

Women Who Do Nothing

OFTEN THERE'S MORE TO THEM THAN MEETS THE EYE.

This is a story for the end of the 1980s. Perhaps by the time New York bursts into the next decade, the balance will have righted itself, and people will not be so preoccupied with what they do and what others don't. Or what they don't do when compared with their peers. Or what they wish they were doing and are not, if only they knew what that was. Perhaps the life of "dignified leisure" that Cicero once prescribed for anyone healthy, good, and well-off will be in vogue again.

This is a story about women, rich women, in New York, who don't work at paying jobs or volunteer full time, not just a few hours a week. It is about those who are perfectly content "doing nothing," as they usually describe it themselves, and it is about those pierced by the spear of judgment every time the dreaded question is put: "What do you do?"

One plays tennis four times a week, twice in New Jersey, and has a decadent friend who reads all day. One dabbles in high-profile careerism, about five hours a week for \$5,000 a year, for the right to introduce herself as a hotshot. Another finds it so offensive every time someone asks her what she does that she holds up clearly untended hands and says lavishly, "Why, my dear, I get a manicure every day." There is the one who dresses for dinner parties, instructing her husband, "I'm going to say I'm working on a screenplay, and you just back me up." If you don't, she explains, no one invites you back.

"It's a feeling, like the sense you get when you enter a room," explained Tamara Elia, a mother of two grown daughters who is intimate enough with the maitre d' at Reginette to get his kiss-kiss when she arrives. "In New York, if you don't do anything, it's almost as if you label yourself UNINTERESTING PERSON, as if people think, *If she*

doesn't do anything, she must be dumb. The only way you can get away with it is if you have small children." Elia, forty-two and stunning, started making jewelry about seven years ago, not out of a compulsion to work in gold but so she could say she did something interesting. She creates up to fifty pieces a year for a

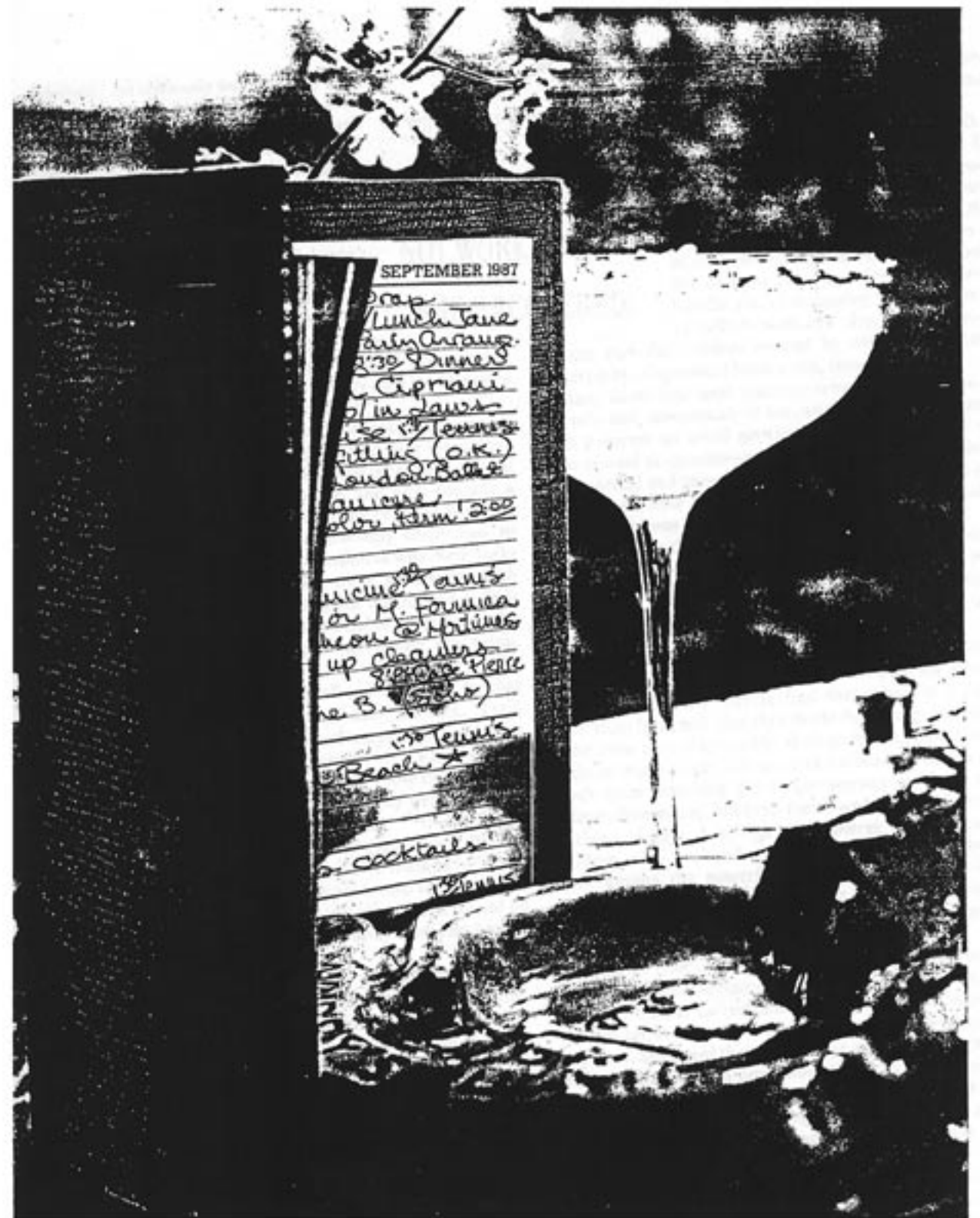
West German firm but shows no inclination to oust Elsa Peretti from a front display case at Tiffany's. She sits at her worktable four afternoons a week. But that is only when she's home. She covets her freedom to travel. And she travels a lot.

"We recently spent a week's vacation with some European friends," she said. "Eight days. And in all that time, no one once asked me what I was doing."

Cathy Blechman, twenty-nine, agrees that there's no place like New York for vocational humiliation. She never felt it when she lived in Austin or in Los Angeles or even in Aspen over Christmas. "But here there is such incredible pressure to be a success, and if you're not at least attached to someone who is a success, it's even more pressure. . . . When I was doing nothing, I was acutely aware of it, especially being single with no responsibilities." It's worst at parties, she said, with "people who are thinking they are on their way to being high-powered."

Another woman, forty-one, married a year, quit her job as vice-president of a consulting firm, where she was earning more than \$100,000 a year. Before that she was personnel director for a magazine-publishing empire and then for a major newspaper.

Only one thing about not working chafes: "We went to a dinner party. I sat next to this man and he said to me, 'What do you do?' And I said, 'Well, I'm not working right now. I've taken a year and a half off, which may end up being



BY BROOKE KROEGER

indefinite." He obviously was not really keen on talking to me. But he said, "Well, what kind of work did you do?" I told him, and he said, "Oh my goodness, you had a big job!"

"At that point I wanted to take whatever course it was and throw it in his face," she said. "It was like, 'Oh, you little girl, you.'

"I never thought my identity would be as tied up in what I did because I haven't stopped being the same kind of person. But for those people who didn't know me then and don't really know me now, New York is a career-oriented place, and you are judged by your achievements. And people don't know how to judge achievements, except, increasingly, by how much money you make and what your surroundings are."

This is not an attempt to whip up compassion for women in a tragic plight—how many people would envy the endless options of those not tied to jobs. Men have yet to be presented with the possibility in any real sense, and with roughly a quarter of the city's population subsisting below the poverty line, the whole subject becomes strikingly obnoxious to ponder. Yet it does raise the larger question of why New Yorkers are so preoccupied with work, more specifically, with being affiliated with the most prestigious institutions in their field, and how harsh the judgment can feel to anyone of shaky self-esteem whose workplace does not define her being.

"I guess you could say I am at the tail end of waiting for that little firecracker to show me the way," said Judi Falk. "I still live in the days when I was a very good teacher.... It was great for my ego, because it was the one area in my life where I had absolutely no doubts that I was terrific." Now she wouldn't consider returning to teaching. It doesn't pay well enough to make it interesting at this point in her life.

"What do I do? I never sit still. I find things to do. When I had the children at home, I felt I owed it to them to be here. I saw it as a teacher that if you don't put it into your children, you can't rely on anyone else to. Now mine are in school all day. Last summer I sent them to sleep-away camp. By August I was really depressed.

"But why do some women have to apologize for not working? Suburban women don't bemoan the fact that they don't work. They don't feel the guilt that city women do."

Last fall she enrolled in an assertiveness course at Marymount Manhattan College that disappointingly turned out to be about preparing for a job interview. In the winter she took one entitled "What Will I Do with the Rest of My Life?" Now she works for her husband two days a week.

Just what is so great about working if you don't really have to? And what, if you don't work, is time well spent?

Don't really have to is, of course, the key phrase. The present examination concerns only those women with

ONE WOMAN FELT SHE HAD TO JUSTIFY NOT WORKING, BUT SHE RECOVERED.

substantial means—of their own, of their husbands, of their parents—those under no economic onus to earn.

It is a rarefied group. They live in bulk up and down the avenues of the Upper East Side, in homes it took a year to renovate and another to decorate. They have second homes by the seashore and perhaps a third in the mountains. Their housekeepers live in, and their children are out—in school all day or away at college. Sometimes drivers handle the chauffeuring that eats into a suburban woman's day. If not, house-

keepers cart the children around by cab. They summon groceries by telephone. Housewives, these are not.

Many came into their majority when the revolution still was new and, consciously or not, waited quietly in the center of that vortex to avoid getting sucked in. Educated well, most started at careers—not too well paid in those days—then married and gave them up for motherhood. Or, as in the case of Falk, now a mother of two, "because my husband complained I was raising his tax bracket."

Others are in their late twenties and quit working because they hated it, even some without the excuse of young children. Still others, after years of success at work, stopped being able to justify the trade-offs and exactions on family life when they no longer needed the money.

A decade and a half has passed since professional women ceased to be a novelty. And those who opted for what was once the traditional course find themselves in a state of separation from self, glad they made the choices they did but at the same time disgraced by their peers who have managed to do so much more. The sense of inadequacy comes not so much from watching the single women or those not of independent means, but from their own kind. For, from many of those elegant dwellings now emerge the women with children, rich husbands, and renovated homes who also work among the powerful, command impressive recompense, and carry themselves with the assurance that, in New York at least, seems directly proportionate to how impressive their occupations can be made to sound.

Susan B. Fine is director of therapeutic activities at the Payne Whitney Psychiatric Clinic of New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center. She works with people attempting to reengage in the work force as well as the more emotionally impaired. She noted the attitude of young psychiatric trainees toward rehabilitation programs offered by her department. They quickly grasp the importance of the work-related programs and immediately begin referring patients to them, "but they value less the things related to leisure time—recreational activity, anything from card playing to crafts to jogging. The critical point is that our culture tends to place higher value on that which it defines as paid employment."

Dr. Elizabeth L. Auchincloss, a psychiatrist with an Upper

West Side practice, said her patients who complain about doing nothing fall into three groups: those who actually do nothing, usually older women whose inertia is masked by the times they grew up in, when lifestyles were different; those who are young and not particularly career-oriented at a time when investment banking has sex appeal; and those who do an overwhelming amount but think of themselves as idle. "Probably you see more people like that in New York than elsewhere, because it collects workaholics," she said.

Auchincloss believes there are criteria for "really doing nothing. I think we all have our ideas about who's doing nothing and who isn't," she said. And while acknowledging that doing nothing is finally a state of mind, a self-assessment, what she looks for as a psychiatrist is for someone to have "a meaningful, serious use of whatever special talents or interests they have. And to be pursuing that over a course of time with some concept of goals, some idea of what they are trying to accomplish."

And there is more to it. Said Fine, the occupational therapist, "I think an increasingly important part of what draws people into the workplace is an expectation, or permission, if you will, to be somebody, to grow, to test your capacities. To that extent, I think it is very positive."

"As soon as I married Danny I stopped work," said Lynn Friedman, forty-two, a former math teacher and sometime travel agent. "We had a new apartment to renovate, and we did a lot of traveling, always with my daughter. We took her everywhere. I did a lot of entertaining. Almost every Saturday night I'd have fourteen for dinner.

"Even as my daughter went to school full time, I felt strongly that I should be there when she opened the door. During that period I took a lot of courses. I took every cooking class in New York. I went to the 92nd Street Y. I made extensive travelogues. Time went on. Three years ago I did our apartment. Then it was time to look at colleges, and we visited eighteen of them. Last year we bought a country house, and I drove two hundred miles a day looking for it. I made it a full-time job. I was decorator and general contractor on the project.

"Last September, with my daughter away, I was ready to get a full-time job, and I'm fooling around with the idea. I have mixed emotions. She and I are such good friends, and she now has a six-week break. I want to spend time with her. I'd feel resentful if I couldn't be around."

Friedman does not particularly like being asked what she does and often replies with considerable annoyance, "I'm a mother." But she has become more comfortable with herself: "I used to feel as if I had to explain, but I've gotten over it. I know many women who don't work."

The six-foot blonde, who is thirty-one, quit working two years ago. She's married now and has an Upper East Side apartment and a century-old house on Long Island. She takes off skiing a few times per winter and loves to travel. At first, after she quit her job at a British travel company, she said she "wanted to fall on the floor." "It was very difficult because I didn't want to feel I had to justify myself about it, and yet I found myself justifying myself all the time. All of my friends are either single with careers or married with children and careers and about to jump off a building. Or married with children and struggling.

"If I'd been paid \$150,000, I might have felt differently about stopping work, but at \$25,000 a year for a thirteen-hour day, even with good benefits, it just wasn't worth it. Besides, I know a lot of people with high-powered jobs who are dull and extremely unhappy.

"So I started working out. The first six months I planned a wedding. I run both our houses, I do all the paperwork, pay the bills, the phone calls. I do administrative work for a charity two afternoons a week, and I travel a lot." Now she wouldn't consider a full-time job. "I physically couldn't do it all and still work," she said. "And I enjoy volunteering. What I do is insignificant, but at least it's for a worthwhile organization. And I like being able to say, 'I won't be back here for three weeks,' and they say, 'That's fine. See you when you're back.'"

Payne Whitney's Fine said a person who feels the accusation in someone's "What do you do?" must ask herself, "Does it mean I'm just overly influenced by what other people think or does it mean I need to find for myself the limits of what I am capable of doing?" For people of independent means, she said, "it's really a matter of what the balance is between their drive to do something and their fear of doing it. I think people are terrified of rejection."

She acknowledged that the aura of importance bestowed on high-earner fields such as investment banking these days "puts enormous numbers of people at great risk of being made into nothing." Auchincloss added that people should follow their own inclinations without regard to what is vocationally fashionable.

"What's my day like?" said Raffaella Costa, a forty-seven-year-old Genovese who has lived for the past fifteen years in New York. "Thursday, my son missed the bus so I had to take him to school. I wanted to get my hair washed and take a shower, but no, I had to throw on a pullover without even washing my face, and with the traffic, I wasn't back to Fifty-fourth Street until 9:30 A.M. So forget the shopping I had planned to do. I took care of the house. There was an appointment at school at noon, and after shopping for the groceries, it was 3 P.M. and

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the day was gone and what had I done? Nothing, nothing, nothing. Of course, this leaves me furious. So my husband comes home and can't understand why I am in such a state. 'What do you have to be upset about and unhappy about?' he says. 'You do nothing all day long.'

"He would be very opposed to my working for someone. It might be all right if I owned my own firm or something—but not to work for someone else.

"One day I was invited to lunch, and I couldn't believe it. These women dress up for lunch as if it were the major event of the day. They buy wardrobes for these lunches, it's that important. A few of them were in real estate, and they were talking about big deals; they looked at me as if I were out of it. And when I said I had to leave to be at school at three to pick up my son, they looked at me as if I were crazy.

"I would like to be busier than I am, to be involved in several things, but I want to be able to say no. If I have visitors from Italy, I want to be free to take them around."

What there is to do expands to fill the amount of time there is to do it in. Costa is an exception. For most, there is no leaving the house before 10 A.M., and errands that could be handled by phone easily burgeon into daylong chores. There is also a tendency not to schedule more than one major event per day.

One woman said her children complained bitterly about the doughnuts she was buying. The affront sent her to every bakery on the Upper East Side the next morning until she found a brand that would please. "At first I thought to myself, *God, I am a wonderful mother. Look at the lengths I go to for my family.* And then I thought again: *Who was I kidding? Is that all I thought my time was worth?*"

Hairdressers and cosmeticians confide they have customers with standing appointments three times a week, and for the Ladies Who Lunch, lunch is four hours, including the time it takes to travel, make up, and dress. There are the weekly visits to psychiatrists, nutritionists, and specialists. There is the odd art appreciation course and spasms of envelope stuffing for charity galas or school. There is exercise class and sometimes tennis and, of course, that most time-honored of time thieves, shopping.

At its most compulsive, a walk down Madison Avenue becomes a journey fraught with monstrous special effects—hooks sized for a freighter that seem to reach out of each doorway, grabbing the passerby by the neck and dragging her inside every shop to buy. One Park Avenue matriarch spent five years in therapy to overcome the affliction. Yet it is not perceived as illness in the woman who telephones ahead to tell the shop proprietress she will be by in the afternoon to look at bathing suits and cover-ups. She arrives at the store by limousine and announces she doesn't feel like trying them on

just now, and could she please just have them wrapped and sent to her house, where she will try them on later. Returning the rejects takes another afternoon.

There is nearly always a redecorating project that requires the viewing of this item or that at an auction house or antique dealer. Preparation for trips takes hours. Gift shopping is never rushed and can be honed to a fine art. Planning a dinner party for eights can take a week.

Every woman interviewed carried a pocket agenda, penciled in weeks ahead, full.

Lynda Zweben-Howland, an Upper East Side psychotherapist, believes there are criteria for time well spent. "I'm not sure it's necessarily a good thing that there are no expectations. And then there is the question of to what extent your identity is based on what you do, on what your work is, whether it is devoting your life to raising money for the New York City Ballet or working in some corporate position.

"I feel there should be expectations of women, that it's not healthy just to accept a narcissistic lifestyle, one that is totally self-gratifying all the time. I don't think that's acceptable for a man, and I don't think it ought to be acceptable for a woman either." Expectations are likely to be particularly high in New York, she said, because it is a center for so many things. "I think the city draws people to the things it has to offer, so it makes sense that people who are here would expect other people to have been drawn here by the same things."

Cathy Blechman worked last as a producer's assistant on a television series but left to do other things, although she's not sure she wants to do much of anything next. "You know, to me, it's not worth being this kind of power-crazy working woman who gets up at 6 A.M. and gets home at 10 P.M. and has no time for family or friends or anything like that. And I just said, 'I really want time to have fun in life and not to wake up to work out and go to work and not have time to breathe in my day, just to feel. Oh, I'm this eighties woman.' I don't want the pressure of that. I'm not hungry enough for it. So though I became very resentful of everyone thinking I was doing nothing, now I'm sort of wound down to, 'Aren't I lucky?'"

The expectations of these women are not, for the most part, oriented toward achievement, except insofar as being beautifully groomed or having the best-outfitted children or the best-laid table is an achievement. Many might argue that it is. Perhaps the question to ask is, What would the life of a woman who doesn't work have to look like before she becomes a peer, instead of an object of scorn, to the women who do?

Or better yet, what would the world have to look like before either stops judging the other?

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