



## MANHATTAN FACES

Mary Allen

*Give me faces and streets . . .  
People, endless, screaming, with strong  
voices, passions, pageants,  
Manhattan crowds, with their turbulent  
musical chorus,  
Manhattan faces and eyes forever for me.  
—Whitman*

If you like fresh air, 25¢ hamburgers, and security, New York may not be the place for you. If you want a Rinso-clean wash you can hang in the backyard, where crickets sound at night, and neighbors who are people much like you, the city probably isn't your bag. But if you should find yourself settling into ease at an early age, and yet you are still hounded by curiosity to see more of the world's faces, and you don't mind standing on the edge of a precipice, come along and live. It so came to pass that I flung the articles of life into my Volkswagen and edged the bug into the heart of Manhattan.

Now, looking out from the fifty-sixth floor of the RCA Building, enclosed in the splendor of a Rockefeller office where I work in the summer, I watch the city spinning below through the polluted air, so thick at times that New Jersey disappears. (Skin is always gritty, hair needs washing every night, soot covers the window sills, and the like.) Out near the edge of sight the Statue

of Liberty looks like a lone, bent twig standing to greet the huddled masses. She may welcome the poor immigrants, but her face is turned toward Wall Street down at the tip of Manhattan, home of all that beautiful money and the shrine of every business heart, the stock market.

Down below me is the clogged traffic of Times Square, jovial sewer of humanity, where tourists and Park Avenue ladies mingle with derelicts in the surge of Broadway. In the midst of all this is the stately public library, quietly dignified among crowds who push into matinees and buy in stores on Fifth Avenue. The library gives me my closest look at faces, for inevitably I come up from the books to gaze. I found Chaucer's Wife of Bath that way, reading in the back of the library in her bright red sequined hat all piled up high, her generous form of red a beacon to every eye. She read as lustily as ever Chaucer's gap-toothed lady took after husbands.

A giant of a man across the room from her was one of the loneliest people I have ever seen. His great paw went punctually in and out of a bag of food as he read: pop, a green grape was in his mouth for every period on the page, and crunch, a candy bar for each paragraph. His stomach seemed to grow even as I watched, forcing the rest of him so far back from the table he could hardly see his book, which he nevertheless strained to read, eating all the time with the surreptitious look of the dieter carrying off a half-gallon of ice cream from his thin wife's freezer.

At my reading table was Matilda, or maybe she was an Estelle or an Olga, who didn't care who saw her spill out the treasures of an enormous bag, all stretched out of shape from hanging on her bony shoulder. She released it with a thud on the floor beside her chair and brought forth from it the wondrous apparatus of her existence — three bright feathers, a half-filled folded cup bent with the imprint of her scrawny fingers, something lumpy in tin foil, two pages of the *Daily News* wadded into balls, cartons of face powder, and one drop earring with a green banana on the end. She lined several lipsticks up in a row, which she evidently hadn't stopped using on a face made uneven by age. The sigh of books being read was gently but persistently broken by the shuffle of her articles along the table. Even the woman next to me reading the Sandusky, Ohio, phone directory with a magnifying glass looked up to see the show.

Many people come to the library to talk and to make friends; for them books are only props. I once looked down to see a smudgy note that someone had shoved across the book I was reading. Would I like to go to Lincoln Center after the library closed? Imagine my nervous smile as I looked up trying to guess which of the three men across the table was Prince Charming. Then there was the man struggling with his letter requesting medicare. After writing and rewriting he pulled his chair over near mine and asked for help. Would his doctor be able to tell that he had never finished high school? His mother was about to have her third operation for cancer, he reported. Some people in the library never say a word or move their eyes, much less turn the pages of the books they prop up in front of them. Just blank stares at the far wall. A young man with a two-day beard sleeps on the table; a New York cop

(they are wonderful) tries to wake him by jangling a ring of keys near his ear. The policeman wears the look of one not yet used to seeing wasted lives.

It isn't easy to be kind without attracting parasites. Maybe that is why New Yorkers harden and develop the get-lost stare. I have tried to master it, but the thing really doesn't come off on a round, freckled face. Something about a midwestern look inevitably draws panhandlers, forlorn tourists, and men of every sort who want a match or more. The get-lost stare dissolves, however, when New Yorkers look at their dogs. I have seen a woman kneel in a puddle to kiss her poodle's nose because the cur had a head cold. One matronly lady who apparently walked dogs for a living radiantly looked down at her tugging beasts, six dogs on six leashes, and said with all the authority of a traffic cop, "Okay, everybody, up on the curb." Up they went. Nearby was the lump of a sleeping drunk so far gone that his wallet and watch were easily lifted, entertainment for a watching crowd.

Except for a few crackpots you read about in the newspapers, most New Yorkers become their better selves in Central Park, where hordes of them circle the park on bicycles or jog with the strained but proud look of the physically fit. The precious grass is worn. Old folks sun themselves while chatting with cronies on park benches, couples sprawl on the grass, families picnic, and children run. Dog walkers meet and compare. All of us are lucky to hear the New York Philharmonic on warm August evenings. You can come when you will — the lawn is your reserved box seat. Some comers get there early and bring candles and splendid picnics. Quiet little men sit on carefully unfolded newspapers and read the program notes. Young Puerto Rican mothers with beautiful chubby babies strapped on their backs wander toward the music from concession stands and stay, surprised by something lovely. You can go to the concert alone and not say a word, or bring a troop of friends to share your blanket and chat softly. Lying on your back, when the sky is deep violet with only a blinking light or two from a passing plane, you can see the background of night Manhattan behind the trees of the park. All to the beautiful magic of a solo violin or the thunder of a Beethoven symphony. What a way to hear music, and it doesn't cost a cent.

The night of the blackout brought another kind of harmony to New York. In midtown I looked out at a shockingly dark city, lit only by an occasional match in a window. Office workers joined hands — business acquaintances who had formally passed papers all day long. We joined in a chain to find the crowded street together, where hundreds bobbed up in the dark. Young men who must have always had the urge entered intersections to direct traffic. A waitress dug up a candle to light a cold meal she served for nothing. Phones rang everywhere. People you thought had forgotten called "just to see if you were okay." Dime stores opened their doors late to sell candles by the thousands, and in the light of an eerie November moon, New York took on the look and the heart of a small town.

A visit to New York can reward you with many of these gifts. Living here through the seasons of the year, accompanied by the seasons of the soul (for who ever took the whole self on a vacation?) yields the gifts of involvement —

the daily nudging, the wear of the subways, theater openings, walking and crying from Times Square to the Battery, praying in St. Patrick's, feeling spring on Madison Avenue as you run to meet a friend for lunch, taking a trip to the Virgin Islands to be warm in winter.

New York has changed me. They tell me my lungs are black, and I've learned not to smile in the subway. Failures have become a hearty chunk of my life. I walk faster and much more. Laugh more quickly and deeply. The first thing that comes through my stupor in the morning is a churning excitement. And I never want time to pass. Teaching a night class at NYU, in the heart of drum-beating Washington Square, I have heard in a new way how the Book of Matthew makes absurd demands on men. I have agreed with my students that Job's God is not kind. But I can't agree that Eve was an afterthought, as the grinning Persian on the back row suggested. The burly man in the purple shirt on the front row (whose wife refused to type his term papers) was convinced that women must be subordinate; after all, since Eve was created from Adam's rib, how could the part be greater than the whole? My most important cause concerns the value of studying the humanities. How can reading *King Lear* help these students make more money, they want to know? Why read Chaucer in Middle English? Why learn to write, after all, since their secretaries will do that sort of thing for them? I stood with joy on shaky Utah legs before this pack of wonderfully needy commerce students, eighteen men and one women enrolled for a required literature course. Ah — what a mission. What a place for a single girl to be more than an unfortunate creature in limbo.

I have always felt a bit guilty about my perpetual urge toward cities. If God is in the country and man in the city, as the case is so often shown, have I stepped away from Him? I pray not. After all, *man* was the last creation, more like God than mountains or seas or roses are, for all their beauty. If the fall of a sparrow in the clean hills matters to God, how much more His heart must soften for the millions of men collected in one place. Multiply one tear. It's awesome. Whenever a cry is heard throughout our land, the sound is overwhelming in a big city.

About compassion. When we read an obituary page and don't know anyone mentioned there, chances are that we feel little sorrow. But if the man who lives down the block dies, and we saw him the Sunday before last, there is a pang. When a friend or a family member dies, we can even cry. It is a commonplace that we learn to love (or hate) the things we know. Before that we may be convinced, but it is our hearts that usually move us to action. It is not easy to have emotion about the life of a Puerto Rican, a Jew, a Negro, or the members of any group if we have never known them or lived where they live. Perhaps that is why many of us whose lives have been spent in isolated Mormon places have so little feeling for people unlike ourselves. Living in New York gives the gift of a new compassion, in spite of the ugly things that often happen in our cities. Yes, I have had the shudder of fright when a black brother sidled up to me late at night, asking if he might walk me home. The fear showed on my face, and we both knew it. All he wanted



was a conversation. Right, it might have been different. But the look on my face is the real problem. Respect. That's what a man wants. And we don't get that by passing a new law.

If you have ever been in Washington Square on a summer night and heard the beat of singers whose grins are wide and whose rhythm is better than yours or mine will ever be, it is easier to care. When the only person you can find to help you collect boxes for moving a thousand books is a nine-year-old Puerto Rican who staggers under the stack of cartons he carries up to your apartment, it matters more what happens to his people. When you come away from an outdoor jazz concert, laughing through a warm evening, and you glance down at the hand covering yours that you had forgotten is black, there is hope for a better world.

Hemingway once wrote to a friend "If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast." I have been lucky enough to have lived in New York in the 1960's and to have such a moveable feast — to have been here through a blackout, a transit strike, and the election of a mayor who calms slum dwellers and warms the hearts of all of us who care for the cause of cities. The people, yes.