"There Are One Million Cars in New York"

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“There Are One Million Cars in New York . . .”

JOHN HARADA
Age 15

“Lobby, please,” I said to the elderly man, in the most mature tone I could muster. His respectful reply of “Thank-you sir,” was proof to me of my success in imitating my father’s voice. As I waited impatiently for the elevator door to open at the lobby, I tried to rid myself of the overwhelming feeling that came from anticipation of great fun. I felt that any slight smile might give my identity away. I was determined to give all who saw me the impression that I was not just an ordinary tourist that had come to New York during the holidays.

I directed my attention to the people in the elevator. There was a plainly dressed couple, probably in their early fifties, who had the tourist look about them. Other than those two and the elevator man, there was only an elderly gentleman who appeared to be carved out of granite. I thought that he was the typical New York businessman, probably very cunning and shrewd.

The elevator stopped abruptly and from the side control panel I could tell it was the fourth floor. With his far hand the man pulled open the wire cage door. With his other hand he separated the outer doors. There stood a striking young lady, the type that I thought of as the young career women. As she stepped into our silent cubicule I quickly turned my attention to the elderly gentleman and enjoyed the game I frequently play. I studied his eyes as the young lady settled herself. I tried not to laugh, or I would give myself away. Again I had won! His eyes hastily studied the woman and turned away. Imme-
diately they returned to take a more complete look. This time they did not move so quickly but lingered to study his subject more carefully. At this point I could not contain myself any longer and burst out in a startling laugh which ended as abruptly as it had started. This shattered the man’s line of concentration. His eyes took a passing glance at me; then proceeded to take one last look at their subject. He looked at his watch and again took on a sullen appearance—with his eyes back under his control. He stared at the wainscoted paneling ahead of him. It was evident that he was uncomfortable. After playing this game for any length of time I usually become disgusted either at men in general, for being so close to their animal ancestors, or at myself, for making a fellow man feel guilty indulging in one of his few harmless pleasures. This time I wondered why it had never occurred to me to indulge in this secret pleasure of all men, or, if I had, unconsciously. I made a mental note to someday write a theme on this game I played.

“Lobby,” said the elevator man, almost too politely. As I stepped out of the elevator I again looked at the elderly gentleman with the sullen mask and silently laughed.

I tried to ignore all the different people who were busily going about their own business. I walked across the lush carpeting, out the entrance to the curb, and waited for a taxi. My fingers traced the outline of George Washington’s profile on the quarter I was preparing to give the doorman who was directing the long line of waiting taxis. He was a tall, young-looking man who appeared even taller in his maroon and gold livery. As he motioned me to go into the next cab I watched his eyes. He was scanning the people around me. Much to my disappointment I realized why. He was expecting someone else to accompany me. I felt like saying, “No, I’m all by my very lonesome.” He eyed me with a dubious look as I grudgingly gave him the quarter.

Self-conscious and alone, I hurriedly climbed into the waiting cab. I nervously told the driver I wanted to go to Macy’s. I sized up the cab’s interior. It was like all the other taxis I had ridden in, with its patched back seat, overstuffed armrests, littered floor, filled ashtrays and worn meter. Next to a worn snapshot of a ordinary looking man was the name Mike Bellis. To me it didn’t matter whether it had been the sweaty negro who had driven us to the hotel the night before; the bald driver who smoked a strong cigar, whom my father and I had had the day before; or the Jewish driver who had never stopped talking. It was peculiar. I would probably never see those men again in my entire life. It was rather a sad feeling—One of the many things that I shrugged off as part of the fascinating city. But the more I thought of this, the more interesting it became, and the sadder I felt. The feeling was almost overwhelming. I looked out the
smudged window at the swarm of people. They were easy to observe as a crowd, but as I tried to concentrate on individual faces it became more difficult, for they passed by so quickly, to be swallowed by the mass and disappear. It was hard to comprehend that these people would go on living and enjoying life without my ever seeing them. It was a selfish feeling that probably stemmed from conceit. I began to wonder if this wasn't similar to the feeling one receives upon reaching old age; is it the fear of the mystery of death, or the fear of having the world go on without you that makes death so undesirable?

"The soombee ! !" My thoughts were scattered by a sudden shout from the driver. Thinking that he had asked me some question to create conversation I said, "Sir?" (A phrase that I have learned at school.)

He belligerently bellowed, "That soombee damn near got us killed ! ! !"

From his explanation I understood that we had been cut off by another cab driver in the taxi ahead of us. I was curious about his vocabulary. Upon asking him what a soombee was, he answered, "A soombee is New York for S.O.B. Ya know what dat is doncha?"

"Yes," I answered meekly.

"You a tourist?" he grunted. Reluctantly I admitted that I was. He sensed that he had found me out. He chuckled and said, "Cheer up, sport. If it makes ya feel any better, everybody's really a stranger in New Yoik."

Within the next few minutes I told him everything about myself that I thought necessary—where I lived, my age, my likes and dislikes, and that I had come from a small town with my father to the city while he did business. In turn he told me something about his life. He was the youngest of an Irish family of five boys, was born in New York, and had never been further than New Jersey. The wall that had separated us was beginning to melt. With the clear understanding that I was nothing more than a tourist I began firing questions at him. Where's Wall Street? Who's the biggest gangster alive? Where's the Peppermint Lounge? How many cars are there in New York? His knowledge of New York was amazing. He knew all the answers to the questions I asked him, from the location of the best burlesque show to the name of the best frankfurter vender on Times Square.

Just before we reached Macy's he said to me, "How'd ya like ta really see da city? I don't mean just the Statue of Liberty and that kind a stuff but different jazz. I've got nothing better ta do, how 'bout you?"

I had been to many places on a sight-seeing bus the preceding day but for some reason I said yes. Maybe it was the promise of
safe adventure to exaggerate upon. I was also curious about this man. Here, I thought, was a man who would know all there is to know about New York. His kind of knowledge could only be acquired by living there a long time.

We started our tour at the Bowery, a place I had long wanted to see. He began by explaining the crude system of organization. Throughout his explanation he used such words as “panhandle” and “king”, words I wanted to remember to throw around at home. He told me of the many kinds of people that live there. “Something Kooky is in them,” he said. “It’s kinda hard ta explain,” he went on, “they don’t seem ta care ’bout anything any more.” As we left he said something that I won’t ever forget. “Yep,” he said, “when ya ain’t got any pride ta even work, well ya might as well be dead.”

As we visited Times Square, Harlem, the Puerto Rican district and Greenwich Village, a question began to take shape in my mind. I asked myself why he had never tried to get a job doing something else. Did he like to drive a cab? Why had he not taken a job that was easier; more fun? As we left a penny arcade and were again in the cab I asked him. For many seconds he said nothing. His eyes were focused on the traffic before us, but as I leaned against the back of the front seat I could tell he wasn’t just studying the traffic. His eyes were looking at something that I couldn’t see.

“Mike,” I asked again, “have you ever thought about doing something else? There’s lots of things that you could do, and you’d probably find more enjoyment in them.”

Without changing his expression we weaved in and out of traffic. Then he said, “Naw, it ain’t that I’m nuts ‘bout drivin’ a cab.” A few seconds later he continued. “Have ya ever heard of a thing called a rat race?

“No,” I answered quite puzzled, “what is it?”

He waited a few seconds and then spoke slowly, carefully picking his words. “Well as near as . . . well as near as I can tell ya . . . well it’s like when ya tryin’ ta live, see? And ya gotta make dough the best ya know how, right? Cops chase robbers, whores get layed, and me, I drive a cab. I don’t know any better. Ha, some people are ’fraid of New York. Me, I’m ’fraid without it.”

There was a few minutes silence. Then I answered, still a little confused, “Yea, I think I understand, Mike. It’s like working to get what you need to survive, and after a while you get to doing it so long you’re kind of surviving to work. Yea, I think I sort of get it.”

Soon we were in front of Macy’s. “Well here ya are, Johnny,” he said. Instinctively I looked at the meter. It read seven dollars and twenty-five cents !!! I had completely forgotten about the cost. While I had been seeing New York the worn meter had been faithfully adding up nickels and dimes until they now amounted to seven
dollars and twenty-five cents!!! I began to get mad; then the feeling turned to burning shame. I had been hooked. Clever me, who was going to fool all of New York into thinking I was one of her sons, had been fished. I reached into my billfold and took out eight dollars.

I managed to say, “Thank you,” as I gave him the money.

He turned his head towards me as I extended my arm with the money in it, and he gave me a thin smile and softly said, “Naw, this one’s on me, Johnny.”

I managed to step out of the cab and stumble to the curb. Puzzlement took the place of my burning shame. As I stood on the curb I turned to look for Mike’s worn, green cab. “There it is!” I thought to myself. “No, it’s that one over there. No, there it is.”

In New York City there are over one million cars. Out of this there are over ten-thousand taxis. In one of them there is a man named Mike Bellis. I turned and walked into Macy’s.

But Men

Blow, Wind, be cold, Wind,
You are strong, Wind, let them know,
    let them know,
Be fierce, Wind, ragged, Wind,
Hard and sharp and painful, Wind—

Hate them, Wind,
Hate this mass of people, Wind,
Show them,
Nearly break them, Wind—

Then come gently, Wind,
With warm and soothing breath again,
Lift them, Wind, be kind, Wind,
For they know,
    they are but men.

JAN M. LAZELERE
Age 15