

Excerpts from “New York Is a City of Things Unnoticed” by Gay Talese

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“New York is a city of things unnoticed. It is a city with cats sleeping under parked cars, two stone armadillos crawling up St. Patrick's Cathedral, and thousands of ants creeping on top of the Empire State Building. The ants probably were carried up there by wind or birds, but nobody is sure; nobody in New York knows any more about the ants than they do about the panhandler who takes taxis to the Bowery; or the dapper man who picks trash out of Sixth Avenue trash cans; or the medium in the West Seventies who claims, “I am clairvoyant, clairaudient, and clairsensuous.”

New York is a city for eccentrics and a center for odd bits of information. New Yorkers blink twenty-eight times a minute, but forty when tense. Most popcorn chewers at Yankee Stadium stop chewing momentarily just before the pitch. Gum chewers on Macy's escalators stop chewing momentarily just before they get off-to concentrate on the last step. Coins, paper clips, ballpoint pens, and little girls' pocketbooks are found by workmen when they clean the sea lions' pool at the Bronx Zoo.

Each day New Yorkers guzzle 460,000 gallons of beer, swallow 3,500,000 pounds of meat, and pull 21 miles of dental floss through their teeth. Every day in New York about 250 people die, 460 are born, and 150,000 walk through the city wearing eyes of glass or plastic.

A Park Avenue doorman has parts of three bullets in his head-there since World War I. Several young gypsy daughters, influenced by television and literacy, are running away from home because they do not want to grow up and become fortune-tellers. Each month 100 pounds of hair are delivered to Louis Feder at 545 Fifth Avenue, where blonde hairpieces are made from German women's hair; brunette hairpieces from French and Italian women's hair; but no hairpieces from American women's hair, which, says Mr. Feder, is weak from too-frequent rinses and permanents.

Some of New York's best-informed men are elevator operators, who rarely talk but always listen-like doormen. Sardi's doorman listens to the comments made by Broadway's first-nighters walking by after the last act. He listens closely. He listens carefully. Within ten minutes of the curtain's fall he can tell you which shows will flop and which will be hits.

On Broadway in the evening, a big, dark 1948 Rolls-Royce pulls in-and out hops a little lady armed with a Bible and a sign reading “The Damned Shall Perish.” She proceeds to stand on the corner screaming at the multitudes of Broadway sinners sometimes until 3 A.M., when the chauffeur-driven Rolls picks her up and drives her back to Westchester.”

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“When street traffic dwindles and most people are sleeping, some New York neighborhoods begin to crawl with cats. They move quickly through the shadows of buildings; night watchmen, policemen, garbage collectors, and other nocturnal wanderers see them-but never for very long.

A majority of them hang around the fish markets, in Greenwich Village, and in the East and West Side neighborhoods where garbage cans abound. No part of the city is without its strays, however, and all-night garage attendants in such busy neighborhoods as Fifty-fourth Street have counted as many as twenty of them around the Ziegfeld Theatre early in the morning. Troops of cats patrol the waterfront piers at night searching for rats. Subway trackwalkers have discovered cats living in the darkness. They seem never to get hit by trains, though some are occasionally liquidated by the third rail. About twenty-five cats live seventy-five feet below the west end of Grand Central Terminal, are fed by the underground workers, and never wander up into the daylight.

The roving, independent, self-laundering cats of the streets live a life strangely different from New York's kept, apartment-house cats. Most are flea-bitten. Many die of food poisoning, exposure, and malnutrition; their average life span is two years, whereas the stay-at-home cats live ten to twelve years or more. Each year the ASPCA kills about 100,000 New York street cats for whom no homes can be found.

Social climbing among the stray cats of Gotham is not common. They rarely acquire a better mailing address out of choice. They usually die within the blocks of their birth, although one flea-bitten specimen picked up by the ASPCA was adopted by a wealthy woman; it now lives in a luxurious East Side apartment and spends the summer at the lady's estate on Long Island. The American Feline Society once moved two strays into the headquarters of the United Nations after having heard that some rodents had infested UN filing cabinets. "The cats took care of 'em," says Robert Lothar Kendell, society president. "And they seemed happy at the UN. One of the cats used to sleep on a Chinese dictionary."

In every New York neighborhood the strays are dominated by a "boss"-the largest, strongest tomcat. But, except for the boss, there is not much organization in the street cat's society. Within the society, however, there are three "types" of cats-wild cats, Bohemians, and part-time grocery store (or restaurant) cats.

The wild cats rely on an occasional loose garbage lid or on rats for food and will have little or nothing to do with people-even those who would feed them. These most unkempt of strays have a recognizable haunted look, a wide-eyed, wild expression, and they usually are found around the waterfront.

The Bohemian, however, is more tractable. It does not run from people. Often, it is fed in the streets daily by sensitive cat lovers (mostly women) who call the strays "little people," "angels," or "darlings" and are indignant when the objects of their charity are referred to as "alley cats." So punctual are most Bohemians at feeding time that one cat lover has advanced the theory that cats can tell time. He cited a gray tabby that appears five days a week, precisely at 5:30 P.M., in an office building at Broadway and Seventeenth Street, where the elevator men feed it. But the cat never shows up on Saturday or Sundays; it seems to know people don't work on those days.

The part-time grocery store (or restaurant) cat, often a reformed Bohemian, eats well and keeps rodents away, but it usually uses the store as a hotel and prefers to spend the nights prowling in the streets. Despite its liberal working schedule, it still assumes most of the privileges of a related

breed-the full-time, or wholly nonstray, grocery store cat-including the right to sleep in the window. A reformed Bohemian at a Bleecker Street delicatessen hides behind the door and chases away all other Bohemians looking for handouts.

The number of full-time cats, incidentally, has diminished greatly since the decline of the small food store and the rise of supermarkets in New York. With better rat-proofing methods, improved packaging of foods, and more sanitary conditions, such chain stores as the A&P rarely keep a cat full-time.

On the waterfront, however, the great need for cats remains unchanged. Once a longshoreman who was allergic to cats poisoned them. Within a day rats were all over the place. Every time the men turned around, they would find rats on crates. And on Pier 95 the rats began stealing the longshoremen's lunch and even attacking the men. So the street cats were recruited from nearby neighbors, and now most of the rats are controlled.

"But cats don't get much sleep around here," said one longshoreman. "They can't. Rats would overrun them. We've had cases here where the rat has torn up the cat. But it doesn't happen often. Most waterfront cats are mean bastards."

At 5 A.M. Manhattan is a town of tired trumpet players and homeward-bound bartenders. Pigeons control Park Avenue and strut unchallenged in the middle of the street. This is Manhattan's mellowest hour. Most *night* people are out of sight-but the *day* people have not yet appeared. Truck drivers and cabs are alert, yet they do not disturb the mood. They do not disturb the abandoned Rockefeller Center, or the motionless night watchmen in the Fulton Fish market, or the gas-station attendant sleeping next to Sloppy Louie's with the radio on.

At 5 A.M. the Broadway regulars have gone home or to all-night coffee shops where, under the glaring light, you see their whiskers and wear. And on Fifty-first Street a radio press car is parked at the curb with a photographer who has nothing to do. So he just sits there for a few nights, looks through the windshield, and soon becomes a keen observer of life after midnight.

"At 1 A.M.," he says, "Broadway is filled with wise guys and with kids coming out of the Astor Hotel in white dinner jackets-kids who drive to dances in their fathers' cars. You also see cleaning ladies going home, always wearing kerchiefs. By 2 A.M., some of the drinkers are getting out of hand, and this is the hour for bar fights. At 3 A.M. the last show is over in the night clubs, and most of the tourists and out-of-town buyers are back in hotels. At 4 A.M., after the bars close, you see the drunks come out-and also the pimps and prostitutes who take advantage of drunks. At 5 A.M., though, it is mostly quiet. New York is an entirely different city at 5 A.M."

At 6 A.M. the early workers begin to push up from the subways. The traffic begins to move down Broadway like a river. And Mrs. Mary Woody jumps out of bed, dashes to her office, and phones dozens of sleepy New Yorkers to say in a cheerful voice, rarely appreciated: "Good morning. Time to get up." For twenty years, as an operator of Western Union's Wake-Up Service, Mrs. Woody has gotten millions out of bed.

At 7 A.M. a floridly robust little man, looking very Parisian in a blue beret and turtleneck sweater, moves in a hurried step along Park Avenue visiting his wealthy lady friends-making certain that each is given a brisk, before-breakfast rubdown. The uniformed doormen greet him warmly and call him either "Biz" or "Mac" because he is Biz Mackey, a ladies' masseur extraordinaire.”