SECTION I:
Here Is New York

“Woolworth Tower in Clouds,” New York © CORBIS.

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The city is like poetry; it compresses all life, all races and breeds, into a small island and adds music and the accompaniment of internal engines. The island of Manhattan is without any doubt the greatest human concentrate on earth, the poem whose magic is comprehensible to millions of permanent residents but whose full meaning will always remain elusive.

E. B. White, From *Here is New York* (1949)

A hundred times have I thought New York is a catastrophe, and fifty times: It is a beautiful catastrophe.

Le Corbusier, Architect

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CHAPTER 1

New Yorkers and Their Neighborhoods

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I'm crazy about this City.

Daylight slants like a razor cutting the buildings in half. In the top half I see looking faces and it's not easy to tell which are people, which the work of stonemasons. Below is shadow where any blasé thing takes place: clarinets and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrowful women. A city like this one makes me dream tall and feel in on things. Hep. It's the bright steel rocking above the shade below that does it. When I look over strips of green grass lining the river, at church steeples and into the cream-and-copper halls of apartment buildings, I'm strong. Alone, yes, but top-notch and indestructible—like the City in 1926 when all the wars are over and there will never be another one. The people down there in the shadow are happy about that. At last, at last, everything's ahead. The smart ones say so and people listening to them and reading what they write down agree: Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things-nobody-could-help stuff. The way everybody was then and there. Forget that. History is over, you all, and everything's ahead at last.

Toni Morrison, From *Jazz* (1992)

I'd rather be a lampost in New York than the Mayor of Chicago.

Mayor James J. Walker

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New Yorkers

This chapter shows how New York City is as much the capital of the world—the ultimate metropolis—as it is the home where we live. The voices collected here are from the eternally loyal, those who can honestly say, as Toni Morrison's narrator in *Jazz* puts it, "I'm crazy about this City." The readings remind us of the fact that New York is more than just a place that inspires awe, imagination, or even envy. Admit it or not, we do take this city personally.

In "The Colossus of New York," Colson Whitehead suggests that the moment we record our first memory of New York, we become a New Yorker. For him, "Our streets are calendars containing who we were and who we will be next." It is a city in which we both lose ourselves and find ourselves, always growing in the process. Similarly, Katie Roiphe in "A Coney Island of the Mind" looks back at a defining New York moment that directed the trajectory of her life. In her reminiscence of a first date on the Coney Island Cyclone, she too comes to understand the powerful role the city plays in influencing life decisions.

In New York, even a subway ride can be transformative. Newly arrived from the South, Ralph Ellison considers his first subway experience in "New York, 1936" as both daunting and liberating. He realizes that in New York's crowded subway cars there are no racial and personal boundaries. For both Anna Quindlen and Ian Frazier, the subway is a place of happenings as well, where one observes or partakes in unanticipated encounters and mini-spectacles. From an insider's perspective, Quindlen's "Pregnant in New York" explores the character of the city in terms of gender difference and etiquette. With a good sense of humor, she illustrates what it means to be "disabled" in New York. Frazier's "Take the F," in turn, presents dynamic and diverse images of F train passengers and his neighbors in Park Slope.

To outsiders, New York may be a nice place to visit, but only those who live here can speak to life on the inside. Using bold and provocative language, Willie Perdomo and Nelson George capture the uniqueness of their neighborhoods. Though both pieces are very different, each reveals how place shapes identity.

E.B. White's "Here is New York" serves as the anchor to this chapter. It is a monumental piece that breathes the spirit of the city. This essay is at the same time an inward expression, an outward description, as well as a thorough assessment of New York. White's essay checks the pulses of the city and offers an insightful prognosis of urban life.

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The Colossus of New York

Colson Whitehead

Colson Whitehead was born in 1969, and was raised in Manhattan. After graduating from Harvard University, he started working at *The Village Voice*, where he wrote reviews of television, books, and music. He is the author of *The Intuitionist* (2000), *John Henry Days* (2001), *The Colossus of New York* (2003), *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006), *Sag Harbor* (2009), and *Zone One* (2011). He lives in Brooklyn.

Pre-Reading

What was your first memory of New York City?

1 I'm here because I was born here and thus ruined for anywhere else, but I don't know about you. Maybe you're from here, too, and sooner or later it will come out that we used to live a block away from each other and didn't even know it. Or maybe you moved here a couple years ago for a job. Maybe you came here for school. Maybe you saw the brochure. The city has spent a considerable amount of time and money putting the brochure together, what with all the movies, TV shows and songs—the whole If You Can Make It There business. The city also puts a lot of effort into making your hometown look really drab and tiny, just in case you were wondering why it's such a drag to go back sometimes.

No matter how long you have been here, you are a New Yorker the first time you say, That used to be Munsey's, or That used to be the Tic Toc Lounge. That before the internet café plugged itself in, you got your shoes resoled in the mom-and-pop operation that used to be there. You are a New Yorker when what was there before is more real and solid than what is here now.

You start building your private New York the first time you lay eyes on it. Maybe you were in a cab leaving the airport when the skyline first roused itself into view. All your worldly possessions were in the trunk, and in your hand you held an address on a piece of paper. Look: there's the Empire State Building, over there are the Twin Towers. Somewhere in that fantastic, glorious mess was the address on the piece of paper, your first home here. Maybe your parents dragged you here for a vacation when

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you were a kid and towed you up and down the gigantic avenues to shop for Christmas gifts. The only skyscrapers visible from your stroller were the legs of adults, but you got to know the ground pretty well and started to wonder why some sidewalks sparkle at certain angles, and others don't. Maybe you came to visit your old buddy, the one who moved here last summer, and there was some mix-up as to where you were supposed to meet. You stepped out of Penn Station into the dizzying hustle of Eighth Avenue and fainted. Freeze it there: that instant is the first brick in your city.

I started building my New York on the uptown No. 1 train. My first city memory is of looking out a subway window as the train erupted from the tunnel on the way to 125th Street and palsied up onto the elevated tracks. It's the early seventies, so everything is filthy. Which means everything is still filthy, because that is my city and I'm sticking to it. I still call it the Pan Am Building, not out of affectation, but because that's what it is. For that new transplant from Des Moines, who is starting her first week of work at a Park Avenue South insurance firm, that titan squatting over Grand Central is the Met Life Building, and for her it always will be. She is wrong, of course—when I look up there, I clearly see the gigantic letters spelling out Pan Am, don't I? And of course I am wrong, in the eyes of the old-timers who maintain the myth that there was a time before Pan Am.

History books and public television documentaries are always trying to tell you all sorts of "facts" about New York. That Canal Street used to be a canal. That Bryant Park used to be a reservior. It's all hokum. I've been to Canal Street, and the only time I ever saw a river flow through it was during the last water-main explosion. Never listen to what people tell you about old New York, because if you didn't witness it, it is not a part of your New York and might as well be Jersey. Except for that bit about the Dutch buying Manhattan for twenty-four bucks—there are and always will be braggarts who "got in at the right time."

There are eight million naked cities in this naked city—they dispute and disagree. The New York City you live in is not my New York City; how could it be? This place multiplies when you're not looking. We move over here, we move over there. Over a lifetime, that adds up to a lot of neighborhoods, the motley construction material of your jerry-built metropolis. Your favorite newsstands, restaurants, movie theaters, subway stations and barbershops are replaced by your next neighborhood's favorites. It gets to be quite a sum. Before you know it, you have your own personal skyline.

Go back to your old haunts in your old neighborhoods and what do you find: they remain and have disappeared. The greasy spoon, the deli, the dry cleaner you scouted out when you first arrived and tried to make those new streets yours: they are gone. But look past the windows of the travel agency that replaced your pizza parlor. Beyond the desks and computers

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and promo posters for tropical adventures, you can still see Neapolitan slices cooling, the pizza cutter lying next to half a pie, the map of Sicily on the wall. It is all still there, I assure you. The man who just paid for a trip to Jamaica sees none of that, sees his romantic getaway, his family vacation, what this little shop on this little street has granted him. The disappeared pizza parlor is still here because you are here, and when the beauty parlor replaces the travel agency, the gentleman will still have his vacation. And that lady will have her manicure.

You swallow hard when you discover that the old coffee shop is now a chain pharmacy, that the place where you first kissed So-and-so is now a discount electronics retailer, that where you bought this very jacket is now rubble behind a blue plywood fence and a future office building. Damage has been done to your city. You say, It happened overnight. But of course it didn't. Your pizza parlor, his shoeshine stand, her hat store: when they were here, we neglected them. For all you know, the place closed down moments after the last time you walked out the door. (Ten months ago? Six years? Fifteen? You can't remember, can you?) And there have been five stores in that spot before the travel agency. Five different neighborhoods coming and going between then and now, other people's other cities. Or fifteen, twenty-five, a hundred neighborhoods. Thousands of people pass that storefront every day, each one haunting the streets of his or her own New York, not one of them seeing the same thing.

We can never make proper good-byes. It was your last ride in a Checker cab and you had no warning. It was the last time you were going to have Lake Tung Ting shrimp in that kinda shady Chinese restaurant and you had no idea. If you had known, perhaps you would have stepped behind the counter and shaken everyone's hand, pulled out the camera and issued posing instructions. But you had no idea. There are unheralded tipping points, a certain number of times that we will unlock the front door of an apartment. At some point you were closer to the last time than you were to the first time, and you didn't even know it. You didn't know that each time you passed the threshold you were saying good-bye.

I never got a chance to say good-bye to some of my old buildings. Some I lived in, others were part of a skyline I thought would always be there. And they never got a chance to say good-bye to me. I think they would have liked to—I refuse to believe in their indifference. You say you know these streets pretty well? The city knows you better than any living person because it has seen you when you are alone. It saw you steeling yourself for the job interview, slowly walking home after the late date, tripping over nonexistent impediments on the sidewalk. It saw you wince when the single frigid drop fell from the air conditioner twelve stories up and zapped you. It saw the bewilderment on your face as you stepped out of the stolen

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matinee, incredulous that there was still daylight after such a long movie. It saw you half-running up the street after you got the keys to your first apartment. The city saw all that. Remembers, too.

Consider what all your old apartments would say if they got together to swap stories. They could piece together the starts and finishes of your relationships, complain about your wardrobe and musical tastes, gossip about who you are after midnight. 7J says, So that's what happened to Lucy—I knew it would never work out. You picked up yoga, you put down yoga, you tried various cures. You tried on selves and got rid of them, and this makes your old rooms wistful: why must things change? 3R goes, Saxophone, you say—I knew him when he played guitar. Cherish your old apartments and pause for a moment when you pass them. Pay tribute, for they are the caretakers of your reinventions.

Our streets are calendars containing who we were and who we will be next. We see ourselves in this city every day when we walk down the sidewalk and catch our reflections in store windows, seek ourselves in this city each time we reminisce about what was there fifteen, ten, forty years ago, because all our old places are proof that we were here. One day the city we built will be gone, and when it goes, we go. When the buildings fall, we topple, too.

Maybe we become New Yorkers the day we realize that New York will go on without us. To put off the inevitable, we try to fix the city in place, remember it as it was, doing to the city what we would never allow to be done to ourselves. The kid on the uptown No. 1 train, the new arrival stepping out of Grand Central, the jerk at the intersection who doesn't know east from west: those people don't exist anymore, ceased to be a couple of apartments ago, and we wouldn't have it any other way. New York City does not hold our former selves against us. Perhaps we can extend the same courtesy.

Our old buildings still stand because we saw them, moved in and out of their long shadows, were lucky enough to know them for a time. They are a part of the city we carry around. It is hard to imagine that something will take their place, but at this very moment the people with the right credentials are considering how to fill the craters. The cement trucks will roll up and spin their bellies, the jackhammers will rattle, and after a while the postcards of the new skyline will be available for purchase. Naturally we will cast a wary eye toward those new kids on the block, but let's be patient and not judge too quickly. We were new here, too, once.

What follows is my city. Making this a guidebook, with handy color-coded maps and minuscule fine print you should read very closely so you won't be surprised. It contains your neighborhoods. Or doesn't. We overlap. Or don't. Maybe you've walked these avenues, maybe it's all Jersey to

15

you. I'm not sure what to say. Except that probably we're neighbors. That we walk past each other every day, and never knew it until now.

Discussion Questions

1. Colson Whitehead writes that everyone's New York is different. What is his "private" New York like? What was the "first brick" in his city?
2. According to Whitehead, when does someone become a New Yorker?
3. What is the significance of the title?
4. According to the author, why are there no "proper good-byes" in New York?
5. How does the author establish the tone of the essay?
6. In paragraph 3 what are skyscrapers compared to? Can you find any other metaphors in the essay?
7. Whitehead uses many expressive verbs such as "roused" (para. 3), "erupted," and "palsied" (para. 4). What are the effects of these words?
8. In paragraph 10 the author writes, "The city knows you better than any living person because it has seen you when you are alone." Find other examples of personification in the essay and comment on them.
9. In the original version of this essay—which was a response to 9–11—Whitehead began paragraph 14 in a different way. Instead of "Our old buildings still stand . . .," he originally wrote "Our towers still stand . . ." What is the effect of this change?

Writing Tasks

- Recount your first memory of being in New York. Focus on a particular image, sensation, event, or encounter.
- What changes have you noticed in your neighborhood? How do you feel about them?
- In New York, many neighborhoods have been undergoing economic development in which run-down buildings and vacant lots have been turned into upscale residential apartments and chain stores (such as Starbucks). What do you feel are the advantages and disadvantages of this change—known as gentrification?

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A Coney Island of the Mind

Katie Roiphe

Katie Roiphe grew up in New York City. She attended Harvard University and received a Ph.D. in English literature from Princeton University. She is best known as the author of *The Morning After: Fear, Sex, and Feminism* (1994). She is also the author of *Last Night in Paradise: Sex and Morals at the Century's End* (1997), *Still She Haunts Me* (2001), and *Uncommon Arrangements* (2007).

Pre-Reading

Have you ever wished to alter a decision or an action that has brought about negative consequences? What would you have done instead?

MY FATHER LEFT Flatbush sixty-five years ago with no intention of ever returning, and one brilliant fall day I find myself going back to deepest Brooklyn, to Coney Island, to the last stop on the F train. 1

My date stops in front of the Cyclone that curls ominously above us. I am astonished that he wants to ride it. I feel twinges of panic on elevators and airplanes, but it somehow seems too early in our acquaintance for him to know that I am too fragile for roller coasters. My date does not give the impression of being afraid of anything. So we end up at the ticket counter. The ticket seller catches a crazy glint in my eyes and says, "Nothing's happened to anyone in the seven years that I've worked here," and we hear the whoops and shouts and rattle of the cars above us, and I look up at my date and wonder how well I know him.

As we climb into the car it feels rickety. The wooden track rising against the sky reminds me of the dinosaur bones in the American Museum of Natural History, which is not a reassuring image. The other passengers are teenagers from the neighborhood who look as if they do things every day that make the Cyclone about as exciting as a crosstown bus.

Once the ride starts, it does not feel safe. It shakes and moans. This is not the sleek modern sound of speed. This is speed from another era. It's the roller-coaster equivalent of reading by gas lamps or sending telegrams. The Cyclone was built in 1927. "Don't worry," my date tells me.

"A Coney Island State of Mind" by Katie Roiphe, copyright © 2008 by Katie Roiphe, from *Brooklyn Was Mine,* edited by Chris Knutsen & Valerie Steiker. Used by permission of Riverhead books, an imprint of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

How does he know I am worrying? Am I not doing a good job of hiding my worry? "There's a guy who checks every inch of the track every day." But this is hardly reassuring. This seems to me like a fallibly human system. Why should we trust a man checking a track, a man whose mind could be wandering to his girlfriend's erratic behavior the night before, or what he might be having for lunch?

We are pulled into the sky. I feel as if I am nothing but stomach, air, and fear. As we hurtle to the top, I grasp my bag, my date's legs against mine, and I see the rotating water and sky and sand, the crowd milling below us, and it's the greatest view in the whole city, thrill and terror blending into clarity, panic focusing the mind. I feel like I have never seen the ocean before.

Down below us is the boardwalk where my father used to come with his friends in the early thirties to swim and buy Nathan's Famous hot dogs for a nickel. He rode the Cyclone in the brighter, grander, better painted days of its youth. He grew up only a few miles from here, on East Twenty-second Street between Avenue T and Avenue U, in a house that I have never really seen. He drove us there once, on my mother's insistence, but when we got to his block he suddenly put his foot on the gas, and we perceived his childhood house, the house he was evicted from during the Depression, as a blur of color. (Years later, after he dies, I will wish I had gotten him to give me the number of the house; I will wish I had gotten him to talk about the movie theaters where he learned English from Ingrid Bergman, about his parent's marriage, about the Battle of the Somme.) But for now I am a tourist in my father's childhood. I am sailing over the past he wouldn't talk about. I am almost reaching it.

The track dips and the car zips down. My date and I are in our late twenties—he at least seems, ostensibly, to be an adult, but the years are stripped away by wind and fear and we are children again, clutching each other's hands.

It seems as if there is only a small chance that the metal bar will actually hold us in. At any moment we are going to fly out—little dots against the horizon. I imagine us falling through the air, like astronauts in a movie, our hair streaming out in the wind, frozen in a black-and-white photograph the next day in the tabloids.

As we turn the curve, even the teenagers shriek, but I am too scared to scream. It seems as if all of my energy has to be focused on staying alive. In 1911, the Cyclone's predecessor, the Giant Racer, flew off its tracks, killing two women. Picture the tracks bending through the air, the pretty cars careening through the danger they are built to simulate. Think how long it will take the observers to realize that the screams are real.

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It feels as if the earth is falling out from under us and I have to close my eyes, no matter what my date will think. We swoop and swerve and finally clatter to a halt. It has been one hundred seconds.

I wonder woozily why I feel so good. I feel sort of bruised and banged up but that feeling is part of the beauty of the Cyclone. It's about terror and the release from terror, about how close dreams are to nightmares, and how easy it is to escape from your life. A journalist from the turn of the century wrote, "Coney Island has a code of conduct all her own," and for the first time I know exactly what he means. The Cyclone gives you the feeling that nothing matters but the second you are in, a feeling worth much more than the four dollars of the ticket. In fact it may be the platonic ideal of dates—a whole journey of risk and reassurance condensed into a minute and a half.

By this point, I am beginning to understand why the city has always had a romantic fixation on this place. Lawrence Ferlinghetti wrote his famous poem "A Coney Island of the Mind" about this too: "There's always complications like maybe she has no eyes for him or him no eyes for her . . . or something or other stands in the way like his mother or her father or someone like that but they go right on trying to get it all the time like in Shakespeare or Proust remembering his Things Past or wherever and there they all are struggling toward each other or after each other like those marble maidens on that Grecian Urn or any market street or merry-go-round around and around they go all hunting love and half the hungry time not even knowing just what is really eating them . . ." It's not a happy poem, really, it's not a poem that bodes well, but who remembers anything but the title?

As I step onto what seems like solid ground, I feel lightheaded and shaky and my date puts his arm around me. We pass a freak show and a dance contest. We walk on the boardwalk in the warm air. My date is tall and quieter than any other man I have ever met. He does not narrate and analyze his inner life in the same compulsive way as everyone else I know. I look back at the Cyclone, arched against the sky. The brightly painted food stands and arcades bear more of a resemblance to the old peep shows in Times Square than to the glamorous architecture of Coney Island's past. But you can still feel the seediness and greatness of the place, the vague feeling of menace, of leisure and unemployment mixing, along with the elation of a day at the beach.

Four years later, I will marry my date in something of the same spirit as that Cyclone ride. I will be taking a risk that I feel as a risk, and yet it will feel inevitable, as I have bought my ticket and am pulled skyward. Later, when he has moved out, I will go back over time. I will review with some puzzlement what I could have been thinking: Where was that man who

checks every inch of the track? What was that man dreaming about when he should have been checking the track?

15 In Delmore Schwartz's haunting short story "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," a grown man watches a movie of his parents' courtship. His father wears a tie. His mother wears a hat with feathers. They are trying to impress each other. They ride a streetcar to Coney Island. They ride a merry-go-round, reaching for the brass rings. Then they stand on this same boardwalk, looking out at this same ocean, when his father asks his mother to marry him. Just at that moment the narrator stands up and shouts at this movie screen: "Don't do it. It's not too late to change your minds, both of you. Nothing good will come of it." This is the feeling I have looking at this moment now. Stop the movie, there on the boardwalk. I feel like shouting at myself through the years. But this is what you can't do. *Don't do it. It's not too late to change your mind.*

For now, though, my date buys a large bag of Nathan's French fries, and I wonder how on earth he can eat after what we have just been through, and the crowd is enveloping us with stuffed dogs, and blown-up alligators tucked under their arms, and the sun glistens in the sand, and the sky is as blue as the cotton candy sold by vendors and for now, I am enchanted by the unknown territories of another person, and of the city itself.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did the author decide to take a ride on the Cyclone despite being hesitant?
2. What was the author's initial impression about her date?
3. What analogies are used to describe her ride on the Cyclone?
4. What is her response to her date's remarks on the safety check of the roller coaster? What does it disclose?
5. How does the author feel during and after the ride?
6. What does Roiphe mean when she says, "Coney Island has a code of conduct all her own"?
7. How does the author compare her marriage with the Cyclone ride?

Writing Tasks

- Write an essay about a memorable or transforming experience you had in the city. Like the approach Roiphe uses in her essay, you should present a unique perspective that combines memories and vivid descriptions.
- Look up Lawrence Ferlinghetti's poem "Coney Island of the Mind," and write an essay in which you compare it to Roiphe's piece.

Subway Rush Hour

Langston Hughes

James Langston Hughes was born February 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri. His parents divorced when he was a small child, and his father moved to Mexico. He graduated from Central High School in Cleveland and then went on to New York where he studied, for one year, at Columbia University. He lived in Harlem for much of his life. Hughes's first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues,* was published in 1926. In addition to leaving us a large body of poetic work, Hughes wrote eleven plays and many works of prose, including the well-known "Simple" books such as *Simple Speaks His Mind.* Hughes died on May 22, 1967, in New York. In his memory, his residence at 20 East 127th Street in Harlem, New York City, has been given landmark status by the New York City Preservation Commission, and East 127th Street has been renamed "Langston Hughes Place."

Pre-Reading

What makes subway riding so enjoyable or, at times, so miserable?

Subway Rush Hour

Mingled 1
breath and smell
so close
mingled
black and white 5
so near
no room for fear.

Discussion Questions

1. Hughes is legendary for being able to say so much in very few lines. How does he accomplish this?

Writing Task

- Write a paper in which you discuss all of Hughes' poems found in this anthology.

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New York, 1936

Ralph Ellison

Born in Oklahoma in 1914 and educated at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, Ralph Ellison established his literary reputation with his first and only novel, *Invisible Man,* first published in 1947 and reprinted numerous times since. His collections of essays include *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986). This essay is excerpted from his memoir entitled *An Extravagance of Laughter* (1986). Ellison died in 1994.

Pre-Reading

How does New York compare to other places you know?

1 In 1936, a few weeks after my arrival in New York City, I was lucky enough to be invited by an old hero and newfound friend, Langston Hughes, to be his guest at what would be my introduction to Broadway theater. I was so delighted and grateful for the invitation that I failed to ask my host the title of the play, and it was not until we arrived at the theater that I learned that it would be Jack Kirkland's dramatization of Erskine Caldwell's famous novel *Tobacco Road*. . . . I failed to note the irony of circumstance that would have as my introduction to New York theater a play with a southern setting and characters that were based upon a type and class of whites whom I had spent the last three years trying to avoid. Had I been more alert, it might have occurred to me that somehow a group of white Alabama farm folk had learned of my presence in New York, thrown together a theatrical troupe, and flown north to haunt me. . . . And yet that irony arose precisely from the mixture of motives—practical, educational, and romantic—that had brought me to the North in the first place.

Among these was my desire to enjoy a summer free of the South and its problems while meeting the challenge of being on my own for the first time in a great northern city. Fresh out of Alabama, with my junior year at Tuskegee Institute behind me, I was also in New York seeking funds with which to complete my final year as a music major—a goal at which I was having less success than I had hoped. However, there had been compensations. For between working in the Harlem YMCA cafeteria as

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a substitute for vacationing waiters and countermen and searching for a more profitable job, I had used my free time exploring the city, making new acquaintances, and enjoying the many forms of social freedom that were unavailable to me in Alabama. The very idea of being in New York was dreamlike, for like many young Negroes of the time, I thought of it as the freest of American cities and considered Harlem as the site and symbol of Afro-American progress and hope. Indeed, I was both young and bookish enough to think of Manhattan as my substitute for Paris and of Harlem as a place of Left Bank excitement.

And yet I soon discovered, much to my chagrin, that while I was physically out of the South, I was restrained—sometimes consciously, sometimes not—by certain internalized thou-shalt-nots that had structured my public conduct in Alabama. It was as though I had come to the Eden of American culture and found myself indecisive as to which of its fruits were free for my picking. Beyond the borders of Harlem's briar patch—which seemed familiar because of my racial and cultural identification with the majority of its people and the lingering spell that had been cast nationwide by the music, dance, and literature of the so-called Harlem Renaissance—I viewed New Yorkers through the overlay of my Alabama experience. Contrasting the whites I encountered with those I had observed in the South, I weighed class against class and compared southern styles with their northern counterparts. I listened to diction and noted dress, and searched for attitudes in inflections, carriage, and manners. And in pursuing this aspect of my extracurricular education, I explored the landscape.

I crossed Manhattan back and forth from river to river and up, down, and around again, from Spuyten Duyvil Creek to the Battery, looking and listening and gadding about; rode streetcar and el, subway and bus; took a hint from Edna Millay* and spent an evening riding back and forth on the Staten Island Ferry. From the elevated trains I saw my first penthouses with green trees growing atop tall buildings, caught remote glimpses of homes, businesses, and factories while moving above the teeming streets, and felt a sense of quiet tranquillity despite the bang and clatter. Yes, but the subways were something else again.

In fact, the subways were utterly confusing to my southern-bred idea of good manners, and especially the absence of a certain gallantry that men were expected to extend toward women. Subway cars appeared to be underground arenas where northern social equality took the form of an endless shoving match in which the usual rules of etiquette were turned upside down—or so I concluded after watching a 5:00 footrace in a crowded car.

5

*Edna St. Vincent Millay was a Greenwich Village poet famous for her poem "Recuerdo," which appears in the Literary New York section.

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The contest was between a huge white woman who carried an armful of bundles, and a small Negro man who lugged a large suitcase. At the time I was standing against the track-side door, and when the train stopped at a downtown station I saw the two come charging through the opening doors like racehorses leaving the starting gate at Belmont. And as they spied and dashed for the single empty seat, the outcome appeared up for grabs, but it was the woman, thanks to a bustling, more ruthless stride (and more subway know-how) who won—though but by a hip and a hair. For just as they reached the seat she swung a well-padded hip and knocked the man off stride, thus causing him to lose his balance as she turned, slipped beneath his reeling body, and plopped into the seat. It was a maneuver that produced a startling effect—at least on me.

For as she banged into the seat it caused the man to spin and land smack-dab in her lap—in which massive and heaving center of gravity he froze, stared into her face nose-tip to nose, and then performed a spring like leap to his feet as from a red-hot stove. It was but the briefest conjunction, and then, as he reached down and fumbled for his suitcase, the woman began adjusting her bundles, and with an elegant toss of her head she then looked up into his face with the most ladylike and triumphant of smiles.

I had no idea of what to expect next, but to her sign of good sportswomanship the man let out with an exasperated "Hell, you can have it, I don't want it!" A response that evoked a phrase from an old forgotten ditty to which my startled mind added the unstated line—"Sleeping in the bed with your hand right on it"—and shook me with visions of the train screeching to a stop and a race riot beginning. . . .

But not at all. For while the defeated man pushed his way to another part of the car, the crowd of passengers simply looked on and laughed. 10

Still, for all their noise and tension, it was not the subways that most intrigued me, but the buses. In the South you occupied the back of the bus, and nowhere *but* the back, or so help you God. Being in the North and encouraged by my anonymity, I experimented by riding all *over* New York buses, excluding only the driver's seat—front end, back end, right side, left side, sitting or standing as the route and flow of passengers demanded. *And,* since those were the glorious days of double-deckers, both enclosed and open, I even rode *top*side.

Thus having convinced myself that no questions of racial status would be raised by where I chose to ride, I asked myself whether a seat at the back of the bus wasn't actually more desirable than one at the front. For not only did it provide more legroom, it offered a more inclusive perspective on both the interior and exterior scenes. I found the answer obvious and quite amusing. But now that I was no longer forced by law and compelled

by custom to ride at the back, what was more desirable—the possibility of exercising what was routinely accepted in the North as an abstract, highly symbolic (even trivial) form of democratic freedom, or the creature comfort that was to be had by occupying a spot from which more of the passing scene could be observed? And in my own personal terms, what was more important—my individual comfort, or the exercise of the democratic right to be squeezed and jostled by strangers? Such questions were akin to that of whether you lived in a Negro neighborhood because you were forced to do so, or because you preferred living among those of your own background. Having experienced life in mixed neighborhoods as a child, I preferred to live where people spoke my own version of the American language, and where misreading of tone or gesture was less likely to ignite lethal conflict.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does Ellison come to New York in 1936? What do you think was his most urgent reason?
2. How does Ellison utilize his free time?
3. How do his experiences help explain the appeal of New York for African-Americans during the 1930s?
4. Why does the author call Harlem "the site and symbol of Afro-American progress and hope"? Does this still hold true?
5. Why doesn't Ellison feel entirely "out of the South" while in New York?
6. Describe the humor in Ellison's subway story. What does he learn from this incident about New York and himself?
7. Why is Ellison so intrigued with buses in New York?

Writing Tasks

- Write an essay in which you compare New York to another part of the country.
- Write an essay which analyzes the many ways New York offers its inhabitants exceptional freedom. Try to include ways in which the city also limits people.
- Describe something about New York that you particularly enjoy.

Pregnant in New York

Anna Quindlen

Anna Quindlen (b. 1952) is the best-selling author of six novels and nine nonfiction books. Her *New York Times* column, "Public and Private," won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992.

Pre-Reading

Have you ever given up your seat to someone in the subway? Under what circumstances?

1 I have two enduring memories of the hours just before I gave birth to my first child. One is of finding a legal parking space on Seventy-eighth Street between Lexington and Park, which made my husband and me believe that we were going inside the hospital to have a child who would always lead a charmed life. The other is of walking down Lexington Avenue, stopping every couple of steps to find myself a visual focal point—a stop sign, a red light, a pair of $200 shoes in a store window—and doing what the Lamaze[1] books call first-stage breathing. It was 3:00 A.M. and coming toward me through a magenta haze of what the Lamaze books call discomfort were a couple in evening clothes whose eyes were popping out of their perfect faces. "Wow," said the man when I was at least two steps past them. "She looks like she's ready to burst."

I love New York, but it's a tough place to be pregnant. It's a great place for half sour pickles, chopped liver, millionaires, actors, dancers, akita dogs, nice leather goods, fur coats, and baseball, but it is a difficult place to have any kind of disability and, as anyone who has filled out the forms for a maternity leave lately will tell you, pregnancy is considered a disability. There's no privacy in New York; everyone is right up against everyone else and they all feel compelled to say what they think. When you look like a hot-air balloon with insufficient ballast, that's not good.

New York has no pity: it's every man for himself, and since you are yourself-and-a-half, you fall behind. There's a rumor afoot that if you are

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[1]Lamaze *adj.* Relating to or being a method of childbirth in which the expectant mother is prepared psychologically and physically to give birth without the use of drugs.

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pregnant you can get a seat on the A train at rush hour, but it's totally false. There are, in fact, parts of the world in which pregnancy can get you a seat on public transportation, but none of them are within the boundaries of the city—with the possible exception of some unreconstructed parts of Staten Island.

What you get instead are rude comments, unwarranted intrusions and deli countermen. It is a little-known fact that New York deli countermen can predict the sex of an unborn child. (This is providing that you order, of course. For a counterman to provide this service requires a minimum order of seventy-five cents.) This is how it works: You walk into a deli and say, "Large fruit salad, turkey on rye with Russian, a large Perrier and a tea with lemon." The deli counterman says, "Who you buying for, the Rangers?" and all the other deli countermen laugh.

This is where many pregnant women make their mistake. If it is wintertime and you are wearing a loose coat, the preferred answer to this question is, "I'm buying for all the women in my office." If it is summer and you are visibly pregnant, you are sunk. The deli counterman will lean over the counter and say, studying your contours, "It's a boy." He will then tell a tedious story about sex determination, his Aunt Olga, and a clove of garlic, while behind you people waiting on line shift and sigh and begin to make Zero Population Growth and fat people comments. (I once dealt with an East Side counterman who argued with me about the tea because he said it was bad for the baby, but he was an actor waiting for his big break, not a professional.) Deli countermen do not believe in amnio-centesis. Friends who have had amniocentesis tell me that once or twice they tried to argue: "I already know it's a girl." "You are wrong." They gave up: "Don't forget the napkins."

There are also cabdrivers. One promptly pulled over in the middle of Central Park when I told him I had that queasy feeling. When I turned to get back into the cab, it was gone. The driver had taken the $1.80 on the meter as a loss. Luckily, I never had this problem again, because as I grew larger, nine out of ten cabdrivers refused to pick me up. They had read the tabloids. They knew about all those babies christened Checker (actually, I suppose now most of them are Plymouths) because they're born in the back seat in the Midtown Tunnel. The only way I could get a cabdriver to pick me up after the sixth month was to hide my stomach by having a friend walk in front of me. The exception was a really tiresome young cabdriver whose wife's due date was a week after mine and who wanted to practice panting with me for that evening's childbirth class. Most of the time I wound up taking public transportation.

And so it came down to the subways: men looking at their feet, reading their newspapers, working hard to keep from noticing me. One day

but90177_ch01.indd 21 06/08/12 8:19 PM

on the IRT I was sitting down—it was a spot left unoccupied because the rainwater had spilled in the window from an elevated station—when I noticed a woman standing who was or should have been on her way to the hospital.

"When are you due?" I asked her. "Thursday," she gasped. "I'm September," I said. "Take my seat." She slumped down and said, with feeling, "You are the first person to give me a seat on the subway since I've been pregnant." Being New Yorkers, with no sense of personal privacy, we began to exchange subway, taxi, and deli counterman stories. When a man sitting nearby got up to leave, he snarled, "You wanted women's lib, now you got it."

Well, I'm here to say that I did get women's lib, and it is my only fond memory of being pregnant in New York. (Actually, I did find pregnancy useful on opening day at Yankee Stadium, when great swarms of people parted at the sight of me as though I were Charlton Heston in *The Ten Commandments.* But it had a pariah quality that was not totally soothing.)

10 One evening rush hour during my eighth month I was waiting for a train at Columbus Circle. The loudspeaker was crackling unintelligibly and ominously and there were as many people on the platform as currently live in Santa Barbara, Calif. Suddenly I had the dreadful feeling that I was being surrounded. "To get mugged at a time like this," I thought ruefully. "And this being New York, they'll probably try to take the baby, too." But as I looked around I saw that the people surrounding me were four women, some armed with shoulder bags. "You need protection," one said, and being New Yorkers, they ignored the fact that they did not know one another and joined forces to form a kind of phalanx around me, not unlike those that offensive linemen build around a quarterback.

When the train arrived and the doors opened, they moved forward, with purpose, and I was swept inside, not the least bit bruised. "Looks like a boy," said one with a grin, and as the train began to move, we all grabbed the silver overhead handles and turned away from one another.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it difficult to be pregnant or "have any kind of disability" in New York?
2. What two enduring memories does Quindlen include in the opening paragraph? How do these details frame the rest of the essay?
3. Quindlen writes that "There's no privacy in New York" and "New York has no pity." How does she demonstrate this? Do you agree with her general assessment?
4. How do New York cabdrivers react to pregnant passengers?

5. What metaphor does the author use to describe the helpful women on the platform? How does this scene illustrate the general attitude towards privacy amongst New Yorkers?

Writing Tasks

- Narrate a subway moment of your own that you consider to be typically New York.
- Write a short essay in which you discuss at least three qualities that make a New Yorker. Be sure to provide examples.

Take the F

Ian Frazier

Ian Frazier (b. 1951) grew up in Ohio and lived for years in Brooklyn. He is a regular contributor to *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic Monthly*. His recent books include *On the Rez* (2000) and *Gone to New York: Adventures in the City* (2005).

Pre-Reading

Do you recall any vivid moments on the subway? What made those moments memorable?

1 Brooklyn, New York, has the undefined, hard-to-remember shape of a stain. I never know what to tell people when they ask me where in it I live. It sits at the western tip of Long Island at a diagonal that does not conform neatly to the points of the compass. People in Brooklyn do not describe where they live in terms of north or west or south. They refer instead to their neighborhoods, and to the nearest subway lines. I live on the edge of Park Slope, a neighborhood by the crest of a low ridge that runs through the borough. Prospect Park is across the street. Airplanes in the landing pattern for LaGuardia Airport sometimes fly right over my building; every few minutes, on certain sunny days, perfectly detailed airplane shadows slide down my building and up the building opposite in a blink. You can see my building from the plane—it's on the left-hand side of Prospect Park, the longer patch of green you cross after the expanse of Green-Wood Cemetery.

We moved to a co-op apartment in a four-story building a week before our daughter was born. She is now six. I grew up in the country and would not have expected ever to live in Brooklyn. My daughter is a city kid, with less sympathy for certain other parts of the country. When we visited Montana, she was disappointed by the scarcity of pizza places. I overheard her explaining—she was three or four then—to a Montana kid about Brooklyn. She said, "In Brooklyn, there is a lot of broken glass, so you have to wear shoes. And, there is good pizza." She is stern in her judgment of pizza. At the very low end of the pizza-ranking scale is some pizza she once had in New Hampshire, a category now called New Hampshire pizza. In the middle is some O.K. pizza she once had at the Bronx Zoo,

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which she calls zoo pizza. At the very top is the pizza at the pizza place where the big kids go, about two blocks from our house.

Our subway is the F train. It runs under our building and shakes the floor. The F is generally a reliable train, but one spring as I walked in the park I saw emergency vehicles gathered by a concrete-sheathed hole in the lawn. Firemen lifted a metal lid from the hole and descended into it. After a while, they reappeared, followed by a few people, then dozens of people, then a whole lot of people—passengers from the disabled F train, climbing one at a time out an exit shaft. On the F, I sometimes see large women in straw hats reading a newspaper called the *Caribbean Sunrise,* and Orthodox Jews bent over Talmudic texts in which the footnotes have footnotes, and groups of teenagers wearing identical red bandannas with identical red plastic baby pacifiers in the corners of their mouths, and female couples in porkpie hats, and young men with the silhouettes of the Manhattan skyline razored into their short side hair from one temple around to the other, and Russian-speaking men with thick wrists and big wristwatches, and a hefty, tall woman with long, straight blond hair who hums and closes her eyes and absently practices cello fingerings on the metal subway pole. As I watched the F-train passengers emerge among the grass and trees of Prospect Park, the faces were as varied as usual, but the expressions of indignant surprise were all about the same.

Just past my stop, Seventh Avenue, Manhattan-bound F trains rise from underground to cross the Gowanus Canal. The train sounds different—lighter, quieter—in the open air. From the elevated tracks, you can see the roofs of many houses stretching back up the hill to Park Slope, and a bumper crop of rooftop graffiti, and neon signs for Eagle Clothes and Kentile Floors, and flat expanses of factory roofs where seagulls stand on one leg around puddles in the sagging spots. There are fuel-storage tanks surrounded by earthen barriers, and slag piles, and conveyor belts leading down to the oil-slicked waters of the canal. On certain days, the sludge at the bottom of the canal causes it to bubble. Two men fleeing the police jumped in the canal a while ago; one made it across, the other quickly died. When the subway doors open at the Smith-Ninth Street stop, you can see the bay, and sometimes smell the ocean breeze. This stretch of elevated is the highest point of the New York subway system. To the south you can see the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, to the north the World Trade towers. For just a few moments, the Statue of Liberty appears between passing buildings. Pieces of a neighborhood—laundry on clotheslines, a standup swimming pool, a plaster saint, a satellite dish, a rectangle of lawn—slide by like quickly dealt cards. Then the train descends again; growing over the wall just before the tunnel is a wisteria bush, which blooms pale blue every May.

I have spent days, weeks on the F train. The trip from Seventh Avenue to midtown Manhattan is long enough so that every ride can produce its own minisociety of riders, its own forty-minute Ship of Fools. Once a woman an arm's length from me on a crowded train pulled a knife on a man who threatened her. I remember the argument and the principals, but mostly I remember the knife—its flat, curved wood-grain handle inlaid with brass fittings at each end, its long, tapered blade. Once a man sang the words of the Lord's Prayer to a mournful, syncopated tune, and he fitted the mood of the morning so exactly that when he asked for money at the end the riders reached for their wallets and purses as if he'd pulled a gun. Once a big white kid with some friends was teasing a small old Hispanic lady, and when he got off the train I looked at him through the window and he slugged it hard next to my face. Once a thin woman and a fat woman sitting side by side had a long and loud conversation about someone they intended to slap silly: "Her butt be in the *hospital!*" Bring out the ar-*tillery!*" The terminus of the F in Brooklyn is at Coney Island, not far from the beach. At an off hour, I boarded the train and found two or three passengers and, walking around on the floor, a crab. The passengers were looking at the crab. Its legs clicked on the floor like varnished fingernails. It moved in this direction, then that, trying to get comfortable. It backed itself under a seat, against the wall. Then it scooted out just after some new passengers had sat down there, and they really screamed. Passengers at the next stop saw it and laughed. When a boy lifted his foot as if to stomp it, everybody cried, "Noooh!" By the time we reached Jay Street-Borough Hall, there were maybe a dozen of us in the car, all absorbed in watching the crab. The car doors opened and a heavyset woman with good posture entered. She looked at the crab; then, sternly, at all of us. She let a moment pass. Then she demanded, *"Whose is that?"* A few stops later, a short man with a mustache took a manila envelope, bent down, scooped the crab into it, closed it, and put it in his coat pocket.

The smells in Brooklyn: coffee, fingernail polish, eucalyptus, the breath from laundry rooms, pot roast, Tater Tots. A woman I know who grew up here says she moved away because she could not stand the smell of cooking food in the hallway of her parents' building. I feel just the opposite. I used to live in a converted factory above an Army-Navy store, and I like being in a place that smells like people live there. In the mornings, I sometimes wake to the smell of toast, and I still don't know exactly whose toast it is. And I prefer living in a borough of two and a half million inhabitants, the most of any borough in the city. I think of all the rural places, the pine-timbered canyons and within-commuting-distance farmland, that we are preserving by not living there. I like the immensities of the borough, the unrolling miles of Eastern Parkway and Ocean Parkway and

Linden Boulevard, and the dishevelled outlying parks strewn with tree limbs and with shards of glass held together by liquor-bottle labels, and the tough bridges—the Williamsburg and the Manhattan—and the gentle Brooklyn Bridge. And I like the way the people talk; some really do have Brooklyn accents, really do say "dese" and "dose." A week or two ago, a group of neighbors stood on a street corner watching a peregrine falcon on a building cornice contentedly eating a pigeon it had caught, and the sunlight came through its tail feathers, and a woman said to a man, "Look at the tail," "it's so ah-range," and the man replied, "Yeah, I soar it." Like many Americans, I fear living in a nowhere, in a place that is no-place; in Brooklyn, that doesn't trouble me at all.

Everybody, it seems, is here. At Grand Army Plaza, I have seen traffic tieups caused by Haitians and others rallying in support of President Aristide, and by St. Patrick's Day parades, and by Jews of the Lubavitcher sect celebrating the birthday of their Grand Rebbe with a slow procession of ninety-three motor homes—one for each year of his life. Local taxis have bumper stickers that say "Allah Is Great": one of the men who made the bomb that blew up the World Trade Center used an apartment just a few blocks from me. When an election is held in Russia, crowds line up to cast ballots at a Russian polling place in Brighton Beach. A while ago, I volunteer-taught reading at a public elementary school across the park. One of my students, a girl, was part Puerto Rican, part Greek, and part Welsh. Her looks were a lively combination, set off by sea-green eyes. I went to a map store in Manhattan and bought maps of Puerto Rico, Greece, and Wales to read with her, but they didn't interest her. A teacher at the school was directing a group of students to set up chairs for a program in the auditorium, and she said to me, "We have a problem here—each of these kids speaks a different language." She asked the kids to tell me where they were from. One was from Korea, one from Brazil, one from Poland, one from Guyana, one from Taiwan. In the program that followed, a chorus of fourth and fifth graders sang "God Bless America," "You're a Grand Old Flag," and "I'm a Yankee-Doodle Dandy."

Discussion Questions

1. How do people in Brooklyn describe where they are from? Do you yourself find this to be true?
2. What does the comment of Frazier's daughter, "In Brooklyn, there is a lot of broken glass," imply about urban life? Can you think of other features that also represent the city?
3. Focus on Frazier's use of topic sentences. How do they work to organize the essay?

4. What is the effect of Frazier's close attention to details throughout his essay? Focus on specific examples.
5. How does the final scene connect with the overall theme of the essay?

Writing Tasks

- Write about what you miss the most when you are away from New York.
- Take a subway ride and get off at a stop you are not familiar with. With pen in hand, explore and observe the environment. Compare and contrast this neighborhood with your own.

where i'm from

Willie Perdomo

Willie Perdomo is the author of *Where a Nickel Costs a Dime* and *Smoking Lovely*, which received a PEN Open Book Award. He has also been published in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Bomb*, *Poems of New York*, and *The Harlem Reader.* He is a three-time Poetry and Fiction Fellow at the New York Foundation for the Arts and currently teaches at Fordham University.

Pre-Reading

When asked to describe where you are from, how do you usually respond?

Where I'm From

Because she liked the "kind of music" that I listened to and she liked the way I walked as well as the way I talked, she always wanted to know where I was from. 1

If I said that I was from 110th Street and Lexington Avenue, right in the heart of a transported Puerto Rican town, where the hodedores live and night turns to day without sleep, do you think then she might know where I was from?

Where I'm from, Puerto Rico stays on our minds when the fresh breeze of café con leche y pan con mantequilla comes through our half-open windows and under our doors while the sun starts to rise.

Where I'm from, babies fall asleep to the bark of a German shepherd named Tarzan. We hear his wandering footsteps under a midnight sun. Tarzan has learned quickly to ignore the woman who begs her man to stop slapping her with his fist. "Please, baby! Por favor! I swear it wasn't me. I swear to my mother. Mameeee!!" (Her dead mother told her that this would happen one day.)

Where I'm from, Independence Day is celebrated every day. The final gunshot from last night's murder is followed by the officious knock of a warrant squad coming to take your bread, coffee and freedom away. 5

Where I'm from, the police come into your house without knocking. They throw us off rooftops and say we slipped. They shoot my father and say he was crazy. They put a bullet in my head and say they found me that way.

"Where I'm From," from *Where a Nickel Costs a Dime* by Willie Perdomo. Copyright © 1996 by Willie Perdomo. Used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Where I'm from, you run to the hospital emergency room because some little boy spit a razor out of his mouth and carved a crescent into your face. But you have to understand, where I'm from even the dead have to wait until their number is called.

Where I'm from, you can listen to Big Daddy retelling stories on his corner. He passes a pint of light Bacardi, pouring the dead's tributary swig onto the street. "I'm God when I put a gun to your head. I'm the judge and you in my courtroom."

Where I'm from, it's the late night scratch of rats' feet that explains what my mother means when she says slowly, "Bueno, mijo, eso es la vida del pobre." (Well, son, that is the life of the poor.)

Where I'm from, it's sweet like my grandmother reciting a quick prayer over a pot of hot rice and beans. Where I'm from, it's pretty like my niece stopping me in the middle of the street and telling me to notice all the stars in the sky. 10

Discussion Questions

1. Why is the speaker's friend so interested in him at first?
2. What elements of his neighborhood does the speaker emphasize?
3. Describe the relationship between the residents and the police.
4. What is the effect of beginning the second stanza with the conditional word "if"? Do you think that the speaker's friend will ever get the whole story of his culture and background?
5. Many of the descriptive scenes throughout this poem are harsh, but the final stanza is radically different. Discuss this shift in tone.
6. What is the effect of using so much Spanish in this poem? Refer to specific instances.

Writing Task

- Write your own "Where I'm From" poem. To do this, begin five stanzas with the dependant clause "Where I'm From, ..." Complete each dependant clause with a descriptive passage that describes either your neighborhood or literally the place where you are from (if not New York).

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Fort Greene Dreams

Nelson George

Nelson George (b. 1957) is a music and culture critic, journalist, and filmmaker. After attending St. John's University, he served as a music editor for *Billboard* magazine from 1982 to 1989. In 1986, he helped to finance director Spike Lee's debut feature *She's Gotta Have It*. He is also the author of *Where Did Our Love Go: The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound, The Death of Rhythm & Blues*, and, most recently, a memoir called *City Kid*, from which the following essay is excerpted.

Pre-Reading

What do you like or dislike most about your neighborhood?

In spring 1985 I was awakened in my Jamaica, Queens, apartment by a phone call from a young filmmaker I'd recently befriended. His high-pitched voice filled my ear. 1

"Nelson, this is Spike! Loved your piece on Russell Simmons in the *Voice!*"

He was referring to my profile of Russ that had run in April of that year. I thanked him, and we chatted. I told him I was moving to Brooklyn, to an area called Fort Greene.

"That's where I live!" he told me excitedly. Turned out I was moving right around the corner from him. I didn't know it at the time, but the publication of the Simmons profile, and moving from Queens to Fort Greene, was the end and beginning of two eras for me.

5 Moving from my Queens apartment with Rocky took me out of daily contact with the business of hip-hop and, happily, ended my long-ass E and F train rides into the city. I was back in Brooklyn, but to a very different 'hood than the one I'd grown up in. All I knew was that Fort Greene was just east of downtown Brooklyn, where I had spent my whole childhood going shopping with my mother. When I did my internship at the *Phoenix* I actually worked just blocks from Fort Greene. Yet streets such as DeKalb, St. Felix, and Carlton were as foreign to me as avenues in Staten

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Island. I knew that the Fort Greene projects had produced the basketball greats Bernard and Albert King. The area was also always regarded as a hotbed for gang activity—first in the seventies, with the Tomahawks, and in the eighties, with the Decepticons.

Fort Greene, and my new place at 19 Willoughby Avenue, were easy to love. In contrast to where I'd grown up in Brownsville and lived in Queens, Fort Greene was very close to Manhattan. On almost every major subway line, Fort Greene was no more than two or three stops into Brooklyn, so going out, especially anywhere below Fourteenth Street, was made very convenient. The streets were lined with tall, thick trees fronting magnificent brownstones. There was a picturesque park with rolling hills and tennis courts, and in the fall it filled with hard, brown, fallen acorns that I used to collect and on occasion toss at friends. Fort Greene was close enough to Manhattan that I could leave my apartment at 7:30 P.M. and catch an 8:15 P.M. show at the Bottom Line in Greenwich Village, which made my life infinitely easier.

Plus, the apartment itself was a marvel. It was a duplex with wood floors, two bedrooms, twenty-foot-high ceilings, a large kitchen, exposed-brick walls, and a large backyard. I vowed when my family moved out of the projects that I would never live in a large apartment building again. However, I never imagined that I could live in a place this spacious.

I was able to afford this place because my quickie bio of Michael Jackson had been a bestseller. For the first time in my life I had disposable income, much of which I would squander on wine, women, and vinyl. But whatever I wasted in riches came back to me threefold in experience.

My first month in 19 Willoughby I actually slept upstairs in the long living room, in awe of all the space as I thought back to the bedroom and cramped closet I'd shared with my sister. I calculated that you could have fit our entire public housing apartment in my upstairs. I would live in 19 Willoughby from 1985 to 1992, the most important years of my life in terms of my immersion in music, film, writing, and sex. In 19 Willoughby I wrote five books, including my breakthough work, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*. I invested in *She's Gotta Have It,* and a couple of other movies, and wrote and produced screenplays. Alone in this large apartment my ambition grew, as if I had to think bigger to fill the space I was now living in. Sometimes it ate at me at night, forcing me out of bed, back to my legal pad to grind out one more record review, and to jot down ideas for books I was sure would change the world. It's likely I was overstimulated by all the vitality of that period's black culture. It was absolutely true that the talent around me was inspiring.

Going out to pick up take-out soul food at a basement spot on DeKalb, walking to the tasty Italian restaurant Cino's or to Junior's on Flatbush

10

Avenue for thick chocolate cake, I'd stroll past the apartments of Spike Lee, writer Thulani Davis, a slew of jazz musicians (Lester Bowie, Wynton and Branford Marsalis, Cecil Taylor, Betty Carter), and other not as well known but vital writers, designers, musicians, and actors. The crackle of creative energy animated the air, as black folk made art all around me. It was a tactile, tangible feeling, and I adored it. With my take-out food in a bag I'd hurry back to 19 Willoughby to wolf down my meal and get back to work, anxious not to be left behind.

It's not that Fort Greene circa mid-eighties was paradise. One reason all these great brownstone apartments were affordable by young artists was crime. Just a long block from my apartment were several public housing projects, which bordered the park on the Myrtle Avenue side. They weren't quite as grim as the Tilden projects I'd grown up in, but they were plenty tough. When crack began running amok in Brooklyn's streets, these projects were a center of trafficking, spawning a wave of dealers and addicts that had you keeping your eyes open at night.

My first week in 19 Willoughby I'd set up my office in the back bedroom, which had big gated windows looking into the backyard. I was sitting in front of my first laptop seeking inspiration when a man appeared in my backyard with a TV in his arms. He'd somehow hopped my neighbor's fence with it, and was preparing to do the same to mine to escape onto the street. I was about to call the cops when, over the fence abutting the street, two policemen hopped over and snagged the thief. I felt like I was watching a live theatrical version of the reality show *Cops.* Welcome to Fort Greene, I guess.

In all my years in Brooklyn I've never been mugged. There's only been one robbery at one of my places in Fort Greene, and it was my fault. As I was leaving one morning a FedEx package arrived. I got distracted as I was signing, and left my door open. When I got home my VCR was gone. Much worse, my satin *Soul Train* jacket, with my name embossed on the lapel, was stolen too. Somewhere out there is my personalized *Soul Train* jacket, a loss I mourn to this day.

After *She's Gotta Have It* (which I'll get to in a bit) was released in 1986, Fort G became internationally known as home base to my generation of artists. What Spike's film did was expand that early community, and attract other artsy black folk. Chris Rock, Rosie Perez, rapper Daddy-O of Stetsasonic, Living Colour's Vernon Reid, actress Alva Rogers of *Daughters of the Dust*, saxophonist/bandleader Steve Coleman, and Def Jam executive Bill Stephney were among the wave that moved to Fort Greene post-Spike. *The New York Times* was among the many publications that profiled the area, making Fort Greene synonymous with a "Brooklyn boheme" vibe. Spike was very much the mayor of that moment, being the most celebrated

artist, the biggest employer of local talent, and a buyer of real estate. At one point he owned five buildings in Fort Greene.

This mix of youth, creativity, and proximity meant parties were a regular staple of Fort Greene. I'd roll into the house of actor Wesley Snipes or cartoonist Barbara Brandon for food, drinks, and dancing. There are folks I saw at those parties who married each other, had kids and, in a few cases, are now divorced. There was lots of sex to be had, and lots of cheating too.

One tangible document of the creative ferment in Fort Greene, and the overall New York black community, was a photo taken by Anthony Barboza for an unpublished *The New York Times Magazine* piece on the "new black aesthetic" by Trey Ellis in 1989. It was taken at the then new offices of Spike's 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks on DeKalb Avenue across from Brooklyn Technical High School. Most in the photo were residents of brownstone Brooklyn—Spike; the writer Lisa Jones; her sister, the art historian Keli; visual artist Lorna Simpson; guitarist Vernon Reid; Bill Stephney; Chris Rock; and myself. In addition, there were fellow travelers from Harlem, Warrington and Reggie Hudlin, and downtown Manhattan icons like theater director George C. Wolf, Fab Five Freddie, and Russell Simmons.

While living at 19 Willoughby I learned what kind of writer, what kind of lover, and even what kind of son I was. But the most surprising revelation was that I was a mentor and, like my mother, a kind of teacher. Not only did I write about artists and hang with them, but I found myself being a kind of one-man support network for people—mostly aspiring artists—I believed in. During the mid-eighties they tended to be my peers, gifted folks who needed some contacts or an introduction to someone to move forward. This dynamic was at work with Russell, as well as with Andre Harrell, a so-so MC who'd go on to form the signature rap label Uptown, and the indie filmmaking brothers Warrington and Reggie Hudlin in the years before they broke through with the hit comedy *House Party.*

Over time I grew more settled in the role, and I became a more hands-on mentor, either collaborating with younger artists or critiquing screenplays, essays, or recordings with tough love. My attorney used to tell me I was a natural producer, but at first I wasn't sure if that was a good thing. Producers in film and television seemed more businessmen than artists, and I always saw myself as a creator.

Yet, as I came to understand the place where mentoring, criticism, and producing overlapped, I moved into that sphere more gracefully than I'd ever imagined. Somewhere in my makeup—perhaps from my mother—I had a nurturing gene that first manifested itself at 19 Willoughby, and that would blossom in the years ahead, and would, in fact, define my life, and self-image, as much as writing.

A few of the people I helped became household names, but, like the majority of ambitious folks who use the city as a springboard, most either went on to humble careers or didn't make it at all. Sometimes they were too insecure to survive the disappointments and rejection. Others allowed their egos to blind them to their limitations, and sometimes, despite immense talent, never learned to play well with others. Whether these artists won or lost, I found being close to their struggles exciting and drew lessons from them that I applied to myself. 20

The most important lesson was to measure myself not by sudden success or rapid failure but by my body of work. My dream was to write a bookshelf of volumes, so many that one day I might drown in them, paper and ink suffocating me in an ocean of my own thoughts. More practically, I wanted to have a full, active life, and being productive seemed the way to ensure that.

Many writers aspire to be Ralph Ellison, to write a starburst of a book that would light the literary sky forever. I was more interested in emulating Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, or Gordon Parks, all of whom had long, varied careers that produced many works and embraced many disciplines. This philosophy gave me patience and a perspective on success (or lack of it). So many folks I met burned out on early success and early failure. If you were in it for the long haul, rolling with the highs and lows was easier, knowing it was all part of a larger whole. Jimi Hendrix may be a deeply romantic figure in our culture, but I'd rather have the body of work of Prince and Stevie Wonder (not to mention the life span). Achieving sustained excellence is what I preached to others and sought for myself.

Discussion Questions

1. Who is the "Spike" that calls the author at the start of the essay? What do you know of this Brooklyn filmmaker's work?
2. Explain what you think Nelson George means when he says, "I was back in Brooklyn, but to a very different 'hood than the one I'd grown up in." Was Fort Greene entirely different from the Tilden projects where he grew up?
3. What are the advantages to living in Fort Greene especially for a music critic such as Nelson?
4. Why do you think Fort Greene was such a creative area in the 1980s? What reputation does it have currently?
5. What significant self-realization does Nelson George have while living at 19 Willoughby?
6. What lessons about writing and fame does the author learn?
7. Nelson claims that the influence of Fort Greene on black pop culture came close to rivaling that of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Where do you

think the next new wave of artists and writers will come from? What will their subject matter be?

Writing Tasks

- Write an essay in which you describe the effects your living space and/or neighborhood have on your life.
- Write an essay in which you explore the work of a famous Fort Greene resident such as novelist Richard Wright, filmmaker Spike Lee, poets Walt Whitman or Marianne Moore, or basketball player Bernard King. Alternately, research and write about a famous New Yorker who hails from your neighborhood.
- Research the early history of Fort Greene. Was it once an actual fort? Who advocated for Fort Greene park? Who were its earliest residents?

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Here Is New York

E. B. White

E. B. White was born in 1899 in Mount Vernon, New York and graduated from Cornell University. He joined *The New Yorker* magazine in 1925 and wrote columns in "Talk of the Town." It was while living in Brooklyn that he wrote two famous children's books: *Stuart Little* (1945) and *Charlotte's Web* (1952). White died in 1985.

Pre-Reading

What do you believe makes New York unlike any other city?

1 On any person who desires such queer prizes, New York will bestow the gift of loneliness and the gift of privacy. It is this largess that accounts for the presence within the city's walls of a considerable section of the population; for the residents of Manhattan are to a large extent strangers who have pulled up stakes somewhere and come to town, seeking sanctuary or fulfillment or some greater or lesser grail. The capacity to make such dubious gifts is a mysterious quality of New York. It can destroy an individual, or it can fulfill him, depending a good deal on luck. No one should come to New York to live unless he is willing to be lucky.

New York is the concentrate of art and commerce and sport and religion and entertainment and finance, bringing to a single compact arena the gladiator, the evangelist, the promoter, the actor, the trader and the merchant. It carries on its lapel the unexpungeable odor of the long past, so that no matter where you sit in New York you feel the vibrations of great times and tall deeds, of queer people and events and undertakings. I am sitting at the moment in a stifling hotel room in 90-degree heat, halfway down an air shaft, in midtown. No air moves in or out of the room, yet I am curiously affected by emanations from the immediate surroundings. I am twenty-two blocks from where Rudolph Valentino lay in state, eight blocks from where Nathan Hale was executed, five blocks from the publisher's office where Ernest Hemingway hit Max Eastman on the nose, four miles from where Walt Whitman sat sweating out editorials for the Brooklyn Eagle, thirty-four blocks from the street Willa Cather lived in when she came to New York to write books about Nebraska. . . . (I could continue

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this list indefinitely); and for that matter I am probably occupying the very room that any number of exalted and some wise memorable characters sat in, some of them on hot, breathless afternoons, lonely and private and full of their own sense of emanations from without.

New York blends the gift of privacy with the excitement of participation; and better than most dense communities it succeeds in insulating the individual (if he wants it, and almost everybody wants or needs it) against all enormous and violent and wonderful events that are taking place every minute. Since I have been sitting in this miasmic air shaft, a good many rather splashy events have occurred in town. A man shot and killed his wife in a fit of jealousy. It caused no stir outside his block and got only small mention in the papers. I did not attend. Since my arrival, the greatest air show ever staged in all the world took place in town. I didn't attend and neither did most of the eight million other inhabitants, although they say there was quite a crowd. I didn't even hear any planes except a couple of westbound commercial airliners that habitually use this air shaft to fly over. . . .

I mention these merely to show that New York is peculiarly constructed to absorb almost anything that comes along (whether a thousand-foot liner out of the East or a twenty-thousand-man convention out of the West) without inflicting the event on its inhabitants; so that every event is, in a sense, optional, and the inhabitant is in the happy position of being able to choose his spectacle and so conserve his soul. In most metropolises, small and large, the choice is often not with the individual at all. . . .

5

The quality in New York that insulates its inhabitants from life may simply weaken them as individuals. Perhaps it is healthier to live in a community where, when a cornice falls, you feel the blow; where, when the governor passes, you see at any rate his hat.

I am not defending New York in this regard. Many of its settlers are probably here merely to escape, not face, reality. But whatever it means, it is a rather rare gift, and I believe it has a positive effect on the creative capacities of New Yorkers—for creation is in part merely the business of forgoing the great and small distractions.

Although New York often imparts a feeling of great forlornness or forsakeness, it seldom seems dead or unresourceful; and you always feel that either by shifting your location ten blocks or by reducing your fortune by five dollars you can experience rejuvenation. Many people who have no real independence of spirit depend on the city's tremendous variety and sources of excitement for spiritual sustenance and maintenance of morale. In the country there are a few chances of sudden rejuvenation—a shift in weather, perhaps, or something arriving in the mail. But in New York the chances are endless. I think that although many persons are here from

but90177_ch01.indd 38 06/08/12 8:19 PM

some excess of spirit (which caused them to break away from their small town), some, too, are here from a deficiency of spirit, who find in New York a protection, or an easy substitution.

There are roughly three New Yorks. There is, first, the New York of the man or woman who was born here, who takes the city for granted and accepts its size and its turbulence as natural and inevitable. Second, there is the New York of the commuter—the city that is devoured by locusts each day and spat out each night. Third, there is the New York of the person who was born somewhere else and came to New York in quest of something. Of these three trembling cities the greatest is the last—the city of final destination, the city that is a goal. It is this third city that accounts for New York's high-strung disposition, its poetical deportment, its dedication to the arts, and its incomparable achievements. Commuters give the city its tidal restlessness; natives give it solidity and continuity; but the settlers give it passion. And whether it is a farmer arriving from Italy to set up a small grocery store in a slum, or a young girl arriving from a small town in Mississippi to escape the indignity of being observed by her neighbors, or a boy arriving from the Corn Belt with a manuscript in his suitcase and a pain in his heart, it makes no difference: each embraces New York with the intense excitement of first love, each absorbs New York with the fresh eyes of an adventurer, each generates heat and light to dwarf the Consolidated Edison Company. . . .

A poem compresses much in a small space and adds music, thus heightening its meaning. The city is like poetry: it compresses all life, all races and breeds, into a small island and adds music and the accompaniment of internal engines. The island of Manhattan is without any doubt the greatest human concentrate on earth, the poem whose magic is comprehensible to millions of permanent residents but whose full meaning will always remain illusive. At the feet of the tallest and plushiest offices lie the crummiest slums. The genteel mysteries housed in the Riverside Church are only a few blocks from the voodoo charms of Harlem. The merchant princes, riding to Wall Street in their limousines down the East River Drive, pass within a few hundred yards of the gypsy kings; but the princes do not know they are passing kings, and the kings are not up yet anyway—they live a more leisurely life than the princes and get drunk more consistently.

New York is nothing like Paris; it is nothing like London; and it is not Spokane multiplied by sixty, or Detroit multiplied by four. It is by all odds the loftiest of cities. It even managed to reach the highest point in the sky at the lowest moment of the depression. The Empire State Building shot twelve hundred and fifty feet into the air when it was madness to put out as much as six inches of new growth. (The building has a mooring mast

10

that no dirigible has ever tied to; it employs a man to flush toilets in slack times; it has been hit by an airplane in a fog, struck countless times by lightning, and been jumped off of by so many unhappy people that pedestrians instinctively quicken step when passing Fifth Avenue and 34th Street.)

Manhattan has been compelled to expand skyward because of the absence of any other direction in which to grow. This, more than any other thing, is responsible for its physical majesty. It is to the nation what the white church spire is to the village—the visible symbol of aspiration and faith, the white plume saying that the way is up. . . .

It is a miracle that New York works at all. The whole thing is implausible. Every time the residents brush their teeth, millions of gallons of water must be drawn from the Catskills and the hills of Westchester. When a young man in Manhattan writes a letter to his girl in Brooklyn, the love message gets blown to her through a pneumatic tube—pfft—just like that. The subterranean system of telephone cables, power lines, steam pipes, gas mains and sewer pipes is reason enough to abandon the island to the gods and the weevils. Every time an incision is made in the pavement, the noisy surgeons expose ganglia that are tangled beyond belief. By rights New York should have destroyed itself long ago, from panic or fire or rioting or failure of some vital supply line in its circulatory system or from some deep labyrinthine short circuit. Long ago the city should have experienced an insoluble traffic snarl at some impossible bottleneck. It should have perished of hunger when food lines failed for a few days. It should have been wiped out by a plague starting in its slums or carried in by ships' rats. It should have been overwhelmed by the sea that licks at it on every side. The workers in its myriad cells should have succumbed to nerves, from the fearful pall of smoke-fog that drifts over every few days from Jersey, blotting out all light at noon and leaving the high offices suspended, men groping and depressed, and the sense of world's end. It should have been touched in the head by the August heat and gone off its rocker.

Mass hysteria is a terrible force, yet New Yorkers seem always to escape it by some tiny margin: they sit in stalled subways without claustrophobia, they extricate themselves from panic situations by some lucky wisecrack, they meet confusion and congestion with patience and grit—a sort of perpetual muddling through. Every facility is inadequate—the hospitals and schools and playgrounds are overcrowded, the express highways are feverish, the unimproved highways and bridges are bottlenecks; there is not enough air and not enough light, and there is usually either too much heat or too little. But the city makes up for its hazards and its deficiencies by supplying its citizens with massive doses of a supplementary vitamin—the sense of belonging to something unique, cosmopolitan, mighty and unparalleled. . . .

The oft-quoted thumbnail sketch of New York is, of course: "It's a wonderful place, but I'd hate to live there." I have an idea that people from villages and small towns, people accustomed to the convenience and the friendliness of neighborhood over-the-fence living, are unaware that life in New York follows the neighborhood pattern. The city is literally a composite of tens of thousands of tiny neighborhood units. There are, of course, the big districts and big units: Chelsea and Murray Hill and Gramercy (which are residential units), Harlem (a racial unit), Greenwich Village (a unit dedicated to the arts and other matters), and there is Radio City (a commercial development), Peter Cooper Village (a housing unit), the Medical Center (a sickness unit) and many other sections each of which has some distinguishing characteristic. But the curious thing about New York is that each large geographical unit is composed of countless small neighborhoods. Each neighborhood is virtually self-sufficient. Usually it is no more than two or three blocks long and a couple of blocks wide. Each area is a city within a city within a city. Thus, no matter where you live in New York, you will find within a block or two a grocery store, a barbershop, a newsstand and shoeshine shack, an ice-coal-and-wood cellar (where you write your order on a pad outside as you walk by), a dry cleaner, a laundry, a delicatessen (beer and sandwiches delivered at any hour to your door), a flower shop, an undertaker's parlor, a movie house, a radio-repair shop, a stationer, a haberdasher, a tailor, a drugstore, a garage, a tearoom, a saloon, a hardware store, a liquor store, a shoe-repair shop. Every block or two, in most residential sections of New York, is a little main street. A man starts for work in the morning and before he has gone two hundred yards he has completed half a dozen missions: bought a paper, left a pair of shoes to be soled, picked up a pack of cigarettes, ordered a bottle of whiskey to be dispatched in the opposite direction against his home-coming, written a message to the unseen forces of the wood cellar, and notified the dry cleaner that a pair of trousers awaits call. Homeward bound eight hours later, he buys a bunch of pussy willows, a Mazda bulb, a drink, a shine—all between the corner where he steps off the bus and his apartment. So complete is each neighborhood, and so strong the sense of neighborhood, that many a New Yorker spends a lifetime within the confines of an area smaller than a country village. Let him walk two blocks from his corner and he is in a strange land and will feel uneasy till he gets back.

15 Storekeepers are particularly conscious of neighborhood boundary lines. A woman friend of mine moved recently from one apartment to another, a distance of three blocks. When she turned up, the day after the move, at the same grocer's that she had patronized for years, the proprietor was in ecstasy—almost in tears—at seeing her. "I was afraid," he said,

"now that you've moved away I wouldn't be seeing you any more." To him, *away* was three blocks, or about seven hundred and fifty feet. . . .

I've been remembering what it felt like as a young man to live in the same town with giants. When I first arrived in New York my personal giants were a dozen or so columnists and critics and poets whose names appeared regularly in the papers. . . .The city is always full of young worshipful beginners—young actors, young aspiring poets, ballerinas, painters, reporters, singers—each depending on his own brand of tonic to stay alive, each with his own stable of giants.

New York provides not only a continuing excitation but also a spectacle that is continuing. I wander around, re-examining this spectacle, hoping that I can put it on paper. It is Saturday, toward the end of the afternoon. I turn through West 48th Street. From the open windows of the drum and saxophone parlors come the listless sounds of musical instruction, monstrous insect noises in the brooding field of summer. The Cort Theater is disgorging its matinee audience. Suddenly the whole block is filled with the mighty voice of a street singer. He approaches, looking for an audience, a large, cheerful Negro with grand-opera contours, strolling with head thrown back, filling the canyon with uninhibited song. He carries a long cane as his sole prop, and is tidily but casually dressed—slacks, seersucker jacket, a book showing in his pocket. . . .

In the café of the Lafayette, the regulars sit and talk. It is busy yet peaceful. Nursing a drink, I stare through the west windows at the Manufacturers Trust Company and at the red brick fronts on the north side of Ninth Street, watching the red turning slowly to purple as the light dwindles. Brick buildings have a way of turning color at the end of the day, the way a red rose turns bluish as it wilts. The café is a sanctuary. The waiters are ageless and they change not. Nothing has been modernized. Notre Dame stands guard in its travel poster. The coffee is strong and full of chicory, and good.

Walk the Bowery under the El at night and all you feel is a sort of cold guilt. Touched for a dime, you try to drop the coin and not touch the hand, because the hand is dirty; you try to avoid the glance, because the glance accuses. This is not so much personal menace as universal—the cold menace of unresolved human suffering and poverty and the advanced stages of the disease alcoholism. On a summer night the drunks sleep in the open. The sidewalk is a free bed, and there are no lice. Pedestrians step along and over and around the still forms as though walking on a battlefield among the dead. In doorways, on the steps of the savings bank, the bums lie sleeping it off. Standing sentinel at each sleeper's head is the empty bottle from which he drained his release. Wedged in the crook of his arm is the paper bag containing his things. The glib barker on the sight-seeing bus tells his

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passengers that this is the "street of lost souls," but the Bowery does not think of itself as lost; it meets its peculiar problem in its own way—plenty of gin mills, plenty of flop-houses, plenty of indifference, and always, at the end of the line, Bellevue. . . .

20

The Consolidated Edison Company says there are eight million people in the five boroughs of New York, and the company is in a position to know. Of these eight million, two million are Jews—or one person in every four. Among this two million who are Jewish are, of course, a great many nationalities—Russian, German, Polish, Rumanian, Austrian, a long list. The Urban League of Greater New York estimates that the number of Negroes in New York is about 700,000. Of these, about 500,000 live in Harlem, a district that extends northward from 110th Street. The Negro population has increased rapidly in the last few years. There are half again as many Negroes in New York today as there were in 1940. There are about 230,000 Puerto Ricans living in New York. There are half a million Irish, half a million Germans. There are 900,000 Russians, 150,000 English, 400,000 Poles, and there are quantities of Finns and Czechs and Swedes and Danes and Norwegians and Latvians and Belgians and Welsh and Greeks, and even Dutch, who have been here from away back. It is very hard to say how many Chinese there are. Officially there are 12,000, but there are many Chinese who are in New York illegally and who don't like census takers.

The collision and the intermingling of these millions of foreign-born people representing so many races and creeds make New York a permanent exhibit of the phenomenon of one world. The citizens of New York are tolerant not only from disposition but from necessity. The city has to be tolerant, otherwise it would explode in a radioactive cloud of hate and rancor and bigotry. If the people were to depart even briefly from the peace of cosmopolitan intercourse, the town would blow up higher than a kite. . . .

To a New Yorker the city is both changeless and changing. In many respects it neither looks nor feels the way it did twenty-five years ago. . . . The slums are gradually giving way to the lofty housing projects—high in stature, high in purpose, low in rent. There are a couple of dozens of these new developments scattered around; each is a city in itself (one of them in the Bronx accommodates twelve thousand families), sky acreage hitherto untilled, lifting people far above the street, standardizing their sanitary life, giving them some place to sit other than an orange crate. Federal money, state money, city money and private money have flowed into these projects. Banks and insurance companies are in back of some of them. Architects have turned the buildings slightly on their bases, to catch more light. In some of them, rents are as low as eight dollars a room. Thousands

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of new units are still needed and will eventually be built, but New York never quite catches up with itself, is never in equilibrium. In flush times the population mushrooms and the new dwellings sprout from the rock. Come bad times and the population scatters and the lofts are abandoned and the landlord withers and dies.

New York has changed in tempo and in temper during the years I have known it. There is greater tension, increased irritability. You encounter it in many places, in many faces. The normal frustrations of modern life are here multiplied and amplified—a single run of a crosstown bus contains, for the driver, enough frustration and annoyance to carry him over the edge of sanity: the light that changes always an instant too soon, the passenger that bangs on the shut door, the truck that blocks the only opening, the coin that slips to the floor, the question asked at the wrong moment. There is greater tension and there is greater speed. Taxis roll faster than they rolled ten years ago—and they were rolling fast then. Hackmen used to drive with verve; now they sometimes seem to drive with desperation, toward the ultimate tip. On the West Side Highway, approaching the city, the motorist is swept along in a trance—a sort of fever of inescapable motion, goaded from behind, hemmed in on either side, a mere chip in a mill-race. . . .

The subtlest change in New York is something people don't speak much about but that is in everyone's mind. The city, for the first time in its long history, is destructible. A single flight of planes no bigger than a wedge of geese can quickly end this island fantasy, burn the towers, crumble the bridges, turn the underground passages into lethal chambers, cremate the millions. The intimation of mortality is part of New York now: in the sound of jets overhead, in the black headlines of the latest edition.

All dwellers in cities must live with the stubborn fact of annihilation; in New York the fact is somewhat more concentrated because of the concentration of the city itself, and because, of all targets, New York has a certain clear priority. In the mind of whatever perverted dreamer might loose the lightning, New York must hold a steady, irresistible charm. . . .

25

A block or two west of the new City of Man in Turtle Bay there is an old willow tree that presides over an interior garden. It is a battered tree, long suffering and much climbed, held together by strands of wire but beloved of those who know it. In a way it symbolizes the city: life under difficulties, growth against odds, sap-rise in the midst of concrete, and the steady reaching for the sun. Whenever I look at it nowadays, and feel the cold shadow of the planes, I think: "This must be saved, this particular thing, this very tree." If it were to go, all would go—this city, this mischievous and marvelous monument which not to look upon would be like death.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the two "dubious gifts" New York presents its citizens? What can they do to an individual?
2. According to White, what are the three types of New Yorkers? What conclusion does he draw from his divisions?
3. What does the author mean when he says that in New York "every event is, in a sense, optional"?
4. Why does White say: "It is a miracle that New York works at all"?
5. How does White define the city in relation to its neighborhoods?
6. What thoughts cross White's mind when he walks past a homeless person? Discuss his ambivalence.
7. What function does the metaphor of an old willow tree in the concluding paragraph serve? Can you think of another metaphor to describe New York?
8. This essay was written in 1948. How have things changed? In what ways are they the same?

Writing Tasks

- Choose your favorite passage. Summarize and respond to it according to your personal experience.
- Write an essay that encapsulates the characteristics of "your" New York.
- Look up a few of White's many references to people, places, and things. Share with your classmates what you discover.

Making Connections

1. Write an essay on the traits that make a New Yorker that incorporates and elaborates on the reflections made in two or more of the readings in this section.
2. Write an essay that discusses the elements that define your neighborhood (or your favorite place in the city). Consider the following possibilities, utilized by the writers you have read, for developing your essay. You may discuss a personal memory, describe the people and the highlights of the neighborhood (bridges, buildings, parks, restaurants, etc.), and/or document its sights and sounds. Consider also themes such as privacy, community, tensions, neighborhood transformations, and/or your relationship to the place where you dwell.

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