MTA police station and a bank of rarely used public phones. I took out my notebook and walked in. I had been here once before and the same man had been friendly and receptive. He had let me take photographs. He had shown me the contents of bins marked October Miscellaneous and November Umbrellas Compact. Now, bearing pen, notebook and intention (“I’d like to write a piece about the Lost and Found here”), I’d become an enemy.

“You can’t write about the station without permission. I can’t speak with you. You have to go to Room [unintelligible number] in the Graybar Building and fill out a form.”

It was almost 5 pm. It would take at least ten minutes to make my way to the Graybar Building.

“Okay, then, do you mind if I just stand here and take notes?”

“You can’t stand here. This space is for customers.”

I stood there for a minute and wrote one or two things down just to assert myself. Then I remembered the proximity of the MTA police station and left. There was a small eating area near the Lost and Found. I decided to sit there and watch people go in. I would write down what they had when they went in and what they had when they went out.

I THOUGHT ABOUT LOSING THINGS ON TRAINS—not just sunglasses, umbrellas, and books, but less replaceable items like computer disks and photographs. When we travel our body becomes part of the train, but our itineraries and the train’s are separate. We disembark, but the train keeps going. When we leave pieces of ourselves on the train - the image of our body, a copy of words we wrote - are we forgetting them there, or do we just want to make sure that part of ourselves keeps travelling? I had another thought (I was forced to, no-one was entering or leaving the Lost and Found). A train station’s charm lies in its many possibilities, but that multitude exists only in the aggregate, since most individuals in the station have a single purpose that rarely varies even from year to year. The aura of possibility, that something unexpected might happen, emerges only from all those fixed purposes criss-crossing one another. The Lost and Found is appealing because it suggests possibility and purpose. It testifies to the station’s chaos and chance.
its lost memories and stray objects, and then puts them in their place.

I WATCHED THE DOOR, then gazed into the distance at a row of metallic telephone cords, a chorus line of seahorses on silver leashes. Finally several people went in and out of the Lost and Found. One woman, wearing gloves, went in with a white shopping bag and a black briefcase. She came out quickly carrying the same things. She seemed upset and looked at me suspiciously, or so I thought. The other two people (a man with a navy travel bag, teal framepack and shoulder pack, a woman with a square beige suitcase and a large rectangular bag), left the Lost and Found with less than they had when they went in. The Lost and Found was also a baggage checkroom. The poetry of the place disappeared completely when workers told me they were shutting down the seating area where I had taken up my post. I wasn’t going take contraband notes on people checking bags in a parcel room masquerading as a Lost and Found while standing.

MY STRATEGY SHIFTED. I would stand above the main concourse and look for someone in the station who seemed lost—someone who’d lost their bearings, someone lost in thought. As I stood, I made a list of what people do on the main concourse. They EMBRACE — RUN — WALK — LOOK UP, FORWARD, BACK, AROUND — STRIDE — BUY TICKETS — TAKE PHOTOS — STAND IN LINE — TICKLE — PRETEND TO FIGHT OR WRESTLE — EAT WHILE WALKING — TALK ON THE TELEPHONE.

Very few people in the main concourse stand still unless they are in line or someone is taking their photograph. It was easy, therefore, to notice a man in a raincoat and brown beret, with a white beard, who stood still for quite a while, holding a newspaper but not reading it. He stood about twenty feet away from the stairs leading to the lower-level tracks.

I DECIDED NOT TO MOVE UNTIL HE DID. He took out his wallet. He looked into his billfold. His actions were exquisitely slow. In the time between his first glance at his billfold and his next action, taking out money, five people in one line got information and three people in another line bought tickets. After taking out his money, he put his wallet in his coat pocket. He licked his thumb. He counted the money very slowly, looking at each bill for a long time. Five more people got information and rushed away from the round booth. Over a hundred people had swarmed around his stillness. After he counted the money once, he counted it again. He took out his wallet and put the money in it. He put his wallet into his pants pocket.

Watching his resolute repose made his every action seem significant. When he began to walk very slowly downstairs, I followed him. He moved so slowly it took enormous effort on my part to stay behind him. On the way down I saw stagnant water in a marble drinking fountain. At the bottom of the still pool, dirt. Floating on top of it, two wooden stirrers, a receipt, a thread, some scum.

Downstairs, where the dining concourse is located, a circle of seats surrounds an out-of-business lemonade stand. Activities are more varied in the dining concourse than up above, probably because there are seats. Here, people READ THE NEWSPAPER — THROW AWAY TRASH — EAT — TALK ON THE PHONE (MUCH MORE THAN UPSAIRS) — RUN — WALK — READ A BOOK (BUT MOST PEOPLE READ THE NEWSPAPER) — TALK TO SOMEONE THEY'RE SITTING WITH — BUY FOOD, DRINKS, MAGAZINES, FLOWERS, A SHOE SHINE — SELL FOOD, DRINKS, MAGAZINES, FLOWERS, A SHOE SHINE — SIT DOING NOTHING (these people tend to look mildly insane).

No-one was writing except for me. I had to stand in order to view the gentleman with the brown beret and white beard. A young man with a head too big for his body and his years, sporting a rakish black eye watched me look at him and then write in my notebook. With his unblackened eye, he gave me a wink so broad it verged on a leer. The gentleman stood still, slightly outside the circle of chairs. He looked around. A clock near the circle of chairs told me that he had been standing looking around slowly for fifteen minutes. It was now 5:45. He turned in a circle, stopping every ninety degrees to face for a while in each of four directions. Was he a clock? A compass? Maybe he paid no attention to time because he was time.

THE LONGER I WATCHED HIM, MAKING MYSELF STILL BY OBSERVING HIS STILLNESS AND BY WRITING NOTES ABOUT IT, THE MORE AWARE OF TIME I BECAME. Decades of watching Hollywood movies have taught me that repose is only a pause framing the actions that precede and follow it. The longer the gentleman stood still, the more I expected that when something finally happened, it would be dramatic: a long-lost love would appear, guns would be fired. Finally he walked off, outside my field of vision. It was 5:54. I decided not to follow him. I had watched him for over half an hour. He was still in the station, and so was I, but now I would never see him again.

I felt loss.

I looked at the clock. I had twenty-two minutes to buy a gift at 48th Street and Fifth Avenue and then get back in time for a 6:20 appointment at the information kiosk. Not a minute to waste. I put away my notebook and strode off. I was leaving the station behind me, but it would be there when I returned.