ALSO BY

Maeve Brennan

The Springs of Affection:
Stories of Dublin

THE LONG-WINDED LADY

NOTES FROM THE NEW YORKER

Maeve Brennan

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CONTENTS

POSTSCRIPT

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE forty-seven pieces collected here were written for *The New Yorker* between 1953 and 1968. They appeared in "The Talk of the Town," where they were introduced by a phrase that varied very little from one time to the next. It was a simple phrase — "We have received another communication from our friend the long-winded lady"; "Our friend the long-winded lady has written to us as follows." Now when I read through this book I seem to be looking at snapshots. It is as though the long-winded lady were showing snapshots taken during a long, slow journey not through but in the most cumbersome, most reckless, most ambitious, most confused, most comical, the saddest and coldest and most human of cities. Sometimes I think that inside New York there is a Wooden Horse struggling desperately to get out, but more often these days I think of New York as the capsized city. Half-capsized, anyway, with the inhabitants hanging on, most of them still able to laugh as they cling to the island that is their life's predicament.

Even after more than twenty-five years the long-

winded lady cannot think of herself as a "real" New Yorker. If she has a title, it is one held by many others, that of a traveler in residence. As a traveler she is interested in what she sees, but she is not very curious, not even inquisitive. She is not a sightseer, never an explorer. Little out-of-the-way places have to be right next door to wherever she happens to be living for her to discover them. She has never felt the urge that drives people to investigate the city from top to bottom. Large areas of city living are a blank to her. She knows next to nothing about the Lower East Side, less about the Upper East Side, nothing at all about the Upper West Side. She believes that small, inexpensive restaurants are the home fires of New York City. She seldom goes to the theater or to the movies or to art galleries or museums. She likes parades very much. She wishes we could have music in the streets — strolling violinists, singers, barrel organs without monkeys. She thinks the best view of the city is the one you get from the bar that is on top of the Time-Life Building. She also likes the view from the windows of street-level restaurants. She hates being a shut-in diner. She wishes all the old Longchamps restaurants would come back with all their oranges and mosaic Indians and imitation greenery. She wishes Tim Costello hadn't died. She likes taxis. She travels in buses and subways only when she is trying to stop smoking. When a famous, good old house is torn down she thinks it is silly to memorialize it by putting a plaque on the concrete walls of the superstructure that takes its

place. She regrets Stern Bros. department store, and Wanamaker's, and all the demolished hotels, including the Astor. When she looks about her, it is not the strange or exotic ways of people that interest her, but the ordinary ways, when something that is familiar to her shows. She is drawn to what she recognizes, or half-recognizes, and these forty-seven pieces are the record of forty-seven moments of recognition. Somebody said, "We are real only in moments of kindness." Moments of kindness, moments of recognition — if there is a difference it is a faint one. I think the long-winded lady is real when she writes, here, about some of the sights she saw in the city she loves.

1969

They Were Both about Forty

SOMEBODY said, "A full-grown child is five-sixths memory." It was half a joke, I suppose, but last night, at a quarter past nine, I saw two full-grown city children — middle-aged people — walking together on Sixth Avenue, and in each of them memory was quite suspended for the sake of the moment they were spending together. They were engrossed in each other. He was besotted. She was proud. She was far gone in hauteur, but her disdainful expression was alien to her harsh face. He was different. The state of beatitude was natural to him, and his expression would normally change only to become more or less intensely pleased with the world and with his own condition. He was from one of the Spanish-speaking countries, and I think he had been here only a very short time. She was showing him her neighborhood — Sixth Avenue in the Forties, where furnished rooms and cheap hotels are still to be found, in spite of the enormous amount of demolition that has taken place around there this year to make way for the new skyscrapers. His hair

was black and dense and glossy, like boot polish, and he had big, soft brown eyes and smooth skin. He had a little half-moon mustache. He was a Latin type, and she was Hogarthian, with Plantagenet features. Her forehead was big, and she had small blue eyes, a domineering, bony nose, and a thin mouth. Her upper lip made a perfect cupid's bow — pale pink, no lipstick — but her skin had the bad, stretched look of the white cotton hand towels they give you in poor hotels. Her hair had been bleached and dyed so often that it was weathered to a rough rust-pink, and it hung stiffly down her back like a mane, or like wig hair before it has been brushed and combed and curled into shape. They were both about forty, and they were the same height (five feet four or so) and about the same weight (a hundred and sixty pounds), and they both had short legs and barrel bodies and short necks. His left arm and hand were locked in her right arm and hand. They paced along together exactly as though they were walking down the long, long aisle leading from the altar where they had been married. To look at them, you could imagine throngs of friends and relatives watching them and waiting to follow them out of the church. When I first saw them, they were approaching the northeast corner of Forty-fourth and Sixth, and were about to cross the street and continue their perambulation downtown. There were numbers of people on the sidewalk, and the full-grown children emerged from the crowd, but, more than that, they emerged from the long, dark distance beyond them. The night view up Sixth Avenue is eerie now that the

blocks on the west side of the avenue are half broken down and half gone. It is as though the area had been attacked and then left in pieces, and there is a clear view all the way to Fiftieth Street, where the shimmering cliffs of the Time-Life skyscraper stand up to be seen in their entirety for the first time since they were built, nine years ago. I noticed the two people because of the deliberate way they walked, close together, and because the hem of her dress was about three inches below her knees. She wore a sleeveless, buttoned-down-the-front dress of pale pink cotton printed with green foliage and cream-colored flowers, and it hung straight down from her shoulders to end in a deep flounce. Her bare legs were heavily marked with spots, bruises, and swollen dark-blue veins, and she wore flat brown moccasins embroidered in white and gold, like bedroom slippers. She carried no handbag, not even a change purse — no luggage at all. She was close to home, out for a few minutes, taking a little constitutional with her friend. He attempted to match her informal attire by going tieless and coatless. He wore navy blue trousers, buttoned tightly around his middle, and a plain white shirt with the sleeves folded back to his elbows, and open-toed leather sandals that showed off his striped socks. When the two had crossed Forty-fourth Street and were proceeding downtown, she was attracted by the model kitchen on display in the Hotpoint showroom in the corner building, and they went to the window and stood, side by side, looking in. It was a very fancy kitchen in chocolate brown and ombré yellow, and the flowered partition that

served as a background wall had a "window" in it showing a summer sky and branches of dogwood in bloom. "I don't really care for that color scheme," she said, and he moved closer to her, so that their bodies were touching from their shoulders to their knees, and he turned his head and beamed into her eyes. He nodded admiringly, but he said nothing. They looked at the kitchen for a minute, and then she stepped back, and so did he, and they looked up and she read the sign over the window. "'Hotpoint Kitchen Planning,'" she read. He began to spell out the first word. *"Hotpoint,"* she said. "Ottpoyn," he seemed to say. "No," she said. *"Hotpoint."* It occurred to me that they might turn around and find me staring at them. His expression would hardly change, but hers would, and I didn't want to get in its way. When the hauteur slipped from her face, what would I see? Despair, I imagine. Not the passive, withdrawn despair that keeps itself in silence but the raging kind that incinerates all before it. I turned away and went home, leaving them to their English lesson.

SEPTEMBER 28, 1968

A Mysterious Parade of Men

THERE are more parades in this city than any of us know about. There was one yesterday that went unwitnessed and unadmired except by two policemen and

me, and it was a real parade, with marching men, all in line and all in step, and martial music. This was about a quarter to eight in the morning, and it was Sunday. I was thinking about coffee, and I was standing in the middle of the block on Forty-fourth Street between Fifth and Sixth wondering whether to go along to the Algonquin, which is so small and familiar, or to walk a little farther, and east, to the Biltmore, which is so large and familiar, when I heard the music striking up on Fifth Avenue, and I hurried along to the corner to see what was happening. I can't say how many men were marching, but there were enough of them to fill the avenue for a block, leaving good margins of space all around, and that is how they were marching — neatly, keeping their margins straight. They were all dressed in dark suits, and they went shoulder to shoulder along the empty avenue, with the empty buildings and the empty windows keeping them incognito. In all these buildings, there was nobody to hear them and nobody to see them. They were passing Forty-fifth Street when I first saw them, moving along uptown at a steady tread. At that distance, they were geometric, private, and solemn, and I thought of funeral marches, drummings out of the corps, hunger marches, executions, revolutions, conscription, and strikes. One of the two policemen I had noticed was on the opposite side of the avenue at Forty-seventh Street, but the other was quite close to me at Forty-fifth. I walked along to him and asked him what the parade was. "I don't know," he said. He was very tall and pink-faced, with

a cheerful smile. I said, "Have you really no idea what it is?" and he shook his head and said, "No idea." I said, "But it could be anything," and I thought of nuclear weapons, the Russians, conspirators, political plots, assassinations, and Trojan horses. The city seemed more deserted than ever, with everybody asleep, and I thought, It is just a step to chaos. I was wondering about the policeman. Then he asked, "Are you thinking of going after them?" and I said no, and turned back down the avenue and decided on the Biltmore and went over there and had coffee. The reason I had to make that choice between the Algonquin and the Biltmore is that Schrafft's is closed on Sundays.

JULY 14, 1962

The Solitude of Their Expression

YESTERDAY afternoon — I was in a taxi — I watched a very tall old man walking north on Seventh Avenue. He was passing the Metropole Café, which is almost directly across the avenue from the Latin Quarter and Playland. The Metropole is a Twist palace, and it has huge glass doors that reveal its shadowy interior. There is always something going on in there, but I have never been able to make out exactly what, because of the crowd that collects in front of the doors, people peering around

each other's heads and necks and shoulders to see what they can see. Even in the furnace heat of yesterday the crowd was there. It was a dreadful day. There was no air except what was left over, and in the heat the big pictures of the Metropole's next-to-naked performers glowed with even more than their usual fleshiness. The old man walked past all this damp confusion as though it did not exist. There was no contempt in his indifference. He lives around here, and I imagine he takes Broadway for granted. I have seen him before, but like many very old people he looks more isolated and more fragile in this oppressive weather. Yesterday he had left his jacket at home, and he wore no tie. He wore a white shirt that was buttoned up at the neck and wrists, and his trousers, which were roomy, especially around the waist, were held up by dark striped suspenders. His hat was made of cream-colored straw, he wore big black boots, and his walking stick would have marked a very firm track in the dust if that overworked Broadway concrete ever had the chance to collect dust. He walked in his usual way, holding himself as straight as he could, and not going very fast. You could see his knees working. He paid no attention to anyone and he asked for no attention. You would think he relied on the solitude of his expression to get him to his destination. There are a good many very old people living in this highly charged part of the city, which you would never think of as being residential. The shabby side-street hotels and rooming houses are camping grounds for all the theaters and night-

clubs and restaurants that provide the bright lights of Broadway, and some of the campers stay on awhile and then they become settlers. At present I have two big rooms in a Forty-ninth Street hotel that is sixty years old this year. I have very high ceilings and windows on three sides. My place is in the rear wing of the hotel, on the eleventh floor, and I look straight across the low roofs of the little Forty-eighth Street houses to the big flat back of another hotel that appears to be about the same age and height as this one. My hotel is twelve stories high and there is an arrangement of rooms called the penthouse on top of the roof. In the penthouse there are six bedrooms and two public baths. That hotel I see over there also has a penthouse. The hotel is made of brick, faded and dirty, pink and yellow. I don't know what the penthouse is built of, but it is painted black. It is a cabin in the sky and it makes a deck of the roof it sits on. At one end there is enough roof left over to make a terrace, which has a low stone wall that is painted a pale pink. I consider myself to be quite high up in the sky, eleven flights up, and the black cabin with its pink terrace is about on eye level with me, but as I look past the cabin, looking south across the city, the view goes up and up as the buildings go higher and higher and the walls grow more and more blank and closed. It is an irregular ascending view, split down here and there by a narrow shaft of light that shows where the big buildings do not quite meet, or are prevented from meeting by some small, stubborn survivor like the old

five-story Forty-eighth Street houses down here at my feet. If I look over to the west I can see, where Seventh Avenue meets Broadway, the Latin Quarter building, which is not much bigger than a very big shed. I can see the sidewalk by the Latin Quarter and the people passing along, going about their business or hesitating to stare in through the glass walls of Playland. Playland is the indoor amusement park that takes up most of the street floor of the Latin Quarter building. The passersby and the loiterers are reflected in the glass of Playland, and there is also reflected the constantly flowing stream of traffic on its way downtown. That is to the west, only half a block away from me. To the east I can see the Empire State Building for most of its ugly length. The Empire State is at least fifteen long blocks from here. It seems to be very close, but then, no matter where you stand, the Empire State always seems to have that effect of trying to be on nudging terms with every other building in the city. The hotel with the black penthouse and the pink terrace presents a flat, unadorned back full of little windows that are covered with white curtains and shades that pull up and down. In one of the rooms two floors down from the roof a very old lady makes her home. I see her at her window. Now in the hot weather she pulls her window up as far as it will go and leaves it so, and her curtains, the white net of hotel room curtains and worn thin, I suppose, like the ones I have here, are fastened back so that she can get all the light and air there is. She has two red geraniums and some sort of

very small green plant in pots on her windowsill. Sometimes she anchors a square of white cloth under the two geraniums. The cloth, stretched tightly across on two of its corners, is limp until it starts to dry, and then it comes to life with little flutters. One evening lately I saw the old lady sitting at her window, facing west or, rather, facing the west wall of her room. Her hair is completely white. She was reading what appeared to be a letter, holding it at an angle in front of her as you would a newspaper. It was one of those lucky evenings when the white summer day turns to amber before it begins to break up into the separate shades of twilight, and in the strange glow the towering outline of the city to the south turned monumental and lonely. The Empire State changed color suddenly, and lost its air of self-satisfaction. Nothing was really certain anymore, except the row of pigeons standing motionless on the western wall of the pink terrace, and beneath, the old lady calmly reading her letter. Without turning her head she put her right hand with the sheet of paper in it out the window, stretched her arm to full length, and let the paper go. It fluttered down and away, and she went on reading. There was a second sheet to the letter. She did not look out. She did not see the amber air, and she did not notice the violet blue vapor that drifted in transparency across her window, carried on a very timid little eastern breeze. A second time she stretched out her arm and let a sheet of paper go, and she continued to read. The third sheet followed the first two uncertainly down

the wall of the hotel, and then she stood up and vanished at once into the dimness of her room. There was something very housewifely about the decisive way she left her window and her geraniums. She is on the tenth floor, but she might just as well have been leaving her ground-floor window after having spent an hour gossiping with her neighbors and watching the market bags to see who was having what for dinner. A good many of the ordinary ways of living go when people begin to live up in the air.

1969

On the A Train

THERE were no seats to be had on the A train last night, but I had a good grip on the pole at the end of one of the seats and I was reading the beauty column of the *Journal-American,* which the man next to me was holding up in front of him. All of a sudden I felt a tap on my arm, and I looked down and there was a man beginning to stand up from the seat where he was sitting. "Would you like to sit down?" he said. Well, I said the first thing that came into my head, I was so surprised and pleased to be offered a seat in the subway. "Oh, thank you very much," I said, "but I am getting out at the next station." He sat back and that was that, but I felt all set up

and I thought what a nice man he must be and I wondered what his wife was like and I thought how lucky she was to have such a polite husband, and then all of a sudden I realized that I wasn't getting out at the next station at all but the one after that, and I felt perfectly terrible. I decided to get out at the next station anyway, but then I thought, If I get out at the next station and wait around for the next train I'll miss my bus and they only go every hour and that will be silly. So I decided to brazen it out as best I could, and when the train was slowing up at the next station I stared at the man until I caught his eye and then I said, "I just remembered this isn't my station after all." Then I thought he would think I was asking him to stand up and give me his seat, so I said, "But I still don't want to sit down, because I'm getting off at the next station." I showed him by my expression that I thought it was all rather funny, and he smiled, more or less, and nodded, and lifted his hat and put it back on his head again and looked away. He was one of those small, rather glum or sad men who always look off into the distance after they have finished what they are saying, when they speak. I felt quite proud of my strong-mindedness at not getting off the train and missing my bus simply because of the fear of a little embarrassment, but just as the train was shutting its doors I peered out and there it was, 168th Street. "Oh dear!" I said. "That was my station and now I have missed the bus!" I was fit to be tied, and I had spoken quite loudly, and I felt extremely foolish, and I looked down, and the

man who had offered me his seat was partly looking at me, and I said, "Now, isn't that silly? That was my station. A Hundred and Sixty-eighth Street is where I'm supposed to get off." I couldn't help laughing, it was all so awful, and he looked away, and the train fidgeted along to the next station, and I got off as quickly as I possibly could and tore over to the downtown platform and got a local to 168th, but of course I had missed my bus by a minute, or maybe two minutes. I felt very much at a loose end wandering around 168th Street, and I finally went into a rudely appointed but friendly bar and had a martini, warm but very soothing, which cost me only fifty cents. While I was sipping it, trying to make it last to exactly the moment that would get me a good place in the bus queue without having to stand too long in the cold, I wondered what I should have done about that man in the subway. After all, if I had taken his seat I probably would have got out at 168th Street, which would have meant that I would hardly have been sitting down before I would have been getting up again, and that would have seemed odd. And rather grasping of me. And he wouldn't have got his seat back, because some other grasping person would have slipped into it ahead of him when I got up. He seemed a retiring sort of man, not pushy at all. I hesitate to think of how he must have regretted offering me his seat. Sometimes it is very hard to know the right thing to do.

FEBRUARY 15, 1958

Balzac's Favorite Food

THERE is a bookshop on Forty-eighth Street, not far from Sixth Avenue, where they sell mostly paperbacks and marked-down copies — publishers' remainders. I was in there the other day looking around. It was Saturday and the weather was cool. The shop door was open to the street. It was about lunchtime, and what business there was was casual. The afternoon was a slow one, and the city was amiable and groggy — no complaints that I could hear. Such a siesta mood is remarkable in New York City and, in the very middle of the city, strange. It was a mysterious occasion and a lighthearted one, as though all the citizens had just been given their seasonal allotment of time and had found that they had enough and to spare — plenty of time, more than they ever would have imagined. In the bookshop, all was calm. You might have been far away, in some much older city, browsing alongside the antiquarians. The pace was intent and unhurried as the customers meandered among the works of Henry James and Rex Stout and Françoise Mallet-Joris and Ivan Turgenev and Agatha Christie and the rest, more and more names turning up in front of my eyes as I stood looking. I had already collected all I intended to buy — five books under my arm — and I was looking through another book, one I cannot remember the name of, and I was reading a description of Balzac's favorite food. What he liked best was plain bread covered with sardines that he

had mashed into a paste and mixed with something. What was it Balzac mixed into his sardine paste? I was just looking back to find out, reading it all again and thinking how delicious it sounded, when my ears were insulted by hard voices screeching right outside the door — people making remarks about the books in the window. "Hey, Marilyn Monroe has been reduced!" a man's voice shouted. "Five seventy-five to one ninety-two!" There were squawks of laughter, and then a woman's voice said (it was a harridan speaking), "Wait till she goes down to a dollar." "Too much! Too much! A dollar is too much!" the man shouted, and then these horrors were trooping into the shop, and I took off my glasses to get a look at them. Cruelty and Stupidity and Bad Noise — there were three of them, a man and a woman and another, but I did not see the third, who was hidden behind the tall spindle bookcase they were all looking at and making merry over. They called out names and titles, and made a lot of feeble puns, ruining the place for everybody, and I paid for the books I had under my arm, and left. I walked over to Le Steak de Paris and asked for sardines and plain bread, but when I began to mash the sardines, I couldn't remember what it was that Balzac used to mix them with. It didn't matter. Sardines with plain bread are very good. I said to myself that there was no use thinking about the hyenas in the bookshop. Their capacity for arousing violence will arouse somebody who *is* violent one of these days. (That is what I told myself.) They will trip over their own shoelaces. Time will tell on them. They will never know anything except the miserable appetite of envy. They will learn, like the boy who cried wolf, that people who mock the Last Laugh are incinerated by it when it finally sounds. I don't care. That little bookshop stays open late, and I am going there this evening to find that book I was looking at that has the description in it of how Balzac made his sardine paste. Before the evening is finished, I will know exactly what the Master's favorite food was, and I will also know how it tastes today.

SEPTEMBER 21, 1963

The Dark Elevator

I HAVE no great fondness for elevators at any time, and I have developed a dislike for the two elevators in this hotel where I live. They are perfectly ordinary self-service elevators, safe and sound, but they carry on as though they were dangerous. They creak, and when they stop at a floor they bounce helplessly, and they often stop at the wrong floor. This morning I got into one of them with even less enthusiasm than I used to have. A few nights ago a minor fire in the hotel left part of the top floors and both elevators soaked with water from the firemen's hoses. Since then the elevators have smelled of smoking mattresses and wet old plaster and cement, and the thin carpeting on

their floors is not yet dry. I live on the eighth floor, and when I got into the elevator this morning I pushed the button marked ONE for the main floor and I pushed the button marked DC so that the doors would close without delay. The doors closed quickly and the elevator began to move, and as it did so all the lights went out, the overhead lights and the signal light, all. There I was in a pitch-black box. I felt around for the metal handbar you are supposed to hang onto in case the floor gives way, but I couldn't find the bar, and the damp floor moved like grease under my feet. It was a ghastly descent. When the door opened at last, I was on the main floor and I walked across to the desk and said to the clerk, "The lights are out in the elevators." He looked at me sadly. "I know," he said. "They have been working on them all morning." He then turned to the switchboard, because in addition to being the desk clerk he is also the telephone operator, and he has other duties as well. It was very hot in the lobby. The air was old and stale, and the fan behind the desk stirred anxiously. I started for the entrance and the white marble steps that lead down to the street, but there is a public telephone booth at each side of the entrance doors and I remembered a call I should have made before I left upstairs. The phone on the right had an out-of-order sign on it — one or the other of the phones is usually out of order — and the other one held a man who was smoking a cigar. He had left the door open, and his right leg was stretched outside the booth so that he could admire his shoe, which

was of straw-colored leather with airholes in it. He was saying, "Where will you be at one-thirty? I'll give you a call then. What about two o'clock, where will you be at two o'clock? Where will you be between one-thirty and two o'clock?" I sat down on a small settee to wait. The settee is covered with orange leatherette, and the wall behind it is covered with a mural-sized photograph in melancholy brown of New York City seen from the harbor. I sat sideways on the settee to avoid staring at the man in the booth, and I looked at the unreal skyline of the city I am living in, and then I stared at the end wall of the desk, which has a square hole cut in it so that the clerk can see who is entering the hotel. Decorating the hole is a potted plant about six inches high. The lobby used to be about three times bigger than it is now, but all that remains of its former grandeur is the high, ornate ceiling and the marble stairs that go off upstairs to the right. The present desk, which is very like an overturned shoebox, is cramped against the wall facing the elevators, and the end wall, between the desk and the elevators, is covered with panels of mirror that are held in place with glass buttons. One of the panels is a door that opens into a tiny office, but the door is usually closed, closing the wall. At right angles to the mirrored door, and right next to the elevators, there is a door opening into a dark and cavernous storage room, where a herd of old, worn-out television sets lie at peace and in silence. One of the television sets still has some life in it, and sometimes at night the bellman on duty leaves

the door ajar and sits on the end edge of his orange leatherette bench peering in at the performance on the screen. At such times the night clerk on duty behind the desk puts his elbows on the counter and watches too. I was beginning to wonder if that phone call was worth all this waiting. I didn't want to go out into the noisy, baking street and start looking for another phone booth and I didn't want to go back upstairs in that dark elevator. Someone started to climb the steps from the street, and I looked over my shoulder and saw a gray-haired lady of about seventy who lives here. She has a room without a bath and she is often in the hall. She has bad temper written all over her face, bad temper and arrogance, and her eyes look about her in a curiosity that is unkind and persistent. She is always fighting with somebody and she is always complaining. Twice I have heard her scolding the young clerk in the grocery store next door, and I have even seen her engage in argument with one of the tiny gypsy children who hang around the street. She looks as though she would like to reform somebody. It was clear, as she climbed the stairs, that the hot weather was hurting her. She was tired. She looked as though she had never seen a worse day. She wore a long-sleeved knitted sweater of beige silk and a brown tweed skirt. Her hair, as usual, was caught tightly in a net, and she carried her handbag and a small brown paper grocery bag. We have cooking privileges here. She passed me by and stopped at the desk, but the clerk was busy on the telephone. While she waited to

speak with him she rested one hand on the counter and stared back at the street she had escaped from. The lobby is not cool but it is not too bright and it is always quiet. I think this must be the only hotel in New York City that has no bar or shop of any kind opening off the lobby. When the clerk had finished speaking on the telephone, the gray-haired lady addressed him in her usual remarkable voice. She could give orders with that voice. She asked, "Are the lights working in the elevators yet?" "Not yet," the clerk said. "When will they be working?" she asked. "I can't tell you," he said, "because I don't know. They've been working on them all morning." "You told me that before, " she said. "Is the manager in?" "I don't know," the clerk said. "I left three messages for him to call me," she said. "What do you mean, you don't know if he's in?" "I know what I know," the clerk said despairingly, "and I don't know if he's in." He then went to the far end of the desk and hid himself in the recess there, where they keep records. The gray-haired lady had lifted her chin against his indifference, and she resumed her contemplation of the rowdy street scene outside. She is a tall woman, and her expression, as she realized how helpless she was, and how afraid of the elevator, was that of an empress confronted by the mob that has arrived to assassinate her. She was all fortitude and dignity. Then she turned and walked the few steps to the elevator, and as she did so her bad temper and her arrogance and her bitterness all went overboard and I think she took nothing into that dark and

smelly box with her except the courage she was born with. The man in the telephone booth put another dime in and continued with his arguing, and I got up and went out into the blinding din of Forty-ninth Street. When I came back later, in the middle of the afternoon, the lights were on in the elevators and I made the ascent in comparative security. I wonder what the gray-haired lady felt when she reached her room. Did she feel defeat, at her circumstances, or victory, because of her behavior in the face of her circumstances? I suppose all she felt was relief at finding herself safe home again.

1969

Broccoli

THE luncheon hour in this city begins at eleven-thirty; by three-thirty even those who sit down latest and stay longest have left the table. Then, until five o'clock, the restaurants are nearly empty, and you can walk in and arrange yourself at the table of your choice, in the lavish solitude provided by a little sea of calm white tablecloths, and look about you, even stare, be as curious or as indifferent or as watchful or as lazy as you are inclined to be — in other words, be yourself in a public place and still consider yourself polite. There is a great deal of virtue in feeling unseen. The small restaurants I like are selfish enough to keep the afternoon quiet hour for themselves,

so today I went to the Longchamps at Fifty-ninth Street, where there is that big window on Madison Avenue — elegant, positive Madison Avenue. I did not sit by the window. I went to a booth, halfway back in the room, that gave me a long view across the empty tables to the street. One of the booths in that Longchamps has a patched seat. It is a booth that faces the back of the restaurant. The patch, of wide gray adhesive tape, is in the form of a Red Cross cross, square and definite. It is reassuring to think of the big Longchamps chain having recourse to such a tiny, housewifely economy and being so neat about it. I sat beside that patch the last time I was in the Fifty-ninth-Street Longchamps, so it must have been summertime then, because I would never agree to face away from the window except in the hot midsummer weather, which I hate. Since that day, the year has receded by several weeks, and now it is autumn. The Longchamps menu is big and extensive, but I ordered what I always do, broiled sole with its Longchamps accompaniments, and then I looked carefully at the menu and gave an extra order, for fresh broccoli with *sauce suprême*. When the food came, the broccoli was in its own dish, with a small companion beside it — a silver sauceboat with a spoon in it. Everything was very hot. The waiter took hold of the sauce spoon and looked inquiringly at me, but I said, "No, leave it a minute." When I had finished the sole, I turned to the broccoli. I took hold of the sauce spoon, as the waiter had done, and I began to move it over the broccoli, and then I quickly put it back in the sauceboat. I could not remember which end

of the broccoli you eat. I couldn't remember. I should have let the waiter do his job. I tried to remember other vegetables that have their limits, but their names, their appearance, everything about them, had gone out of my head. I can think of them now — asparagus, scallions, and so on — but I couldn't think of them then. My mind was blank, and I could do nothing. The broccoli was fluffy, with delicious-looking stalks. It was simply a question of where to put the *sauce suprême.* After a while, I took the spoon again and dribbled some of the *suprême* along the side of the broccoli and pushed at it with my fork, and then I put the fork down and left it so. I took up my book and began to read absentmindedly. The waiter came and took everything away and brought coffee. He kindly said nothing about the uneaten broccoli. There is neither moral nor reason, and there is no justice, in this kind of private failure, as you will understand the next time you try to introduce two of your old friends and cannot remember the name of one of them.

NOVEMBER 2, 1963

A Shoe Story

I WAS hurrying across Park Avenue the other day when my left foot gave way and I almost fell, but I recovered myself and got to the corner and up on the sidewalk. I investigated and found there was nothing

wrong with my foot, but the heel of my left shoe had snapped in two. I was really angry, because the shoes were only a week old. A taxi was coming along, and I waved at it and got into it and gave the driver the name of the shop where I had bought the shoes. I intended to go in and confront the manager. Then I realized that I could make a much more effective stand, so to speak, if I walked in in a pair of brand-new, expensive shoes from some other shop instead of limping in in the shoes they had sold me. I asked the driver to take me to Bergdorf Goodman, and when we got there I went into the Delman Shoe Salon and told what had happened to me to the first salesman I saw, and listened to his words of sympathy. I sat down and he measured my foot, and then he went off and quickly came back with several pairs of shoes, and I decided on the pair I wanted, but I didn't like the way the bows were sewn onto them. The bows were set at an angle, and I wanted them set straight. The salesman said that the change could easily be made but that the girl who did that work was out to lunch and would not be back for twenty minutes or so. I said I would wait, and he went off with the shoes and I sat back, prepared to waste the time. I began to listen to the conversation of two ladies who were sitting near me looking at evening sandals. They were talking about the election. They were talking about Senator John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

One of them said, "He's simply too young. He's too *young.*"

The other one said, "*Much* too young."

The first one said, "Forty-three years old. It's absurd."

I began to feel very cheerful. I am forty-three. Of course, I was aware from reading the papers that Senator Kennedy and I were born the same year, but the close connection between us had never been apparent to me until that moment. I hoped the two ladies would go on criticizing the senator's age, but instead they turned their attention to the sandals and decided they didn't want any that they had seen, and they gathered themselves up and went away. That left me with nothing to listen to. There was no sign of my new shoes, so I couldn't go out of the shop. I decided I would just go up to the fifth floor and see if there was anything left from the sales that most of the stores have at this time of year. When I got to the fifth floor, I found a big sale going on. All the reduced dresses were ranged in rows on big double racks. I began to look along the rack that held my size, and I became aware that someone was humming a tune near me — someone who was hidden behind one of the dress racks. The tune was "I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face," and the humming increased in volume so gradually that it was insistent but not noticeable, the way a nice, well-treated air-conditioner sometimes is. I couldn't find a dress I wanted, and I wandered around to see who owned the voice I was listening to. It was a lady who was looking at the size tens and finding a lot of bargains. She had three dresses over her arm, and while I was looking at her she found another one worth trying on. Every time she saw something that

interested her, her humming rose a little, and by the time she went off to the fitting room, with several dresses, she had almost achieved a soft chant of triumph. I have often noticed women humming when they are looking at dresses, but this lady was the most enthusiastic shopper I have ever listened to. Since I had found nothing, I went down to see about my new shoes, and they were ready, and I put them on. The salesman put my old shoes in a bag and gave them to me, and I thanked him and asked him for his name.

He said, "Mr. Sugarman," and he gave me his card.

I said, "I'd better put this card in a safe place," and I slipped it into my passport, which I have always carried since the day a taximan told me that if I was picked up for jaywalking I would be taken away in the wagon unless I had proper identification.

I said to Mr. Sugarman, "Now you're in my passport. That means you'll travel all over the world."

Mr. Sugarman said, "Oh, I hope I won't be seasick."

I said, "If you are seasick, I will let you know."

I went out onto Fifth Avenue and began to walk downtown. It was a lovely, sunny day, not too warm, and everybody was walking very fast. I passed St. Thomas Church, which I first saw twenty years ago, when I already considered myself quite grown up. I thought how astonishing it was to have been alive so many years and to have looked at so many faces and heard so many words and said so many words and seen so many different kinds of weather

and still to be judged young. I blessed Senator Kennedy, and then I blessed Vice President Nixon, because he is young, too. I had friendly thoughts for everybody over forty-three and also for everybody under forty-three. I thought about the national emphasis on youth that I have often heard deplored and that I have sometimes objected to myself, and I thought that that question would not bother me again, now that I had realized that emphasis on youth really means emphasis on me. I was so taken up with myself that I walked right past the shop where I had bought my bad shoes and forgot to go in and make my complaint. Now I think I will not bother to return those shoes.

AUGUST 27, 1960

In the Grosvenor Bar

TODAY I saw the man who does the right thing in the right place at the right time and *knows* it. I think he must also be that man who is in step when all the rest of us are out of step. His sense of timing is very good. He knows when to be silent and when to speak. Perhaps he knows everything. Perhaps he has all the questions to all the answers that I have. I should have followed him. He was in the Grosvenor bar, sitting at the bar, all alone at the far end of the bar, with his back to the empty dining room

that lay beyond him, when I rushed in there to get out of the rain this afternoon. I didn't exactly rush into the bar — I was washed in by a cloudburst that arrived very unfairly because it had given no warning. There had been a faint drizzle earlier, that was all. The Grosvenor Hotel stands at the corner of Tenth Street and Fifth Avenue, and I know it well because I lived around that neighborhood for years. It is a very nice bar, with small tables along the wall, and beyond it the dining room is big and has a polite hotel air. It looked very polite in there this afternoon, with all the clean tablecloths and no people. This is Sunday, and it was too late for lunch and too early for dinner. I sat down in front of one of those big windows that would look out on Tenth Street if they were not shrouded with draperies and curtains, and I was very cold, and I wondered about pneumonia. The bartender came over and put an extremely small paper napkin on the table in front of me and said, "Some rain," and I asked him for a martini. It was not too early for a martini. The man at the bar was drinking what seemed to be a Scotch-and-water. He was very middle-aged, and he had a very large face. He had his right elbow on the bar, and beside his elbow he had his black umbrella crooked to the edge of the bar. He was gazing down the length of the bar and through the glass entrance doors at the rain, and his expression was contemplative. He moved his eyes to watch the bartender mix my martini, and the bartender caught him and said cheerfully, "Some rain, all right," but he got no answer. When the bartender had

delivered my drink, he went back and stood with his hand on the bar staring out at the rain and at three ladies in cotton dresses who stood huddled in the doorway. From time to time, one of the ladies would turn to look in at us all.

It was a peaceful scene until a tall, thin man in a very wet cotton suit plunged in from the street, paused to ask the bartender for a Scotch-and-soda, and then went straight back to look around the deserted dining room. He was soaked and his shoes squelched when he walked, but he was very cheerful and wore a beaming smile. He said to the bartender, "I waited twenty minutes for a taxi at the corner of Madison Avenue and Fifty-sixth Street, but I made it." The bartender shook his head and said, "This is some day for rain." The beaming man was enjoying the drink with which he was rewarding himself. He looked out into the street once or twice, and then he said to the bartender, "Is there another bar here, or any place where somebody could be waiting?" The bartender said, "Just the lobby," and he jerked his head and then pointed his arm to show the lobby entrance, which is around the corner of the far end of the bar. The beaming man squelched off and disappeared into the lobby, and in about one minute he was back, looking ruined. He said, "*This* isn't the Fifth Avenue Hotel." The bartender said, "This is the *Grosvenor* Hotel. I'm sorry, sir." And the ruined man said, "I thought it was Tenth and Fifth." The bartender said, "Ninth and Fifth, you want," and he looked sympathetic and glanced

at the silent man, who remained silent. The ruined man vanished into the street. The rain continued to pour down, and the ladies outside waited patiently for it to stop. I wondered why they did not give up and come on in. No one came in and nothing happened until the silent man suddenly stood up, lifting his umbrella. The bartender said, "Thank you, sir." The silent man spoke at last, and he said, "It's a good thing it was raining when I left home; otherwise I would not have brought my umbrella." And he walked away and out, past the drooping ladies, and as he left our shelter he opened the umbrella and held it up over himself and went toward Eleventh Street, rejoicing.

AUGUST 4, 1962

A Chinese Fortune

THE train was crowded as usual last night, and so I was riding standing up with my arms clasped around the center pole of the car, and my hands were joined not together but by a copy of *Life* that I had purchased at the Fifty-ninth Street station newsstand. I was reading from the back of the magazine to the front — not from inclination, but because the particular balance I was trying to maintain between my right shoulder and the pole obliged me to turn the pages with my left hand. I describe my position with some care because it occasioned

sign that the snow would ever stop falling, and as I looked about me, making my way along, I could see no reason for it ever to stop falling. I looked at the buildings closest to me, and then I looked as far up as their tops, which were hidden in a hazy confusion of sky and snow, and I looked along Sixth Avenue as far as the falling snow would allow, and wherever I looked, the buildings had shed their tacky, temporary air, and appeared theatrically lost and desolate, as though they were in a movie and would soon flicker away and disappear forever. Therefore, I have this to say for Sixth Avenue: It is a perfect place for snow, and snow should always be falling there, tons and tons and tons of snow, making the avenue just about impassable, so that anybody managing to struggle through there could look at it with affection, because Sixth Avenue possesses a quality that some people acquire, sometimes quite suddenly, which dooms it and them to be loved only at the moment when they are being looked at for the very last time.

NOVEMBER 4, 1961

I Look Down from the Windows of This Old Broadway Hotel

FROM the windows I have on the eleventh floor of this old Broadway hotel, I look down on West Forty-eighth Street, where the roofs of a few little houses that

survive down there make a deep well inside the tall city that has grown up around them. Broadway is on my right — Broadway and all the big lights. A trombonist from the Latin Quarter appears on its roof every evening and gives a concert all by himself and to nobody. At that point the roof is only a story and a half high, and the crowd hurrying along just below him must be deafened by the Broadway din, because no one ever seems to stop to look up at him. Up here where I am, I can hear him very clearly. He comes up during intermission time, I suppose, and he saunters about for a minute, getting exercise, and then he walks to the edge of the roof and begins to play. He plays to the stars and he plays to the street and he plays for himself, with a large flourish to the right, a large flourish to the left. He is a heavyset man in a white shirt and black trousers, and his stage is a blackened roof that slants down to where he stands, with his toes almost touching the dazzling river of white and yellow neon light that rushes around the walls of the club. He stands in the middle of a vast explosion of restless light — every sign on Broadway going full blast — but he would be invisible if it were not for the whiteness of his shirt and the shine of his trombone. Those Broadway lights are selfish. They illuminate only themselves. The trombonist doesn't care. On his shelf of darkness, in the middle of all the splendor, he performs as devotedly as though he had the world at his feet.

One evening he turned up on the roof at seven, clearly visible in the azure autumn air. He took his stand at the

roof's edge and began to play, and at that moment an extremely tall young man stood up between the two blue-painted water towers of the Flanders Hotel (twelve stories high, to my left) and began playing the clarinet. They both seemed to be playing "A Gypsy Told Me." The trombonist, a few stories above the crowded street, faced east, and the clarinetist, half a block away from him and twelve stories up in the air, also faced east, and all around them, above and below, on both sides, and in all directions, far and near and high and low, they were surrounded by walls of windows — hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of windows — and all the windows were blind, because there was not a face to be seen at any of them.

This is just about the center of the theatrical and entertainment section of New York City, but what joviality and good fellowship exist here are thin; the atmosphere is of shabby transience, and its heart is inimical. It is a run-down neighborhood of cheap hotels and rooming houses and offices and agencies and studios and restaurants and bars, and of shops that pack up and disappear overnight. If you walk along the street, you will find it busy, crowded, colorful, untidy, and with a fly-by-night air that makes it rakish, but in the first, unrested light of morning, which comes up very suddenly here, the irregular roof lines have a stoical despondency, and the blank windows reflect an extremity of loneliness — that mechanical city loneliness which strays always at the edge of chaos, far from solitude. The small houses down there mark the remains of a street

where ordinary life used to be lived — ordinary social life, domestic life, real life, with children and parents and grandparents and uncles and family friends, with Christmas trees and schoolbooks and wedding dresses and birthdays — but it has come to be hardly more than a camping ground for strollers and travelers and tourists and transients of every kind. They all move on. A few people stay around here because they have no choice, and some stay because they are attached to the neighborhood for old times' sake and cannot bear to leave, although they can barely afford to stay. Each person is sealed off from the next person, sealed off even from the people he exchanges good mornings with, as though by fear of betrayal. An old woman living by herself in a single hotel bedroom goes frantic with apprehension and picks up the telephone, but there is no one for her to call. She tries to tell the room clerk of what is threatening her, and he listens, but he has the switchboard to attend to, and he has to watchdog the street entrance and the elevators, and he has other duties, and, in any case, he has heard her story many times before, from other people, in other years and in other defeated places like this one. The old woman puts the phone back and realizes immediately that she has made a bad mistake. It is a mistake she has guarded against until now. She knows perfectly well that she must not call attention to herself. This is her last stand in the land of the living, and she is here only on sufferance. The hotel won't miss her if she goes, and it can rent her room in a minute. She must

not complain and she must watch her step. She must be more than polite; she must be obsequious. If you are old and poor and you get the hotel maid against you, you are out of luck.

This hotel was very grand when it was built, in 1902, but it has slid downhill. The lobby has been cut down to a fraction of what it was, and the ornate old ceiling, towering up there, makes a sad cavern of the small, mean space where the desk and the elevators are. The lobby used to be immense, with an orchestra playing and (I am told) a fountain, and along the back wall there was a row of noble windows that overlooked the gardens of the little Forty-eighth Street houses — the ones I can see from my windows. Three of the gardens are still there, but they are more or less rubbish now, and three others, together with their houses, have been erased to make a parking lot. The parking lot is busy all day and half the night, but at dawn it is deserted except by the pigeons, who fly down from the eaves and roofs and collect in a flock there to peck about peacefully, like barnyard fowl, while a thin mother cat, a stray, leads her family of kittens, who do not know yet that they are strays, in and out among the garbage cans that line the foot of this hotel and of the restaurants next door. But the morning wears on and the city begins to hustle. By half past eleven this morning, the pigeons and the cats had gone from the parking lot, and cars had parked there, and the restaurants up and down the street were busy getting ready for the lunchtime rush.

I have two very big rooms up here on the eleventh floor

— two big, shapely, spacious rooms, with folding doors between them. The ceilings are high, and the walls are so thick that I never hear a sound from inside the building. From outside I hear many sounds. I hear the cats and the pigeons and the cars, and I hear church bells, fire engines, garbage machines and the unearthly clatter of garbage cans, horses' hooves, radio music, singing, voices shouting, calling, laughing, denouncing, and screaming, glass breaking, airplanes, hammering, rain, the trombone-playing, and the roar of Broadway. Then today, at eleven-thirty, I heard some other music — the music of a very small band — and the tune being played was small and sweet and noticeably free: elfin music. The music came from Broadway, and I felt sorry for myself, because I thought that there must be a parade going on and that I would have only a glimpse of it as it passed the corner of Forty-eighth Street. But the music came closer, and then, at the western side of the parking lot, a man came slowly into view. He wore a dark blue suit and a military cap of the same blue. He was the band. The drum was strapped in front of him, and balanced on it was a plate for people to throw money into. The cymbal was fastened to his left side, and he clashed it with something fastened to the inside of his left arm. The trumpet, the drumstick, and all the small pieces of his equipment were attached to him by strings, and the reason he moved so slowly was that he had almost no legs. His legs had been cut off far above the knee, but he had enough power left in them to work his way along in what was not a walk but an adamant advance, and, all the time,

he played. He looked very small. He banged the drum and blew the trumpet and clashed the cymbals and piped on a little pipe, but although the street was fairly busy, nobody gave him any attention that I could see, and nobody gave him any money. He appeared as indifferent to those around him as they were to him and his music, but as he moved along he kept turning his head to look into the parking lot. He was very much interested in the parking lot. He examined it. He looked it over. He seemed to be considering it. Maybe he was only doing what we often do when we are alone in public: hide our faces by pretending an interest in whatever presents itself — anything, as long as it cannot stare back. I do not know. Suddenly a car drove into the parking lot at such high speed that when it stopped, the brakes screamed horribly, but before it stopped, as it hurtled across the sidewalk, it came so close to the musician's back that I was sure it had brushed him. I got a fright, but the musician showed no sign of fright, or anxiety, or anger — not a sign of interest. He continued banging the drum, clashing the cymbal, blowing the trumpet; his music never faltered. Imperturbable, he advanced along his way and passed out of my sight behind the little houses just below me. His blithe, innocent music grew fainter and then faded, and I couldn't hear him anymore. I thought he might turn around and come back to Broadway this way, but he did not come back — at least, not while I waited.

OCTOBER 21, 1967

Mr. Sam Bidner and His Saxophone

NOT one man of the amiable company having dinner together at the Adano Restaurant on New Year's Eve held a lower rank than captain. There were Captain James Ancona, Captain Mickey Fields, Captain Joe Linder, Captain Bob Freed, and Captain Tom Shaw. Then there were Assistant Maître d' Eddie Femine, Maître d' Gigi, Night Manager Harry Spector, Banquet Manager Sonny Dall, Stage Manager Ernie D'Amato, Musical Director Sammy Fields (show music), Musical Director Sammy Bidner (dance music), Manager Henry Tobias, and Page Jack Hunter, who wore his page uniform, all buttons. These men constituted all the big brass of the Latin Quarter, and they were strengthening themselves at the Adano before going back to their own glittering palace to face the fiercest night of the year in the biggest night club in New York City. It was a snowy evening, not very cold — one of those nights when the Empire State Building smokes with light. And it was very early, not yet six o'clock. At that hour, the groups of people patrolling Broadway and the Broadway area nearly all included little children, who were being treated to their last glimpse of Christmas lights and Christmas trees before having their last dinner of the Old Year and going home to sleep the New Year in. At the Adano, the men from the Latin Quarter were eating their heads off. They started out with fish salad and went on to antipasto — stuffed mushrooms,

roasted peppers, artichoke hearts in olive oil, pickled mushrooms, and more. Then they had green salad, linguine with lobster sauce, yards of Italian bread (both brown and white), cheesecake, and coffee. There were also two orders of linguine with white clam sauce, one order of spaghetti with meatballs, one order of veal scallopini with lemon sauce, a great many orders of lobster Fra Diavolo, and two orders of steak. The men all drank Italian wine. They were a handsome crowd, too alert-looking to be called worldly and too worldly-looking not to be called worldly. They sat together at a long table that had been arranged down the center of the room for them, and they all wore dark clothes — business suits or tuxedos — except Mr. Eddie Femine and Mr. Sammy Bidner. Mr. Femine, who is tall and debonair, wore a beige turtleneck, and Mr. Bidner wore a sporty-looking houndstooth-checked jacket with vents at the sides. Mr. Bidner had brought a small saxophone with him, and he played it every time he stood up from his place, halfway down the long table. He stood up very often. Some of his colleagues were late, and every time a new arrival walked in from the street, Mr. Bidner went forward to serenade him. Mr. Bidner walks very lightly and quickly, and he appears to move without making a sound, as though he remained always an inch or so above the ground and could make a complete turn, or two or three complete turns, without changing his posture or his expression and without losing a note of his music. I think he could move quickly backward for a long time without ever needing to look over his shoulder. He has beetling black eyebrows, and the expression of his eyes preserves the same high intensity whether he is looking at a stranger or talking with a friend or making a minute examination of some mysterious point in the near distance. He seems to look through what is present in the room but not beyond it. When he is not playing his saxophone, his expression is self-contained and at the same time conspiratorial. He appears to live at a high rate of speed, perhaps because he moves so softly. When he plays he crouches slightly, and when he is not playing he stands back ready to begin playing again. He is either playing or not playing, and his restless, attentive eyes give no sign of what he sees or of what he notices, and no sign of what he is thinking. His hairdo is Dickensian. Above his huge black eyebrows his bald pate shines round and unashamed, but he has a thick fringe of black hair around the sides and back of his head. Along the edges of the room, by the walls, ordinary Adano customers were sitting here and there having dinner, and Mr. Bidner went to each table and played a request tune. Anything he was asked for he played with all his might. There was a balloon master present. Mr. Ernie D'Amato can blow balloons into any shape he pleases: dogs, cats, giraffes — even automobiles, I suppose. Some of us at the Adano would have liked to see a balloon animal being made, but we had not brought any balloons with us, and Mr. D'Amato's tuxedo had just come back from the cleaners; his pockets

were empty — no balloons. He could only smile regretfully, a toymaker on holiday. That was a busy table. The Adano waiters, who usually move about at an ordinary pace, flew up and down the room so fast that they were like shadows of themselves, and the dinner seemed to be still going on when suddenly it was all over and the party began to break up as the men started back to take up their posts at the Latin Quarter. They went out in twos and threes, all smiling and cheerful, no complaints. Everybody had had a very good dinner. It was still snowing out, but from the Adano to the Latin Quarter is a short distance — along Forty-eighth Street and across Seventh Avenue to where the big night club stands on its own small private island between Seventh and Broadway. Assistant Maître d' Eddie Femine stayed behind to check the bill. He stood at the bar, reading carefully, while Joe Pariante, night manager of the Adano, watched him. Mr. Femine was very quiet until he came to one item, which caused him to raise his head and look disagreeably at Joe Pariante. "*Two dollars a portion! Who do you think you are?*" he yelled, and then, laughing like a television maniac, he went back to his careful checking. It was Mr. Femine's little joke. He was pretending to be an ordinary customer. Behind the bar, Bob, who looks imperturbable whether he is smiling or serious, smiled. When the bill was paid, Eddie Femine congratulated Joe Pariante on the food, the wine, the service, and the atmosphere, and wished him a Happy New Year, and left. He was the last of the Latin Quarter crowd

to go, and when Josephine, the hat-check lady, had seen him out she sat down in the end booth and beamed. "Weren't they nice?" she said. "Weren't they nice?" Every Adano customer gets two warm welcomes from Josephine — one welcome on arrival, one on departure. For New Year's Eve she wore a black-and-silver tunic dress and her hair was newly rinsed with Miss Clairol's Moongold. With all the Latin Quarter crowd gone, the Adano seemed very quiet. Joe Pariante leaned against the bar and allowed himself to look wild-eyed for a minute, but the telephone rang and he had to answer it. He came back to say, "A party from Radio City Music Hall wants a table for ten at nine-thirty. That was Freddie Pasqualone calling." His was the last reservation accepted. The Adano was booked up until midnight. It was going to be a big evening, but not yet. The clock said a quarter to seven. There was plenty of time. The waiters began walking around at their ordinary speed, and soon the tables that had been put together for the big party were separated and dressed up with fresh linen and glasses and silver. The Adano stopped looking as though New Year's Eve were over and began looking like itself again. Joe Pariante remembered that some of the fish salad was left, and that he wanted to show it around. Fish salad is not on the menu at the Adano. It was specially ordered by the Latin Quarter ahead of time. Shrimp, *scungilli*, *calamari*, and octopus, cut up into small pieces, with lemon, oil, garlic, and red-seeded hot pepper — that is fish salad, and it looks delicious. When it had

been admired and exclaimed over, Joe took the dish to the window refrigerator, where people going by on the street can see bottles of wine, a basket of pears and apples and grapes, and antipasto, red and green.

It was still snowing out. Forty-eighth Street in that block is a musicians' street, with a great many shops selling musical instruments and sheet music, and then there are practice studios and teachers' studios. Diagonally across from the Adano, the second-floor window of Frank Wolf Drummers' Supplies was dimly lighted to show glittering tinsel scattered across a row of drums of different colors and sizes — there were a royal blue drum, a pale blue drum, a turquoise drum, and a pink drum, and two gold drums, one bright and shining and one in dull gold. Through the snow and the darkness, the little window of drums and tinsel looked like a still life of New Year's Eve. It would be nice to think that all those men from the Latin Quarter would come back to the Adano next New Year's Eve and have exactly the same dinner and make the same jokes, and that Mr. Sammy Bidner would play his saxophone around the room again. But next New Year's Eve there won't be a Forty-eighth Street. A number of houses are already down, and on weekdays the street is filled with that choking white wreckers' dust. Forty-eighth Street is going, going. Office Space must be served, but somebody should write a Lament for Forty-eighth Street — a cheerful lament, because Forty-eighth has always been a cheerful street. And who, by the way, is Freddie Pasqualone?

Freddie Pasqualone is a member of the Radio City Music Hall Symphony Orchestra. He plays the trumpet.

JANUARY 20, 1968

The Ailanthus, Our Back-Yard Tree

THE ailanthus, New York City's back-yard tree, has been appearing around Broadway lately. "Appearing" is the exact word, because the ailanthus appears, like a ghost, like a shade, beyond the vacancy left by the old brownstone houses that are coming down one two three four five these days. From the north and from the south and from the east, Office Space is advancing on Broadway, and the small side streets west of Sixth Avenue are going fast. Behind the old houses, only shreds remain of the original back yards or gardens, but when the houses come down the ailanthus appears — the tenacious ailanthus, growing up, well nourished, in its scrap of earth. The first of the Broadway ailanthuses I saw appeared on Forty-ninth Street, beyond the empty hole left by the brownstone where the gypsies used to be. The gypsies had had the first floor of the house, and they had taken over the front steps as well. The old house hadn't been changed much, and nine worn steps with iron treads led up to the entrance. Somebody had made the ascent narrower and easier with low iron railings, and on summer nights the

gypsies congregated there, and the young women among them stood and leaned against the railings while the small gypsy children swung and tumbled about on the railings. When I looked across the street one day, after the wreckers had been at work on that block for quite a while, and saw the ailanthus — two ailanthuses, in fact — I was startled, and I stood and looked at them, and said to them, "Were you there all the time?" That first day the two ailanthus trees were green under a blue November sky. It was sixty-five degrees that afternoon, unseasonable weather, but the ailanthuses accepted the warm sunshine serenely, and made shadows of themselves against the high, blank wall beyond them. The Forty-ninth Street ailanthus trees are skeletons now — thin skeletons, meticulously defined by the blank wall that juts out from the back of one of the Sixth Avenue buildings. The trees will soon be gone, and so will the blank wall, because that area between Forty-ninth and Fiftieth is being flattened to make way for the latest Rockefeller office building, a fifty-four-story skyscraper that will probably be the new Esso Building, according to the *Times*. On these Broadway side streets, where the architecture is so mixed and often so unfortunate, the brownstones, the handsomest houses of them all, come down the most quickly. One minute the brownstone is standing, deserted, stripped, and empty, and the next minute its roof is gone and its front is gone and its insides are showing, daylight streaming like cold water over curved staircases and papered walls and small interiors — doors and ceilings and corners that remain secret even with everybody looking at them. Then, when it is all over and the house is gone and the thick white dust has settled, there is the ailanthus, speaking of survival and of ordinary things. These days in New York, when Order and Chaos shadow each other so closely that it is hard to tell the difference between them, the ailanthus stands up like a sign of reality. The new Office Space giants have nothing to do with our daily lives, or with ordinary things, and they are taking away our streets.

The side streets off Broadway have always been crammed with small enterprises of every description, and with small restaurants. There used to be hundreds of restaurants, of every nationality and of varying degrees of charm and atmosphere and price. What all those restaurants had in common was that each place was owned by the man who stood behind the bar, or by the man who stood behind the cash register, or by the man who came forward to meet you when you walked in. We ordinary New Yorkers were kings and lords in all those places, even where the owner pretended to be surly, even where he really was surly. We could pick and choose and find our favorites, and so enjoy one of the normal ways of making ourselves at home in the city. It is in daily life, looking around for restaurants and shops and for a place to live, that we find our way about the city. And it is necessary to find one's own way in New York. New York City is not hospitable. She is very big and she has no heart. She is not

charming. She is not sympathetic. She is rushed and noisy and unkempt, a hard, ambitious, irresolute place, not very lively, and never gay. When she glitters she is very, very bright, and when she does not glitter she is dirty. New York does nothing for those of us who are inclined to love her except implant in our hearts a homesickness that baffles us until we go away from her, and then we realize why we are restless. At home or away, we are homesick for New York not because New York used to be better and not because she used to be worse but because the city holds us and we don't know why.

Manhattan is an island, and so she has two horizons — the architectural horizon, impermanent and stony, and the eternal horizon, constantly changing, that is created when water and sky work together in midair. It may be that the secret of Manhattan's hold over us is lost somewhere between those two horizons, the one hard and vulnerable, the other vague, shifting, and implacable. All we can be sure of is that she has a secret that binds us to her — something unresting and restless, something she shares with us even though we are not allowed to understand it. Other cities are mysterious. Amsterdam and London and Hong Kong are mysterious. Rome and Berlin are mysterious. New York is not mysterious. New York is a mystery. What is this place where Chaos stretches and sits down and makes himself at home? We live here, and we become part of the mystery. With Chaos, we make ourselves at home. We find our way about and establish a daily life for

ourselves. But more and more the architecture of this city has nothing to do with our daily lives. The Office Space giants that are going up all over Manhattan are blind above the ground, and on the ground level they are given over to banks and to showrooms, and to businesses run by remote control by companies and corporations rich enough to afford the staggering rents. The smooth, narrow thoroughfares created by the office skyscrapers are deadly to walk through in the daytime, and at night they are silent and dangerous. The newly depressed areas of our city are very rich.

At this moment I am sitting at a table in the English Grill and I am looking out into Rockefeller Plaza. The Promenade Café is bright and cheerful, with the vaguely institutional air common to restaurants run by remote control — restaurants where the host is not the owner. It is a benign institutionalism, not bad at all once you get used to it. Sitting here by the big glass wall, I am a part of the crowd outside in the plaza. The plaza is spectacular, with its stone terraces and stone steps, and with the long and lingering vistas of stone and light and shadow that occur between and through the surrounding towers of Rockefeller Center. In the skating rink the skaters go round and round. I wonder if the ailanthus will ever appear in Rockefeller Plaza. I suppose not. The ailanthus is a back-yard tree, and Rockefeller Plaza is a private back yard only one day each year. Every July, for the length of one Sunday, the plaza is closed to the public. On all the

other days, members of the public are allowed to come and go in the plaza, free of charge. And the ailanthus is wild. It grows like a weed. There are no weeds in Rockefeller Plaza. The plaza is monumentally correct in every detail, and its key monument, the massive John D. Rockefeller, Jr., memorial stone, has not a scratch on it, not even a smudge. The memorial stone is a huge, severely cut wedge of polished dark green marble, and it is set into the top of the steps at the eastern end of the skating rink. The side of the stone facing the rink bears a bas-relief in bronze of Mr. Rockefeller's head and, underneath:

JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER, JR.
1874–1960
FOUNDER OF ROCKEFELLER CENTER

The reverse side of the stone, facing the flowered promenade that leads to Fifth Avenue, is slanted for easy reading, and is deeply engraved with the ten points of Mr. Rockefeller's personal credo, his "I Believe." To anyone approaching the stone from Fifth Avenue, the engraved words stare out with the dark and awful command of a prophecy. Here are Mr. Rockefeller's words:

I BELIEVE

I believe in the supreme worth of the individual and in his right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

I believe that every right implies a responsibility; every opportunity, an obligation; every possession, a duty.

I believe that the law was made for man and not man for the law; that government is the servant of the people and not their master.

I believe in the dignity of labor, whether with head or hand; that the world owes no man a living but that it owes every man an opportunity to make a living.

I believe that thrift is essential to well ordered living and that economy is a prime requisite of a sound financial structure, whether in government, business or personal affairs.

I believe that truth and justice are fundamental to an enduring social order.

I believe in the sacredness of a promise, that a man's word should be as good as his bond; that character — not wealth or power or position — is of supreme worth.

I believe that the rendering of useful service is the common duty of mankind and that only in the purifying fire of sacrifice is the dross of selfishness consumed and the greatness of the human soul set free.

I believe in an all-wise and all-loving God, named by whatever name, and that the individual's highest fulfillment, greatest happiness, and widest usefulness are to be found in living in harmony with His will.

I believe that love is the greatest thing in the world; that it alone can overcome hate; that right can and will triumph over might.

— JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER, JR.

Architecturally, very little that was notable has been lost in the destruction of the Broadway area. What has been

lost is another strip of the common ground we share with each other and with our city — the common ground that is all that separates us from the Machine. Mr. Rockefeller's words stand up to be read by everyone who walks through Rockefeller Plaza. Perhaps the architects of the proposed Esso Building will consider memorializing the words of another New Yorker, a man whose only house was made of wood and built on sand. How enjoyable to see engraved, *in marble,* on a wall of the new Rockefeller skyscraper: "Where it all will end, knows God! — Wolcott Gibbs."

MARCH 23, 1968

A Little Boy Crying

I SAW a little boy on the street today, and he cried so eloquently that I will never forget him. He was going down the subway steps into the station at Seventy-seventh Street and Lexington Avenue. There is a big flower shop on the corner there, and its window overlooks the steps. The window was filled high with spring flowers today, a calm and silent conflagration behind the glass, and across the middle of the glass, like skywriting, a single line of red neon spelled out DANA'S FLOWER SHOP. On this gray day the flowers in the window glowed, but the red of the neon sign was both raw and suffused — the color of pressure, if we could see pressure. The little boy who cried was six or

seven years old, and he was bundled up too tightly in heavy clothes. He wore his dark winter clothes, although we were having one of those damp, irresolute days that turn with the wind from mild to chilly. The boy was carrying a schoolbag, a kind of fat briefcase, and it banged against his legs as he came along Lexington toward the subway entrance — partly through his own fault, because he was running from side to side behind his mother, peering up at her, trying to find which side gave him a better view of her face. He wanted to be sure she heard his scolding. His voice went on and on. He had an enormous amount of energy in his voice — hard energy. She was carrying two shopping bags and a large handbag and a large, square parcel, which she held high against her chest. The parcel forced her chin up. The child hadn't a chance of seeing her face, and, in any case, her expression said that all she was thinking of was when she would get a chance to sit down. She was young and fat and walking very fast, with her black raincoat swinging open. The little boy and his schoolbag tumbled around behind her as though they were attached to the back of her coat collar by elastic string. There was another child, a boy of about nine, who strode beside the mother in independence, carrying a bigger schoolbag in one hand and a loaded shopping bag in the other. I first saw the three of them as they approached Dana's doorway, which is only a step from the subway entrance. As they passed the doorway, the little boy stopped harrying his mother and began harrying his

brother, who glanced absently at him, as if he were a chair, and got him out of the way with a good push of the big schoolbag. The little boy stopped scolding and ran back to his mother to demand justice. She had turned the corner by the flower shop, and, very carefully, she started down the steps. She was concentrating on keeping her balance, and her attention was farther than ever from her younger son. The older boy had slipped ahead of his mother and run down the steps, and he was waiting at the bottom, not looking up but looking away into the station. The smaller boy, following his mother, put his right hand up to the handrail to steady himself, and so had to change his schoolbag from his right hand to his left. When he realized that both his hands were now held, one by the rail and the other by the schoolbag, he stood still on the step and gathered his strength and began to denounce his mother while continuing to try to explain to her that his brother had pushed him. But the anger that had been churning around inside him while he was in motion must have gained in power when he stopped moving, because all his words turned into gasps that imprisoned him so that he could cry only two sounds — or, rather, two notes on one sound. The sound was "Aaaaaaaah!" and the notes were of denunciation and reproach. Denunciation was the hard note and reproach was the pitiful minor note. While he continued to cry with all his strength, his face turned a solid pale red that was closer in color and feeling to Dana's neon sign than it was to any of the flowers in the window. The two notes continued like a lament. It was a lament.

The little boy was singing on two notes. There was no end to his grief. He was completely betrayed, his song said, and it continued even after he began to climb slowly down the steps to his mother, who was calling desperately to him from below. His lament went on and on, growing fainter but remaining unmistakable as he descended. He might have been the last bird in the world, except that if he had been the last bird there would have been no one to hear him.

APRIL 27, 1968

A Young Man with a Menu

LATE this afternoon, in the Longchamps at Twelfth Street and Fifth Avenue, I watched a young man persuade a girl to join him for dinner by reading the menu to her over the telephone. He stood in the glass telephone booth by the huge street window and read here and there from the menu, suggesting things to eat, and from time to time he fell silent and listened to whatever the voice at the other end of the phone was saying. The voice seemed to have a good deal more to say than he had, and each time, after he had listened to it for a while, he stopped staring and lifted the menu in front of himself as though it were a hook that would drag her back to the point he wanted to make. He wanted her to have dinner with him. There was snow falling outside — a steady fluttering of modest little

flakes that turned into gray fluff as soon as they touched the sidewalk. Every once in a while, a fierce gale tore down the avenue from the north, sending the snowflakes streaming away toward Washington Square, and then the whole view seemed to blow up, and looked white and dangerous. It was getting dark. Across the street, the heavy stone of the massive building where the Macmillan Company used to be made a somber background for the pandemonium, and the bookshop next door, Dauber & Pine, had all its lights on but still managed to suggest a shadowy and mysterious interior, making it the very picture of an old bookshop seen through the dusk of a wintry day — a wintry day in spring, as it is now. The great sheet of glass that allows this theatrical view of Fifth Avenue is really a movable wall that rolls back in the good weather to open the restaurant to the sidewalk café. It is an arrangement that turns the whole Fifth Avenue front of the restaurant into a stage set.

Tonight, shut in from all the wildness and clamor outside, Longchamps was very quiet and warm, and almost deserted. The young man who read the menu over the phone had not yet made his appearance when I arrived. There was hardly anyone at the long, long bar, which looked lonely; only a few people were having drinks or dinner; there were mostly empty tables in the big, comfortable room; and the back room, which is even bigger, was just as quiet. Some years ago they lowered the ceilings in this branch of Longchamps and made a great many other alterations that banished every trace of the awkward,

cavernous, romantic atmosphere the place used to have, but the front room is saved from being completely conventional by the arrangement of the sidewalk café. The café is carpeted in green and has a low marbled wall of faded pink coral with a miniature hedge of green box along the top of it, so that in summer people sitting out there are half hidden from the passersby, and all year round all we in the restaurant can see of the passersby is what shows of them above the hedge — the upper parts of their bodies, their shoulders and heads. The café awning, printed on the inside with pink apple blossoms, extends down to within a couple of feet of the top of the little hedge, so that the view of the Avenue, wild and snowy tonight, is sliced off at the top by apple blossoms and from below by the spiky green box, making the setting even more theatrical. Tonight, with darkness coming on and everything tossing about out there, it seemed as though that scrap of Fifth Avenue had been set up as the starting point of a very interesting movie. Any minute now, the star of the movie would come into view, walking past the hedge with the rest of the people who were struggling along out there, but he would turn away from the crowd and walk through the opening in the hedge and push his way through the revolving door. We would get only glimpses of him across the top of the hedge and then see him vaguely through the glass panels of the door, but after that he would step into the restaurant and look decisively about him, registering his personality, before he walked straight to the bar, or straight to a certain table. He would

be wearing a raincoat. It would be a spy movie, with perhaps a murder and certainly a chase. All these empty tables would make good hurdling, and there were just about enough customers to register fear, horror, glee, and so on. And all the waiters and waitresses were at their stations, in full fig. Full fig for the waitresses at this Longchamps means a blue-and-gray-striped dress — a very unfair garb, unbecoming to the girls and depressing for the customers, but one that might lend itself to all kinds of sinister effects in the eye of an imaginative cameraman, though it takes only a little imagination to connect those stripes with crime and punishment. Almost any restaurant provides a good opening scene for a movie about spies, but the Longchamps at Twelfth and Fifth is ready-made for episodes of intrigue and pursuit, because, in spite of all the remodeling that has been done there, the back of the restaurant — the far end of the back room — still seems to stretch off into infinity. And across the avenue there is the haunted-looking bookshop, the dour gray front of the publishers' building, and the old Presbyterian church, with its gardens and its railings. The noseless architecture we are all growing accustomed to has dulled our view and will soon cure us of our habit of gazing at the city we live in, but this part of lower Fifth Avenue still allows us to dream that there is room for life to go here and there in human ways, off the mechanical paths.

The little hedge out there had gathered quite a lot of snow when the young man who was to spend so much time in the glass phone booth came into view, exactly as

the star of that movie might have made his entrance, head and shoulders first across the hedge, and then full length but blurred through the glass panels of the revolving door, and then he was inside — still standing up, which was lucky, because he was one of those who fumble and paw at revolving doors instead of pressing themselves firmly against them. He wore a big, crumpled raincoat, which hung open so that the tartan lining showed. He was tubby and not very tall, and he had straight, fine, sandy hair that was plentiful except on top of his head, where it was very thin — nearly all gone, in fact. He was about twenty-five, or perhaps twenty-seven, with blue eyes and neat features — a straight, tiny nose and a serious mouth. His expression as he entered the restaurant said that he was intent on something — one thing — and indifferent to everything else. He couldn't have walked very far; there was very little snow on him. Under his arm he clutched a bundle of London *Observer*s, which had been opened and folded back carelessly so they looked half inflated and as though they might start to rise, like a soufflé, at any minute. He didn't look about him, or hesitate, but spoke anxiously to the first face he saw, which belonged to the coatroom girl, who was watching him across the half door of her little cubicle, where she had a background of empty wall tonight — no customers, no coats. The girl answered him by nodding toward the glass phone booth, and he went quickly over and got into it and shut the door. He had his dime ready, and he dialed at once and started talking, holding the phone with the same air of anxiety he had

shown when he spoke to the coatroom girl. He never smiled. Even later, when he had won his suit on the telephone, he did not smile. He was serious in all his ways, and methodical — not as though he were naturally methodical but as though he had made up his mind that tonight he was going to make no false move. The occasion was so important to him that he was not himself. He was buried in the importance of that phone call. He spoke on the phone for a minute, and then he opened the door and stepped out of the booth, and when he stepped back in he had the big Longchamps menu in his left hand, and he took the phone in his right hand. The restless *Observer*s were pinned down by his right elbow. And he had coins to manage and maneuver. He used up three more before the conversation ended. The young man was taking no chances, and he wasn't going to tempt the Fates by letting go of any of his encumbrances — he would hold on to all of them, like a man standing up in the subway at rush hour. He read from all sections of the menu. I had a menu of my own, so I could tell just about where he was — in Seafood, and in Desserts, and in Curries and Specialties, and in Salads, and so on. He read straight down the Sizzling Platters column, and something there may have decided her, and shut her up, because it all ended very suddenly. He hung up the phone and got himself out and went to the bar, which is on the north side of the room and looks about a mile long — more than a mile tonight, in its deserted state.

The young man put his *Observer*s on one of the stools

near the window end, and then he turned and politely laid his menu on the nearest unoccupied table, and took off his raincoat and made it into a bundle to anchor the newspapers. And at last he stood still and looked around him, tightening the knot of his tie, which was much too tight and small already. Once he had taken the raincoat off, you could see that he was not tubby but sloppy. His navy blue suit was loose and almost as crumpled as his raincoat, and he wore a white shirt with a button-down collar, which went up quite far on his neck. The tie let itself go under the tiny knot and flowed in bright stripes of red and orange down to below the waistband of his trousers. His expression as he surveyed the restaurant was calm, and when he sat down he turned the stool sidewise to the bar and went on gazing benignly at the room. Most people sitting alone at that bar turn sidewise, because there is nothing facing them across the bar but a blank wall with, at its center, a towering cupboard of evangelical extraction that looks as though it might be musical. The young man put his hands on his thighs and sat there resting. He was not relaxing. What he was doing was much more old-fashioned — he was simply resting. The bartender brought him a bottle of beer and a tall glass, and after the young man had tasted the beer he picked up a little bowl of peanuts that was there on the bar and emptied some of the peanuts into his right hand. Then he went on resting, taking peanuts from his right hand with his left hand and looking around the restaurant.

It was time for me to leave, and as I collected my um-

brella from the coatroom girl, somebody came through the revolving door, and I turned to look. She wore a red coat with a red hood attached, and she didn't throw the hood back, so I didn't see even the color of her hair. The young man had stood up and was looking at her, and his face wore the same expression it had had when he came in — he looked intent on something and indifferent to everything else. I went out. The sidewalk was positively dangerous, sliding away from me and everybody else, and the tall new apartment buildings that dwarf the Washington Arch seemed to shiver in their glittering skins. Those buildings give off a magnificent slaty light on wet nights. It is their only moment of beauty. The wind had turned bitter, perhaps because the snow had stopped falling, and it took me nearly fifteen minutes longer to walk home than it usually does.

APRIL 22, 1967

Painful Choice

I WAS in a new small supermarket the other evening, waiting to have my things put in a bag, when I saw a shabby tall man with red eyes, who had obviously been drinking heavily since the cradle, trying to decide between a can of beans, a canned whole dinner, a canned soup, and a canned chicken à la king. He had thirty-seven cents or

twenty-nine cents or some sum like that, and he was standing there with the four cans, glaring down at them and all around at the stalls of vegetables and fruit and bread and so on. He couldn't make up his mind what to buy to feed himself with, and it was plain that what he really wanted wasn't food at all. I was thinking I wouldn't blame him a bit if he just put the cans back on their shelves, or dropped them on the floor, and dashed into the bar-and-grill next door, where he could simply ask for a beer and drink it. Later on it occurred to me that, putting it roughly, there is usually only one thing we yearn to do that's bad for us, while if we try to make the effort to do a virtuous or good thing, the choice is so great and wide that we're really worn out before we can settle on what to do. I mean to say that the impulse toward good involves choice, and is complicated, and the impulse toward bad is hideously simple and easy, and I feel sorry for that poor tall red-eyed man.

SEPTEMBER 18, 1954

The New Girls on West Forty-ninth Street

I HEARD bad news tonight at Le Steak de Paris, where I had dinner. "The building is coming down" — and the little restaurant is to be swept away, just like that, after more than twenty-six years of hardy life. Those words

"The building is coming down" occur so often in New York conversation, and they have such finality, and are so unanswerable, that once they have been said there is nothing more to say. There is no appealing the decisions of the ogre called Office Space that stalks the city and will not be appeased. Le Steak de Paris occupies the ground floor and the cellar of an old brownstone on West Forty-ninth Street, between Sixth Avenue and Seventh Avenue. Demolition has begun, but there are still several of the brownstones in a row — tall, thin nineteenth-century houses that stand as straight and plain as ever they did but seem to slant backward together because they are so out of line with the rest of the street. It is a broken-down, mismatched, patched-up street, and for many years it has existed in the extraordinary vacuum created by the city planners, who cast whole areas into limbo for long periods — for decades, sometimes — before the demolition workers actually move in. At the moment the dark shadow in New York is cast not by the past but by the future, and too many streets wear a dull air of "What's the use?" This particular block of West Forty-ninth Street is dingy and finished-looking in the daytime, but at night it is merely shabby, and when the lights are on in the restaurants and bars and around the hotel entrances it becomes garish and secretive — more like the extension of a carnival than like a city street. Broadway, the street of dreams, has about as much connection with the ordinary life of the city as a traveling circus would have, but although the area's image

is steadily being transformed into a grimmer and more orderly one — the office-space image — the glamour of Broadway persists and spills over into the narrow side streets that lead to the big lights. All is makeshift on Forty-ninth Street, and even the old brownstones, so beautifully proportioned and presenting such a pure outline against the high, calm evening sky of summer, seem part of a stage set designed to illustrate the shaky and vanishing side of New York City. This is a tourist block, and they were nearly all tourists on the sidewalks tonight — out-of-towners in light-colored cottony dresses and suits, with jackets and sweaters over their arms. Diligent sightseers, they had been going around town all day, looking at the "points of interest," and now they plodded on toward their share of night life. Though the groups walking along were of all kinds, they were mostly couples, or parties of men and women walking together, or small parties of middle-aged women walking very close together. They formed little crowds along the street, peering through restaurant doorways and windows, wanting to see inside without quite wanting to go in. The pavement in front of Le Steak de Paris had just been swept clean, and the miniature box hedge at the window looked very fresh and green after last night's rain. No one was peering through the windows of Le Steak — it is too quiet there for visitors in search of excitement or novelty. There were a few people having dinner — very few — and two men, two solitaries, were drinking peacefully at the bar. I asked

the owner, M. Guy L'Heureux, whether he had found a new home for his restaurant, and he sadly said, "No, not in the city. It was very difficult. We were looking all the time, everywhere. There was nothing. We have decided to move to Miller Place, Long Island. We will learn English now. There will be no one to speak French to." Inside, Le Steak has hardly changed in all the years I have been going there. The walls were once covered with printed-paper murals of rustic eighteenth-century scenes. Later there was red-brick-patterned wallpaper. Now the paper imitates polished wooden planks — vertical planks — and there is a cigarette machine where the jukebox that played French records used to be. But nothing has really changed there. The menu is much the same as always — Crème Jeannette, Poulet Rôti, Shrimps Cocktail, Artichaut Froid, and so on. Even the atmosphere is the same, as though finality had stayed where it belongs — out of sight and far away. M. Guy and Jo, the waiter, and Francine, the waitress, were all calm and cheerful, as though they expected to be welcoming customers to Le Steak de Paris for a long time to come. There are restaurants in the other brownstones, but the tenants who used to live upstairs in the old houses have all moved away except one top-floor lady, who clings to her apartment, where she has lived for years, and still carefully tends potted plants on her windowsills. The plants make a fragile show of green, a living frieze against the old walls. When I left Le Steak, about nine-thirty, I walked toward Seventh Avenue, which becomes Broadway at almost exactly the point where it meets Forty-ninth Street. I moved along slowly, with the slow, hesitating crowd. With all the hesitation, and all the slowness, there was no revelry. There never is, on West Forty-ninth Street. It is a tentative, transient, noisy street, very ill at ease and, to a stranger's eye, shifty, as though gaiety were unknown or strictly forbidden. Traffic is westbound in that block, so we all went along together, cars and people moving toward Broadway in a solid mass, almost as though we were on a pilgrimage. We passed the bouncy discothèque place next to Le Steak, and we passed Chinese restaurants and a Japanese restaurant and the record shop and the delicatessen and the hairdressing salon that stays open far into the night, and the Plymouth Hotel Coffee Shop, which never closes, and at last we reached the big parking garage. There's a pizza-hero place next to the entrance, and next to that, in what was once the doorway to the upper floors of the garage building, a gypsy has her parlor, a tiny place. Four stone steps lead up to her private door, which stood open tonight, though the gypsy was not to be seen. She had retreated to a back room, perhaps. But a vase of artificial flowers stood invitingly on a round table, and there was a small piece of carpeting on the tile floor. Next to the gypsy's parlor is an adults-only movie house that advertises itself with a frenzied blast of lights and signs. Tonight, the shows were *The Promiscuous Sex* and *Strip Poker Queens Wild.* The theater marquee is so dazzling that the letters of the titles always seem to jump into the

air, blinding people half a block away, and it is surprising, when you finally reach the theater, to find a fairly clear space on the sidewalk in front of it, because hardly anybody lingers there. Tonight, at the edge of the clear space, to the side of the theater and at the foot of the gypsy's steps, five big young girls were standing around — not together, not in a group, but just standing around. The crowd was so thick up to that point that I didn't see the girls until I reached them. Nobody around me saw them, either, and although we were moving along and they were standing still, before we knew it they were upon us. It was like that, as though they had pounced, just as the lights seem to pounce, causing shame, or distress, or embarrassment, or curiosity, or derision, or excitement, or disgust, according to the nature of the person who sees them. This was one of those times of surprise when we cannot tell the difference between memory and instinct, between reminders and threats, and all was confusion, except that it was obviously important to avoid the eyes of those girls, because they were the eyes of satisfied furies, or of unsatisfied prison wardresses. The five never moved. They stood still, and the crowd broke up and detoured unsteadily around them. They were quite tall and about twenty years of age each, with straight, heavy hair dyed different shades of bronze and yellow and platinum, and they all wore tiny, frothy demi-mini shifts, which barely covered their behinds and seemed designed to show even more leg than they had. They were not slender girls. They looked

well fed, and their legs were solid and strong and female, like pillars of flesh. One pair of legs was bare, a powdery-pink color. The four other pairs were encased in neon-colored fishnet stockings — two pairs in neon green, one pair in neon mauve, and one pair in neon white that shone with a pearly luster. The girls were probably not unusually tall, but their legs made them look colossal. They were a powerful group of young women, and people hurried past them, glancing at them with the furtive attention most of us give to the solemnly erotic photographs in the big glass-covered case that stands outside the movie house. In front of me there was a diminutive old lady with thickly crimped hair dyed to a rich dark red, who kept turning to stare back at the girls. She wore an imitation-leopard pillbox hat, and she was grinning, almost laughing. She spoke to a woman walking next to her. "Did you see those bums?" she said to the woman. The woman sprang away from her without answering her, and the old lady turned back and saw me. "Did you see those bums?" she said delightedly to me. "Did you *see* those *bums*?" She looked about ninety years old. It was my turn to hurry on ahead, in order to get away from her, and I almost caught up with the first woman to be addressed, who had joined two other women, as quietly dressed, in suits and hats and gloves, as she was herself. The three women reached the corner and disappeared up Seventh Avenue, going as fast as they could — home to their hotel, I think. I had a short wait on the corner for a taxi. I didn't like to turn around for an-

other look at Forty-ninth Street, for fear of finding the imitation-leopard pillbox bobbing about behind me. But there was no need to fear any further word from her to me. When I did turn around, she had gone back along the street to where the girls were. I had a glimpse of her pillbox, and I am sure she was asking her question of other surprised people. A taxi came along, and I got into it and started home. Three or four summers ago, at about six o'clock in the evening, I saw a girl walking alone along Forty-ninth Street. She wore a red dress, and her walk was a ladylike travesty of Marilyn Monroe's walk, and she was swinging her handbag. All heads turned to stare at her as she sauntered boldly along in broad daylight, and she seemed very daring, but any one of the girls I saw tonight would make short work of her. Those girls looked as though they had been assembled, legs and all, in an automobile factory. They made Forty-ninth Street look very old-fashioned — faded, in fact, and harmless. They didn't go with the street at all. They were ahead of themselves by a year or two. They will go better with the new buildings.

SEPTEMBER 16, 1967

The View Chez Paul

TODAY, Saturday, was warm, windy, and gray, and for the first time this year the city showed its summer emptiness. The endless avenues were quiet and

looked wider, and people were scarce on the side streets. In the middle of town, New York took on its desultory tourist look, except in the block of Forty-fourth Street between Fifth and Sixth, where there was pandemonium of the locked, almost silent kind we who live in the city have come to associate with the arrival of the moviemakers. During the past few months, I have watched preparations for moviemaking in several parts of town, and in every case there was the same enormously organized cessation of activity; it is as though invaders from another country had arrived with all their trucks and their armies and their heavy artillery, and with their battle plans drawn up, only to find they had forgotten their ammunition, or their general. They wait. First they maneuver themselves and their heavy equipment into position, and then they begin waiting. They drink coffee out of cardboard containers. They speak together, but not very much. They have no need of language. They annex what they want — this doorway, that second-floor window, a corner of the park, a certain stretch of street — and they ignore the rest, including us New Yorkers, who stand about smiling and goggling like friendly natives. The moviemakers hate to be asked questions. They hardly seem to see us. They are aloof, touched by the remoteness of the Star that will begin shining now at any minute. They wait. And, on the outside, we wait — adults, children, and dogs, all of us crowding as close as we can get to where the Presence will stand, the Star. The Star on West Forty-fourth Street today was Julie Andrews. She was making a movie in the Algonquin Hotel, and early

this afternoon the narrow street outside the hotel was packed tight with her caravan. A caravan, according to my dictionary, is a company traveling together for safety in the East. Miss Andrews's caravan was extensive — theatrical moving van (Schumer's), silver-colored long-distance buses (Campus Coach Lines), suppliers' trucks (Thos. A. Deming: platforms, tents, bleacher seats, chairs, tables), limousines, and big green Hertz vans. Only a narrow and uncertain lane was left in the middle of the street for motorists traveling from Sixth Avenue to Fifth, and cars trying to get in and out of the big parking garage directly across from the Algonquin were having an even worse time than they usually do. The entrance to the Algonquin was hedged in with ropes and coils and boxes and tripods and lights, and at the curb a red revolving light on a stand about three feet high went round and round in a triumphant way that made me feel oppressed and obedient. I was standing in a window of the hairdresser's on the second floor of the Royalton Hotel, across the street from the Algonquin. I was having my hair done, and every once in a while I struggled out from under the dryer and went to the windows to have a look. I was not the only curious one. M. Paul, who owns the establishment, and his assistant, Pauline, who has blue-black hair and comes from Normandy, also kept going to the windows to look out. I asked if she had ever seen Julie Andrews. "Not in person," she said regretfully. The Royalton Hotel and the Algonquin Hotel are about the same age, both of them going on

seventy — handsome, strong old places that are not at all alike except for the heavy Edwardian air they have, which is beginning to seem recalcitrant on this narrow street. The obliterating touch of the cement mixer is gradually smoothing this block into the bland expression that is the new New York. The street seems very close and at the same time quite distant from the Royalton windows, which are curtained only in a pale diaphanous material, a veil. Elizabeth Bowen once described a room that was crowded although there were no people in it as looking as if somebody were holding a party for furniture. The scene on Forty-fourth Street today looked as if somebody were holding a protest meeting for cars. There were very few people about, and nobody was standing and staring. The street would have been mobbed except that Miss Andrews and her caravan had come without fanfare into a very quiet weekend city. The doorman of the Algonquin kept hurrying out into the middle of the street, looking for taxis for people, but the rampart of trucks and vans hid most of what was going on. Once in a while we had a glimpse of the real movie people — the actors and actresses who made their headquarters in a very large silver omnibus that was parked in front of the Algonquin. The bus door opened, and a handsome, white-haired gentleman in evening clothes stepped down. He had handlebar mustaches and he wore a red carnation in his lapel, and he was carrying a cardboard box with coffee containers in it. A golden-haired lady in silver lamé climbed up into the bus.

Her dress was trimmed with silver fringe that undulated about her knees, and she wore a silver Pocahontas band around her head. At that moment, on Forty-fourth Street in her glittering stage dress, she was enviable and beautiful, part of the illusory world we all half hope to enter when we gather to watch the Hollywood people keep their enormous vigils on our streets. The golden-haired actress sat down in the front seat of the bus, across from the driver, and almost immediately bent her head and began making the gestures people make in airplanes when the stewardess has brought them their tray of food. She opened little envelopes and looked into them, and she opened big envelopes and looked into them, and then she began eating her box lunch. In the dim interior of the bus, she was only a shadow along with all the other shadows who sat eating or stood talking or walked to the bus door to step out into the daylight that showed them as they really were — costumed figures, the men in evening clothes, the girls dressed for a wild party of forty years ago. One of the bus seats was piled almost to the top of the window with light-colored, long-haired furs — furs of the nineteen-twenties. "It must be a movie about the twenties," M. Paul said. "Julie Andrews hasn't come out yet," Pauline said. When my hair was finished, I walked across to the Algonquin to buy cigarettes and have a look inside. At that early hour of the afternoon, even on a summer Saturday, there are always people sitting about the hotel, having a drink or reading the paper or waiting for friends

to join them for lunch. Not today. The place looked half dismantled. The chairs and sofas were there, but there was no place for anybody to sit down, with all the movie clutter about and underfoot. The lobby, usually so comfortable and hospitable, looked like a setting for anxiety, and the Rose Room restaurant, at the end of the lobby, was drowned in a blaze of tall white lights that concentrated on the back wall and the bar. I picked my way across to the newsstand and bought cigarettes, and I was starting to leave when I saw Julie Andrews. She was alone, sitting in a high, high-backed armchair beside the entrance to the Rose Room, having her box lunch. Her tight short dress seemed to be made of crystal and light, and she was wearing a crystal headband for a crown; she looked like Titania. The chair was much too big and too high for her, and to balance herself and her lunch she had put her knees together, and her feet, balanced on the tips of her toes, were far apart. She was very hungry. All her attention was on her sandwich, which she picked up with both hands, and she was just about to take a bite out of it when she raised her eyes and saw me standing and staring at her. I immediately stopped thinking of Titania and began thinking of Lady Macbeth. At the sight of me, Julie Andrews froze in fury. Behind her sandwich, she was at bay, her hungry face glazed with anger. She is a Star, no doubt about that. She shines and radiates, and she can cast a spell, any kind of spell. Later in the afternoon, I went back to the Algonquin to get a taxi and first have another look

around. This time, Julie Andrews was standing in the entrance to the hotel, having her photograph taken. Her flirtatious little dress shimmered mauve in the gray-white daylight, and she might have been the girl Scott Fitzgerald had in mind when he wrote:

There'd be an orchestra
  Bingo! Bango!
Playing for us
  To dance the tango,
And people would clap
  When we arose
At her sweet face
  And my new clothes.

I looked over at the Royalton, and beside Chez Paul's filmy curtains I saw a neat blue-black head. Pauline, catching a glimpse of Julie Andrews in person.

JUNE 17, 1967

The Sorry Joker

ONE night recently, in the Longchamps Restaurant at Madison Avenue and Fifty-ninth Street, I had the satisfaction of seeing a practical-joker type smacked down, and in such a way that he could do absolutely nothing to save his face. That night was rainy — a steady,

heavy rain. I was having dinner in one of the crescent-shaped booths they have at Longchamps; it was one that faces the entrance door and the street window on the Madison Avenue side. It was about nine-thirty, and in the light from the street lamps and from the few shop windows that were still lighted the rain fell brightly, but hardly anybody passed by. It was too wet for walking that night. There were not many people in the big restaurant, and the long bar was quite deserted, but at a table by the door four people were sitting — two men and two women — and they were very noisy, laughing a lot and shouting at the waiter and changing their minds about what they wanted to eat. One of the men, the one who talked the loudest and the most, the life of the party, was sitting with his back to me, but I could see the faces of his three companions. When I had been there only a couple of minutes, the revolving door went around very slowly and a tall elderly lady wearing a transparent raincoat over her regular coat, and a transparent rain hat over her real hat, and transparent galoshes, came in, carrying a very wet umbrella. She opened her raincoat, and from inside it, where they had been keeping dry, she drew out a book and a folded newspaper that looked like the London *Times.* Then, without hesitation, she started to walk toward a table not far from me. But she had taken only a few paces past the table by the door when the man with his back to me turned his chair noisily and shouted "Hey, *lady!*" after her. The lady turned and took a step or two back toward

him, and found him laughing senselessly, looking up at her, and his three companions convulsed with amusement at the sight of her startled face. She turned away from them immediately and again started walking to her table, and this time she reached it and sat down, but she forgot to take off her raincoat, which billowed out awkwardly around her, shining with raindrops. The waiter brought her a menu and then went to attend to someone else. She looked at the menu and laid it on the table and began to stare in the direction of the street, but her eyes kept wandering over to the four rude strangers by the door, who gave every sign of enjoying themselves and each other and their dinner. She took up the menu again, and then she put it back on the table and took up her book, her London *Times*, her handbag, her gloves, and her umbrella, and went out of the restaurant as quietly as she had come in, but in disarray. I was afraid that the man might speak to her again as she passed his table, but I do not think he saw her go. It had been a pointless little scene, but the point was that there had been a scene. Someone had been humiliated. A woman had been deprived of the quiet dinner she had promised herself, and now she was going to have to decide on another place and on how to get there in the rain, and she would probably decide to just give up and go home.

To divert myself from the spite I was feeling, I began to watch a fat lady in a pearly satin Nefertiti turban who sat a good distance off, several empty tables away from me, in

the corner booth by the window. She was square and pink, all flesh, and she sat up very straight, with her back pushed firmly against the back of the booth, and her round dark eyes, like an idol's eyes, seemed to look directly at nothing. She hardly moved her head on its erect, portly neck, and as her eyes moved over the restaurant she seemed to see not one person, or two, but millions, maybe billions, of people, and she ate steadily. A man sat with her, but she never spoke to him. Her fork was in her right hand, and her right hand never rested; she was eating something creamy — chicken à la king, or something like that. Her left hand was laid against the base of her throat, flat against her skin, and the ring she wore sparkled brilliantly, like her earrings. When I first looked at her, she was lifting some food from her plate, and as she carefully raised the fork she glided her left hand down and placed it, palm downward, under the food, and so conducted the fork up to her face, in a gesture that looked as though she might be about to dance in Bali. When the food was safe, when she was eating it, the fork went down onto the plate again, and her left hand was laid back against her throat again until the fork could be filled once more. Her imperturbability and the smoothness and style of her gestures and the independence of her arms and the separate independence of her head made me believe that I was seeing how Siva might eat and still maintain an inhuman ascendancy, because the common work of eating detracted no more from the majesty of this woman in Longchamps than falling

down a cliff detracts from the majesty of water or passing through clouds detracts from the majesty of the sun. She would remain the same, whatever she did. Nothing would affect her. Nothing could make her vulnerable or cause her shame or discomposure. No one would ever drive *her* out of the restaurant she had made up her mind to dine in.

I glanced over at the four rude people, and I was glad I did, because just then the joker fell off his chair. He did not slide off or slip off — there was no chance for him to pretend he was acting — he *fell* off and hit the floor with a fearful thump, and his chair fell over, too, with a small crash. His companions behaved abominably. They did not reach down to help him up, or chortle companionably at him, or anything like that. Instead, the second man in the party turned his back and began to watch the street, and the two women took their mirrors out of their handbags and gave critical attention to their forelocks. The Joker stayed sitting on the floor for perhaps half a minute, staring at the hem of the tablecloth, and then he got up and set the chair straight and began to blame the chair and said he would sue Longchamps. He shook the chair to show how it wobbled, but it was as solid as a rock, and he sat down on it and stopped talking. He drank some coffee. None of the others spoke. They seemed to feel that the fun had gone out of the evening. The second man waved for the check and signed for it, and they all went out into the rain.

I looked across at the Idol, because I wanted to know

how she placed her hands when she was not eating, but her dinner plate must have been bottomless — she was still at it. In my turn, I left the restaurant, and started looking for a taxi home, and the only regret I had was that the lady with the London *Times* had not stayed long enough to see her tormentor get his comeuppance.

JANUARY 20, 1962

Giving Money in the Street

IT is and always has been my inclination to give money to people who ask me for money on the street, and I always give something — usually a quarter these days, where I used to give a dime. I know people who say that to give money to someone who asks for it on the street is to submit to blackmail and that most of the people who ask on the street are frauds. I say that I would rather give the quarter and walk on free than not give it and pay out the rest of the day, or even an hour or ten minutes of the day, in doubt: should I have given it after all, the chances are surely fifty percent against the person's being a fraud, and so on. I find that a decision to do something leaves me free, while a decision not to do something only leaves me surrounded with undone things and endless, exasperating chances of changing my mind. Not long ago, I was going to a matinée with a friend and I had the tickets and I was

late. I was to meet my friend at the theater. It was raining hard. I stood outside the Algonquin Hotel waiting for a taxi for about five minutes before I realized that even if a taxi came along it would be going the wrong way — it would be going east, and my theater was on Forty-fifth Street west of Broadway. I got across Sixth Avenue and walked very fast and made the light at the corner of Forty-fifth and got across, so that I was on the right side for the theater. Then I really tore along toward Broadway; I could go so fast because it was raining so hard that there was no one to get in my way. While I was hurrying along, I opened my bag and got out a dollar bill to have ready in case a taxi stopped and somebody got out, and when I got near Broadway I suddenly wondered if I really had the tickets, and I opened my bag again and looked in, and they were there, all right. I saw that the light at Broadway was red, and I thought that by the time I got to the corner it should be turning green and I would be able to race right across. Just then I saw, standing near the corner of Forty-fifth and Broadway, an unfortunate-looking woman who wore a straw hat and a little short black coat and who was holding a box top in her hands and looking toward me. I thought, That poor woman thinks I took something out of my bag to give her. Then I thought, I would have given the dollar to the taximan anyway and I'll just give it to her and maybe I'll get to the theater on time, and as I was going past her I put the dollar in the box top, which held two or three yellow pencils and some brown shoelaces. That took a second or so, and as I rushed on I heard her say, "Oh, it's

too much," but I did not stop, and then I heard her coming after me crying "It's too much, it's too much." She caught me at the corner just as I was stepping down into the street, and I had to turn and speak to her, and I said several times, "Oh, it's all right," but, of course, I couldn't take time to talk about it, and she seemed agitated, so I took back the dollar and tore across Broadway and left her standing there in the rain. I didn't look around when I got to the other side, and I was just in time at the theater, and while my friend was watching the curtain go up and settling down to enjoy the afternoon I was wondering what a dollar was too much *for.* Too much for me to give? I suppose so. Too much for her to take? Why? She hadn't tried to get me to take any, or all, of the few pencils and shoelaces she had in the box top. I decided that a person who invites money on the street and then wants to limit or set the amount to be given *is* a fraud, but I feel I have not finished with the matter yet, and I have an uneasy suspicion that the decision I make is going to go against me, although I do not see why it should be so.

JULY 23, 1960

Bad Tiny

I HAVE just seen the worst-mannered dog in New York City, and possibly in the world. Her name is Tiny, and her mistress is blind, and from now on, whenever I see

one of those gentle Seeing Eye dogs that sit and lie for hours on end on the hot midsummer sidewalks up and down Fifth Avenue and on the side streets off the avenue, attending while their blind masters collect money for one purpose or another, I will think of Tiny and wish that she would take a moment to contemplate her colleagues and maybe learn a little about the source from which they draw the fortitude that saves their dignity in the face of acute discomfort and acute boredom.

I saw Tiny in the waiting room of the Ellin Prince Speyer Hospital for Animals, which is quite far downtown. I had to take a little cat there for treatment, and while I was waiting my turn to see the doctor, Tiny and her blind mistress came plunging into the room, accompanied by an old lady whose only function, as far as I could make out, was to repeat Tiny's name over and over again, in tones of reproach, admiration, and awe, so that we would all know who it was that we were looking at. Tiny's mistress, who was holding on to the harness with both hands, was very old indeed, and her temper was almost as bad as her dog's. Every time the companion tried to touch her elbow to guide her out of the laps of the people waiting on the benches, the old blind lady gave the companion a violent push, and it was at these moments that the companion would wail, "Tiny, Tiny," and it is possible that she was not speaking to the dog we were all being forced to look at but was recalling some nicer, smaller, thinner, more polite dog, who had perhaps been the current Tiny's

predecessor in the fierce affections of the old blind lady. It was not hard to see that according to her mistress, the dog we were all pulling our legs and animals out of the way of could do no wrong. Tiny had "favorite" written all over her, and she looked as though she lived on chocolate creams. She was big and fat and curly, with a pointed nose and mean little eyes, and her bark was shocking. In the waiting room at Speyer, they have long benches where people sit, and when the benches are filled up, the latecomers stand. The benches were filled up that day, but several people got up to make room for this noisy trio, headed by Tiny, who continued to strain frantically at her harness even after the old ladies were seated. Tiny wanted to get out of the place. Apparently — the blind old lady began to talk after she had sat down — Tiny often visits the Speyer Hospital. She goes there to be weighed. They have her on a diet, and I suppose she associates these visits with fewer treats and smaller portions of food. All the other animals were scandalized by her bad manners. The other dogs — poodles and a collie and a beautiful Afghan — all kept looking down in embarrassment and looking away, and one small furry young dog just stared at her in astonishment. The cats, in their baskets, were as silent as they were invisible, but their contempt was in the air. One of the men who had surrendered his place on the bench was carrying a tiny monkey wrapped in a shawl, and the monkey seemed to be deliberately averting his damp, wistful eyes from the sight of the hysterical Tiny. The monkey

was distressed to see a creature so full of ill will and bad temper. Everyone was distressed and silent to see a grown dog in a tantrum, and the room was terribly hot and crowded. Tiny and the two old ladies were ushered into the doctor's office as quickly as possible, and we were all glad to see them go. Soon we heard Tiny's voice again, making new dreadful sounds, which probably indicated she was being weighed.

Shortly afterward I took my little cat in to another of the offices, and I had to leave her there for treatment, so I walked out of the office alone. Outside the door of the waiting room at Speyer there is a forbidding-looking flight of stone steps — quite steep, wide steps — that leads down to the street doors. Side rails are there for people who might be afraid of slipping or tripping and falling all the way down to the bottom. As I left the waiting room, Tiny and her convoy hurtled out behind me, the companion crying, "Tiny, Tiny," and the old blind lady keeping her lips pressed tightly together, as seemed to be her habit when under way. Tiny made a murderous dash for the top of the steps and got her old mistress right to the edge, where she stood holding on to the harness with one hand and with the other hand feeling around for something that would guide her down the steps. But Tiny was pulling her away from the rail. The old lady was going to lose her balance, and then she would fall, and she would certainly be battered to death as Tiny dragged her down to the street. I grabbed a side rail with one hand, and with the

other hand I grabbed the old lady's arm, hoping very much that I would not be dragged to destruction along with her. Little did I know, fool that I was. That old lady was as strong as an ox, and the next thing that happened, without even turning her beautiful snowy head in my direction she sent me spinning over to the rail with such force that if it had been a knife I would have been cut in half or, rather, into a third and two thirds, for I am a short person.

There is little left to tell. I skidded down the steps, holding on to the rail, and hurried out onto the street just in time to avoid being trampled under by that trio. I was lucky enough to find a taxi at once, and as I sailed away uptown, collecting myself, I caught a final glimpse of the three of them, trotting happily along, Tiny carrying her head up and wearing an air of genuine virtue and the two old ladies chatting amiably. Going home to tea and cake, I suppose. I could not help wondering, they made such an angelically serene picture walking together on a summer afternoon: What if they had knocked me down and left me crushed at the foot of those steps; who would have had the heart to tell them what they had done? Would anyone have wanted to run after them and capture them and accuse them? I cannot believe it. Nobody would have wanted to spoil their contentment with themselves and with each other. Nobody would be so cruel, and things are not always what they seem.

JULY 29, 1961

An Irritating Stranger

TODAY is Sunday, and an hour ago, in the hot August sun, I was standing by the fountain across from the Plaza Hotel feeding an expensive Plaza Hotel brioche to some pigeons, who were lethargic but were determined to have their rights, and to two thin sparrows, who knew they had no rights but were determined to get something to eat. I was on the side of the sparrows, but I did not want to antagonize the pigeons. I like pigeons. I cannot imagine where they get their pampered air, but they have it and I like them for having it. I stood there placating the pigeons and favoring the sparrows. I was throwing the crumbs cleverly and with real strategy when I heard a girl say, "I can see that New York might be a nice place to visit, and I suppose if you live here it's different." I listened, but she said no more. Her voice was cheerful and definite. I turned to look at her, and found that she was walking away toward the park, but I could see that she was the same red-haired girl I had been watching earlier from the Edwardian Room of the Plaza Hotel while I was having breakfast. The table I had been given was placed so that although I was not sitting by a window, I had a view out through a window on the Fifth Avenue side and through two windows on the Fifty-ninth Street side. Through the first window I saw the fountain and, beyond the fountain, the big buildings of Fifth Avenue, and through the other windows I saw Fifty-ninth Street, with the green park

beyond. People appeared in one window and reappeared in another, moving slowly through the heat. It was all burning-dry summer, except for the shine of water from the fountain. When I first saw the red-haired girl, she was standing just where I later stood while I fed the birds, and she was taking a photograph of three men, who were lined up in front of her with their arms hanging at their sides, looking rather foolish and very obedient. I noticed her first when a sudden breeze lifted her hair, so that for a second or two it flared straight up in the air, showing its color, which was brilliant. Now I stood looking after her. I was fumbling with what she had said. There was only one man with her, and I wondered what had happened to the two others. Her remark, in all its vacancy, had begun to mope around in my mind, and it said nothing, and the more I looked at it the more it said nothing, and it wouldn't go away. It was a suffocating remark — the kind that makes you want to cry. One time, I knew somebody who always greeted me by saying, "Well, there you are! You know, I've been worried about you." I did not know that person very long. The red-haired girl crossed Fifty-ninth Street and went into the park, and I saw her no more.

That is a handsome and spacious intersection where Fifth Avenue and Fifty-ninth Street and the Plaza Hotel meet, but on ordinary days it is busy and noisy and full of strain. This morning, in the empty summertime, the streets and the park and the substantial Fifth Avenue

buildings all stretched themselves out to their full length and full height and full bulk, and the Plaza sat there looking rich, and the whole scene was free and amiable and impromptu. The few people who were about wore light-colored summer clothes, and they sauntered and strolled and paused to look around like the extras in an operetta just before the principals walk on and take the center of the stage. At that moment, from where I stood feeding the birds, the center of the stage was taken by the line of patient horses, one of them a lovely piebald, who stood harnessed to their canopied carriages, waiting with their masters for the customers. It was a nice Sunday morning in New York. That red-haired girl had a carefree walk. If she was miserable, why did she not droop and go somewhere else and shut up?

Beyond the horses, over there where the girl and her companion had disappeared, I had seen four women in loose flowered dresses pass by earlier, as I sat in the restaurant. They walked steadily along, and they seemed eager to get where they were going, and oblivious of the street and the park and of everything except whatever occasion was ahead of them, but they were not hurrying. They had allowed plenty of time. They appeared in one window, walking along by the low park wall, and then they disappeared and appeared again in the next window, still making good time. The windows in the Plaza are immense and impressively overdressed in miles and miles of heavy tasseled hangings and in pounds of shirred beige blinds. It is

a good, big, solidly theatrical room, and this morning it was about half full of strangers having a late, leisurely Sunday-morning breakfast. The atmosphere was very sedate. Nobody waved at anybody across the room. None of the people coming in stopped at a table to say hello. There were no nods or smiles of recognition. The room was all transients who were there for breakfast, and that was that. The Sunday *Times* was divided up at every table where two or more people sat together, and where one person sat alone the *Times* was piled neatly on a chair while the chosen section was being read. The woman at the table next to me was devoting herself seriously to the Review of the Week section. My view of Fifty-ninth Street was crosswise, over her shoulder. She was wearing a tailored black silk suit. Her hair was drawn back in a small bun, and in the bun she had anchored a number of silver pins, and from every pin a heavily chased silver bead hung free and wobbled. A silver fish, three inches long, dangled from each of her ears. I looked past her at the four walking women outside. Three of them were quite tall and upright, but the fourth, who walked on the edge of the sidewalk, along by the curb, was very small and bent, and she did not walk, she toddled. The three others were bareheaded, but she had a cotton scarf tied over her hair and under her chin, and she held on to the arm of the woman next to her and followed trustfully along, with her head down, keeping all her attention to herself, as though she were concentrating on the labor of walking and of listening to what the

younger women were saying. The younger women might have been grandmothers, and she was old enough to be a great-great-grandmother. Her dress covered her ankles. They all looked happy, and the very old woman looked as though she knew she was in good hands. She looked content. She was going somewhere. She was having an outing. Not one of them even bothered to turn her head as they passed by the park and the park entrance. They only looked up and down Fifth Avenue, because of the traffic there, and when they reached the sidewalk that started them toward the east side of the city they all marched forward along Fifty-ninth as though they would be willing to walk as far as the river if what they wanted was to be found there.

The silver fish in my neighbor's ears were no longer idle. They were dancing around, up and down, swinging here and there. There was a reason for their activity. Their owner was eating her breakfast melon. She was taking enormous spoonfuls out of the melon, a big, wide wedge of honeydew, and she was still reading hard. She had folded the paper in a businesslike way, so that only the columns that concerned her showed, and she held it upright in her strong left hand. Suddenly she put her spoon down and looked intently at the melon, and then she put the *Times* down and began to search with her head for a waiter. She turned so that I saw her face. She looked wild-eyed but in control, as though the train were about to leave and the porter had not yet arrived with her luggage.

The room was full of waiters, and one came immediately. He listened to what she had to say, and while he was listening the headwaiter came and listened too. The waiter looked worried, but the headwaiter only smiled understandingly. Apparently the melon she had been given was very poor. She must have been too interested in her reading to notice how awful it was, because she had eaten a great deal of it. She said many things, and when she stopped talking the waiter took the melon away and brought another big wedge and placed it before her. This time the headwaiter stood by and watched attentively while she took the first spoonful, and while she was tasting it, before she had swallowed it, she looked at him, smiling and nodding, and then she raised her right hand high in the air and made a circle with her thumb and forefinger, saluting the melon and the headwaiter and, I suppose, herself and the Plaza Hotel. Was she splendidly unself-conscious, or was she ridiculous? I didn't know. I was tired of her.

My waiter brought my change, and I took the leftover brioche and got up and left and went to stand beside the fountain to feed the pigeons and, as it turned out, two sparrows, and, as it turned out, to hear that red-haired girl drop her empty remark. That was about an hour ago. She is probably still strolling around Central Park, carrying her camera and saying things. I wonder who is listening to her now. I am glad I am not.

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