n a trip to Miami in the early fifties, while studying the breakfast menu at the Carillon Hotel (Kazota Figs? Can’t they spell?), a couple approached our table.

“‘You look familiar,’” they said to my grandparents. “‘Are you from Brooklyn?’”

“No,” said my grandmother, ever so graciously. “‘We’re from New York.”

Wait a minute. People from Brooklyn weren’t from New York? I never crossed a state line on the way to Coney Island. What was going on here?

“‘Manhattan is different,’” Nana explained. “‘It’s not like the other boroughs. If you come from Manhattan, you’re allowed to say you come from New York.

“‘Look at the mail,’” she continued. “‘You have to write ‘Brooklyn, New York’ to get a postcard to Brooklyn. But the post office knows ‘New York, New York’ is Manhattan.”

From that moment on, I knew my town was special. Years later, I figured out why. What sets New York apart is that it has more of everything than everywhere else. It even has more of less. New York is the cleanest/the dirtiest, the oldest/the newest, the fastest/the slowest, the brightest and the bleakest. It’s even the richest and the poorest. And sometimes it’s both at once.

Four blocks from the zoo, in the shadow of The Plaza, a man sets up house on a park bench. He’s got a ginko tree for a bathroom and a busted umbrella for a roof. His bench is right on Fifth Avenue, overlooking Central Park. That’s prime real estate in a city where a garage space costs more than mortgage payments almost anywhere else. I pass this man every day on my way to work. He is wrapped in a Martex “Avignon” comforter, the $175 quilted one I’ve been dreaming about ordering from the Bloomingdale’s catalog.

Lunch? For $35, not including wine, you get to watch a translucent sliver of fish flesh raised on Trout Chow curl and writhe in a chafing dish, pulsing as if it’s breathing, next to a fetal radicchio leaf.

Or you order up and get the wrong thing.

“‘No, no!’” you tell the delivery boy with the painted-on hair. “‘I ordered
He stares. He shrugs. He scratches his head 'til his nails turn black. Then he sticks his palm in your face and says, “I don’t take pennies.”

If most people act crazy, is crazy the norm?

In New York, a flashing “DON’T WALK” sign means run. A closing subway door is perceived as a challenge. Going to the movies is a labor of love.

HE: “All right. You save a place on line and I’ll get the tickets. Then I’ll meet you back on line, and we’ll go in together. Then I’ll get the popcorn while you get the seats. Get two on the aisle and throw my coat over the empty one. When I’ve got the popcorn, I’ll stand down front. Then wave when you see me so I can see you. Then I’ll look for two good seats, and if I can find two better ones together, I’ll wave to you. Get it?”

SHE: “Don’t I always?”

In Los Angeles, they play a game called “If you could add half an inch to your body anywhere, where would it be?” In New York they play a game called “How many people are mad at you before you get to work?”

The elevator man slams the door open. Did I ring too hard?

The bus driver, smiling, closes the Limited door in my face. He doesn’t like girls?

The next bus comes 15 minutes later and the only place left to sit is next to a woman whose feud with me occupies half my seat. I try not to sit on her. She hisses anyway.

That’s three.

At the newsstand in the lobby, the Times are gone. It’s 9:05. I ask the lady where the Times are. She tells me they were stolen.

“I’m sick of it,” she screams. “I can’t take it anymore! How come they never steal the Voice?”

In the company cafeteria, the man behind the counter pounds his fist against the stainless.

“A cup on the lever means the coffee’s not ready! You don’t know that?”

No. But I’m willing to learn.
The cashier looks at my tea and says, “You don’t have anything smaller than a five?”

I apologize. I tell her it’s not her fault. I explain how I usually get change at the newspaper stand, but they got ripped off.

“Is that my problem?” she says.

And in the elevator a man screams, “WHAT FLOOR IS THE MEN’S INTERNATIONAL TENNIS COUNCIL ON?” His Walkman is turned up to Deaf.

“GOD!” He rolls his eyes when he can’t hear my answer.

But where there’s misplaced hostility, there’s serendipitous kindness.

My briefcase is stolen from the office. A man calls, says he found it in a garbage can on 48th and 7th, would I like him to bring it over?

A stranger stops me on Park and says, “I don’t think you want it this way,” as he zips my dress up the back.

A cab driver snaps, “Not so fast, Miss,” and hands me the ten I forgot to wait for.

The same elevator man who was peevish yesterday holds the door while I turn the apartment upside down looking for my watch.

And on the bus, heading for work, my friend Amanda says she doesn’t know which is correct.

“Is it ‘I feel bad,’” she says, “or ‘I feel badly’?”

“Well, if you say ‘I feel badly,’ it means when I touch you I don’t do it right,” I say.

“Yeah,” she says, “but ‘I feel bad’ sounds wrong.”

“It’s one of those tricky words,” I tell her, “like swam and swum, hanged and hung, or a whole nother. Stay away from it.”

“Well, I really think it’s ‘I feel bad,’” Amanda says. “Only everytime I say it somebody corrects me.”

“As a matter of fact, it is ‘bad,’” the straphanger next to us joins in. “A feeling is intransitive,” he continues. “It just sits there. It doesn’t do anything. It’s not an action verb. It’s an emotion verb.”

We size him up. He’s early forties, clean, and wearing a camel-hair topcoat. The Wall Street Journal is folded under his arm.

“Exactly how do you know that?” Amanda says.

“I minored in English lit at Yale, where I was pre-law. After school, I taught remedial English for two years on the Navajo reservation in Kayente, Arizona. I’m a partner now at Anderson Russell Kill & Olick.”

“Well, all right then,” we say. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

New York is where people live who cherish what is hardest to attain. Some wind up like turkeys in cold rain. They tuck their heads into their own feathers for warmth, then suffocate to death. Others thrive on the absurd. Writers, for example. What other town has typewriter repairmen who make house calls seven days a week?

Ever try getting a hot pastrami sandwich at 3 a.m. in Bogalusa? Where
Sometimes living in New York feels like going against nature. It’s like bending down in an “up” elevator or swallowing a belch. It gets so quirky, you wait for the line in your life that says, “And then she woke up.”

Up from Florida for a visit, my ex-New Yorker sister doffs her Rent-A-Mink and prepares to jog around the reservoir with me.

“How can you stand it,” she says, as we walk toward the park. She looks at me with eyes I know better than my own, eyes the color of the inside of black olives. “It’s so dirty! It’s so cold!”

We head for Engineer’s Gate.

“How can you stand living on top of someone,” she says. “How can you stand living in a box?”

“Watch it!” I say, slamming into her with my elbow. It’s too late. She scrapes her shoe against the curb.

“Who is that guy?” she says, pointing to a man in sweats across the street. “I know that guy.”

“That’s Ralph Lauren,” I say.

“No. The one next to him.”

“Him? Oh, that’s Robert Redford.”

She stares for a moment, thoughtful.

“Come to Florida,” she says. “We’ve got Don Johnson.”

And that’s the thing about New York. That’s how you know it’s the best place to live. If it weren’t, why else would everyone compare where they live to it.

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And then, early one Sunday, you find yourself in the Vermeer room at the Met, utterly alone. You turn a corner and the sun warms you in places you forgot you had. You see a show off-Off Broadway, a show so small, so touching, so perfect, it changes your life.

Through some bureaucratic snafu, the people who repair the sidewalk on Madison and 62nd mix glitter in their cement, and at night with the street lights ricocheting off it, you feel like you’re walking on the Milky Way.

And then there’s that tree. The one on the northwest corner of Madison and 84th. The one that defies logic by growing through a sidewalk grate, slicing itself up and then joining into a trunk again. You see that tree and you suddenly feel blessed. It’s like that brief moment in life when your Wite-Out is perfect—not too thick, not too thin.

PATRICIA VOLK, whose great-grandfather introduced New York to pastrami, lays claim to the city on other counts as well.

A fifth-generation New Yorker, Volk was born and bred in Babe Ruth’s building on Riverside Drive. Fans of the Times may recognize her name; last fall she was guest author of the widely read “Hers” column. She has also guest-written William Safire’s column in the Times Magazine, and has written for The New Yorker and New York.


Volk holds an honors degree from SU, in fine arts. She has studied also at Adelphi University, Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris, the New School for Social Research, and Columbia University.

https://surface.syr.edu/sumagazine/vol4/iss2/3

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