

ALSO BY
Maeve Brennan

*The Springs of Affection:
Stories of Dublin*

THE
LONG-WINDED
LADY



NOTES FROM THE NEW YORKER

Maeve Brennan



A MARINER BOOK

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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 Long-champs 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 shoe-

laces. 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 back-

ward 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 Fortyninth 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 inte-

riors — 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