5. NEW YORK SCENES

AT THIS TIME MY MOTHER was living alone in a little apartment in Jamaica Long Island, working in the shoe factory, waiting for me to come home so I could keep her company and escort her to Radio City once a month. She had a tiny bedroom waiting for me, clean linen in the dresser, clean sheets in the bed. It was a relief after all the sleepingbags and bunks and railroad earth. It was another of the many opportunities she’s given me all her life to just stay home and write. I always give her all my leftover pay. I settled down to long sweet sleeps, day-long meditations in the house, writing, and long walks around beloved old Manhattan a half hour subway ride away. I roamed the streets, the bridges, Times Square, cafeterias, the waterfront, I looked up all my poet beatnik friends and roamed with them, I had love affairs with girls in the Village, I did everything with that great mad joy you get when you return to New York City.


Whole panoramas of New York everywhere, from New Jersey, from skyscrapers.—

EVEN FROM BARS, like a Third Avenue bar — 4 P.M. the men are all roaring in clink bonk glass brass-foot barrail “where ya goin’? excitement — October’s in the air, in the Indian Summer sun of door.— Two Madison Avenue salesmen who been working all day long come in young, well dressed, justsuits, puffing cigars, glad to have the day done and the drink comin in, side by side march in smiling but there’s no room at the roaring (Shit!) crowded bar so they stand two deep from it waiting and smiling and talking.— Men do love bars and good bars should be loved.— It’s full of businessmen, workmen, Finn MacCools of Time.— Be-overalled oldgray topers dirty and beerswiggin glad. — Nameless truck busdrivers with flashlights slung from hips — old beatfaced beerswallowers sadly upraising purple lips to happy drinikg ceilings.— Bartenders are fast, courteous, interested in their work as well as clientele.— Like Dublin at 4:30 P.M. when the work is done, but this is great New York Third Avenue, free lunch, smells of Moody street exhaust river lunch in road of grime bsmashing the door, guitarplaying long sideburned heroes smell out there on wood doorsteps of afternoon drowse.— But it’s New York towers rise beyond, voices crash mangle to talk and chew the gossip till Earwicker drops his load — Ah Jack Fitzgerald Mighty Murphy where are you?.— Semi bald blue
shirt tattered shovellers in broken end dungarees fist-
ing glasses of glistenglass foam top brown afternoon beer.— The subway rumbles underneath as man in homburg in vest but coatless executive changes from right to left foot on ye brass rail.— Colored man in hat, dignified, young, paper underarm; says goodbye at bar warm and paternal leaning over men — elevator operator around the corner.— And wasn't this where they say Novak the real estator who used to stay up late a-nights linefaced to become right and rich in his little white worm cellule of the night typing up reports and letters wife and kids go mad at home at eleven P M — ambitious, worried, in a little office of the Island, right on the street undignified but open to all business and in infancy any business can be small as ambition's big — pushing how many daisies now? and never made his million, never had a drink with So Long Gee Gee and I Love You Too in this late afternoon beer room of men excited shifting stools and footbottom rail scuffle heel soles in New York? — Never called Old Glasses over and offered his rim red nose a drink — never laughed and let the fly his nose use as a landingmark — but ulcerated in the middle of the night to be rich and get his family the best.— So the best American sod's his blanket now, made in upper mills of Hudson Bay Moonface Sassenach and carted down by house-
painter in white coveralls (silent) to rim the roam of his once formed flesh, and let worms ram — Rim! So have another beer, topers — Bloody mugglers! Lovers!

MY FRIENDS AND I in New York city have our own special way of having fun without having to spend much money and most important of all without having to be importuned by formalistic bores, such as, say, a swell evening at the mayor's ball.— We don't have to shake hands and we don't have to make appointments and we feel all right.— We sorta wander around like children.— We walk into parties and tell everybody what we've been doing and people think we're showing off.— They say: "Oh look at the beatniks!"

Take, for example, this typical evening you can have:

Emerging from the Seventh Avenue subway on 42nd Street, you pass the john, which is the beatest john in New York — you never can tell if it's open or not, usually there's a big chain in front of it saying it's out of order, or else it's got some white-haired decaying monster slinking outside, a john which all seven million people in New York City have at one time passed and taken strange notice of — past the new charcoal-fried-hamburger stand, Bible booths, operatic jukeboxes, and a seedy underground used-magazine store next to a peanut-brittle store smelling of subway arcades — here and there a used copy of that old bard Plotinus sneaked in with the remainders of collections of German high-
school textbooks — where they sell long ratty-looking hotdogs (no, actually they're quite beautiful, particularly if you haven't got 15 cents and are looking for someone in Bickford's Cafeteria who can lay some smash on you) (lend you some change).—

Coming up that stairway, people stand there for hours and hours drooling in the rain, with soaking wet umbrellas — lots of boys in dungarees scared to go into the Army standing halfway up the stairway on the iron steps waiting for God Who knows what, certainly among them some romantic heroes just in from Okla-
ahoma with ambitions to end up yearning in the arms of some unpredictable sexy young blonde in a pent-
house on the Empire State Building — some of them probably stand there dreaming of owning the Empire
State Building by virtue of a magic spell which they’ve dreamed up by a creek in the backwoods of a ratty old house on the outskirts of Texarkana.— Ashamed of being seen going into the dirty movie (what’s its name?) across the street from the New York Times — The lion and the tiger passing, as Tom Wolfe used to say about certain types passing that corner.

Leaning against that cigar store with a lot of telephone booths on the corner of 42nd and Seventh where you make beautiful telephone calls looking out into the street and it gets real cozy in there when it’s raining outside and you like to prolong the conversation, who do you find? Basketball teams? Basketball coaches? All those guys from the rollerskating rink go there? Cats from the Bronx again, looking for some action, really looking for romance? Strange duos of girls coming out of dirty movies? Did you ever see them? Or bemused drunken businessmen with their hats tipped awry on their grayish heads staring catatonically upward at the signs floating by on the Times Building, huge sentences about Khrushchev reeling by, the populations of Asia enumerated in flashing lightbulbs, always five hundred periods after each sentence.— Suddenly a psychopathically worried policeman appears on the corner and tells everybody to go away.— This is the center of the greatest city the world has ever known and this is what beatniks do here.— “Standing on the street corner waiting for no one is Power,” sayeth poet Gregory Corso.

Instead of going to night clubs — if you’re in a position to make the nightclub scene (most beatniks rattle empty pockets passing Birdland) — how strange to stand on the sidewalk and just watch that weird eccentric from Second Avenue looking like Napoleon going by feeling cookie crumbs in his pocket, or a young 15-year-old kid with a bratty face, or suddenly somebody swishing by in a baseball hat (because that’s what you see), and finally an old lady dressed in seven hats and a long ratty fur coat in the middle of the July night carrying a huge Russian woolen purse filled with scribbled bits of paper which say “Festival Foundation Inc., 70,000 Germs” and moths flying out of her sleeve — she rushes up and importunes Shriners. And dufflebag soldiers without a war — harmonica players off freight trains.— Of course there are the normal New Yorkers, looking ridiculously out of place and as odd as their own neat oddity, carrying pizzas and Daily Newses and headed for brown basements or Pennsylvania trains — W. H. Auden himself may be seen fumbling by in the rain — Paul Bowles, natty in a Dacon suit, passing through on a trip from Morocco, the ghost of Herman Melville himself followed by Bartleby the Wall Street Scrivener and Pierre the ambiguous hipster of 1848 out on a walk — to see what’s up in the news flashes of the Times — Let’s go back to the corner newsstand.

SPACE BLAST . . . POPE WASHES FEET OF POOR . . .

Let’s go across the street to Grant’s, our favored dining place. For 65 cents you get a huge plate of fried clams, a lot of French fried potatoes, a little portion of cole slaw, some tartar sauce, a little cup of red sauce for fish, a slice of lemon, two slices of fresh rye bread, a pat of butter, another ten cents brings a glass of rare birch beer.— What a ball it is to eat here! Migrations of Spaniards chewing on hotdogs, standing up, leaning against big pots of mustard.— Ten different counters with different specialties.— Ten-cent cheese sandwiches, two liquor bars for the Apocalypse, oh yeah and great indifferent bartenders.— And cops that stand in the back getting free meals — drunken saxophone players on the nod — lonely dignified ragpickers from Hudson Street supping soup without a word to anybody,
with black fingers, woe.— Twenty thousand customers a day — fifty thousand on rainy days — one hundred thousand on snowy days. — Operation twenty-four hours a night. Privacy — supreme under a glary red light full of conversation. — Toulouse-Lautrec, with his deformity and cane, sketching in the corner. — You can stay there for five minutes and gobble up your food, or else stay there for hours having insane philosophical conversation with your buddy and wondering about the people. — “Let’s have a hotdog before we go to the movie!” and you get so high in there you never get to the movies because it’s better than a show about Doris Day on a holiday in the Caribbean.

“But what are we gonna do tonight? Marty would go to a movie but we’re going to connect for some junk. — Let’s go down to the Automat.”

“Just a minute, I’ve got to shine my shoes on top of a fire hydrant.”

“You wanna see yourself in the fun mirror?”

“Wanta take four pictures for a quarter? Because we’re on the eternal scene. We can look at the picture and remember it when we’re wise old white-haired Thoreaus in cabins.”

“Ahh, the fun mirrors are gone, they used to have fun mirrors here.”

“How about the Laff Movie?”

“That’s gone too.”

“They got the flea circus.”

“They still got donzinggerls?”

“The burlesque is gone millions and millions of years ago.”

“Shall we go down by the Automat and watch the old ladies eating beans, or the deaf-mutes that stand in front of the window there and you watch ’em and try to figure the invisible language as it flees across the wind-

... Why does Times Square feel like a big room?”

Across the street is Bickford’s, right in the middle of the block under the Apollo Theater marquee and right next door to a little bookshop that specializes in Havelock Ellis and Rabelais with thousands of sex fiends leafing at the bins. — Bickford’s is the greatest stage on Times Square — many people have hung around there for years man and boy searching God alone knows for what, maybe some angel of Times Square who would make the whole big room home, the old homestead — civilization needs it. — What’s Times Square doing there anyway? Might as well enjoy it. — Greatest city the world has ever seen. — Have they got a Times Square on Mars? What would the Blob do on Times Square? Or St. Francis?

A girl gets off a bus in the Port Authority Terminal and goes into Bickford’s, Chinese girl, red shoes, sits down with coffee, looking for daddy.

There’s a whole floating population around Times Square that has always made Bickford’s their headquarters day and night. In the old days of the beat generation some poets used to go in there to meet the famous character “Hunkey” who used to come in and out in an oversized black raincoat and a cigarette holder looking for somebody to lay a pawnticket on — Remington typewriter, portable radio, black raincoat — to score for some toast, (get some money) so he can go uptown and get in trouble with the cops or any of his boys. Also a lot of stupid gangsters from 8th Avenue used to cut in — maybe they still do — the ones from the early days are all in jail or dead. Now the poets just go there and smoke a peace pipe, looking for the ghost of Hunkey or his boys, and dream over the fading cups of tea.

The beatniks make the point that if you went there
every night and stayed there you could start a whole Dostoevski season on Times Square by yourself and meet all the midnight newspaper peddlers and their involvements and families and woes — religious fanatics who would take you home and give you long sermons over the kitchen table about the "new apocalypse" and similar ideas: — "My Baptist minister back in Winston-Salem told me the reason that God invented television was that when Christ comes back to earth again they shall crucify Him right on the streets of this here Babylon and they gonna have television cameras pointin' down on that spot and the streets shall run with blood and every eye shall see."

Still hungry, go out down to the Oriental Cafeteria — "favored dining spot" also — some night life — cheap — down in the basement across the street from the Port Authority monolith bus terminal on 40th Street and eat big oily lambs' heads with Greek rice for 90¢. — Oriental zig-zag tunes on the jukebox.

Depends how high you are by now — assuming you've picked up on one of the corners — say 42nd Street and 8th Avenue, near the great Whelan's drug store, another lonely haunt spot where you can meet people — Negro whores, ladies limping in a Benzedrine psychosis. — Across the street you can see the ruins of New York already started — the Globe Hotel being torn down there, an empty tooth hole right on 44th Street — and the green McGraw-Hill building gaping up in the sky, higher than you'd believe — lonely all by itself down towards the Hudson River where freighters wait in the rain for their Montevideo limestone.

Might as well go on home. It's getting old. — Or: "Let's make the Village or go to the Lower East Side and play Symphony Sid on the radio — or play our Indian records — and eat big dead Puerto Rican steaks — or lung stew — see if Bruno has slashed any more car roofs in Brooklyn — though Bruno's gentled now, maybe he's written a new poem."

Or look at Television. Night life — Oscar Levant talking about his melancholy on the Jack Paar show.

The Five Spot on 5th Street and Bowery sometimes features Thelonious Monk on the piano and you go on there. If you know the proprietor you sit down at the table free with a beer, but if you don't know him you can sneak in and stand by the ventilator and listen. Always crowded weekends. Monk cogitates with deadly abstraction, clonk, and makes a statement, huge foot beating delicately on the floor, head turned to one side listening, entering the piano.

Lester Young played there just before he died and used to sit in the back kitchen between sets. My buddy poet Allen Ginsberg went back and got on his knees and asked him what he would do if an atom bomb fell on New York. Lester said he would break the window in Tiffany's and get some jewels anyway. He also said, "What you doin' on your knees?" not realizing he is a great hero of the beat generation and now enshrined. The Five Spot is darkly lit, has weird waiters, good music always, sometimes John "Train" Coltrane showers his rough notes from his big tenor horn all over the place. On weekends parties of well-dressed uptowners jam-pack the place talking continuously — nobody minds.

O for a couple of hours, though, in the Egyptian Gardens in the lower West Side Chelsea district of Greek restaurants. — Glasses of ouzo, Greek liqueur, and beautiful girls dancing the belly dance in spangles and beaded bras, the incomparable Zara on the floor and weaving like mystery to the flutes and tingtang beats of Greece — when she's not dancing she sits in the orchestra with the men plapping a drum against
her belly, dreams in her eyes.—Huge crowds of what appear to be Suburbia couples sit at the tables clapping to the swaying Oriental idea.—If you're late you have to stand along the wall.

Wanta dance? The Garden Bar on Third Avenue where you can do fantastic sprawling dances in the dim back room to a jukebox, cheap, the waiter doesn't care.

Wanta just talk? The Cedar Bar on University Place where all the painters hang out and a 16-year-old kid who was there one afternoon squirting red wine out of a Spanish wine skin into his friends' mouths and kept missing...

The night clubs of Greenwich Village known as the Half Note, the Village Vanguard, the Café Bohemia, the Village Gate also feature jazz (Lee Konitz, J. J. Johnson, Miles Davis), but you've got to have mucho money and it's not so much that you've got to have mucho money but the sad commercial atmosphere is killing jazz and jazz is killing itself there, because jazz belongs to open joyful ten-cent beer joints, as in the beginning.

There's a big party at some painter's loft, wild loud flamenco on the phonograph, the girls suddenly become all hips and heels and people try to dance between their flying hair.—Men go mad and start tackling people, flying wedges hurtle across the room, men grab men around the knees and lift them nine feet from the floor and lose their balance and nobody gets hurt, blk.—Girls are balanced hands on men's knees, their skirts falling and revealing frills on their thighs.—Finally everybody dresses to go home and the host says dazedly.—"You all look so respectable."

Or somebody just had an opening, or there's a poetry reading at the Living Theater, or at the Gaslight Café, or at the Seven Arts Coffee Gallery, up around Times Square (9th Avenue and 43rd Street, amazing

spot) (begins at midnight Fridays), where afterward everybody rushes out to the old wild bar.—Or else a huge party at Leroi Jones's—he's got a new issue of Yugen Magazine which he printed himself on a little cranky machine and everybody's poems are in it, from San Francisco to Gloucester Mass., and costs only 50 cents.—Historic publisher, secret hipster of the trade.

—Leroi's getting sick of parties, everyone's always taking off his shirt and dancing, three sentimental girls are crooning over poet Raymond Bremser, my buddy Gregory Corso is arguing with a New York Post reporter saying, "But you don't understand Kangaroonian weep! Forsake thy trade! Flee to the Encheneded Islands!"

Let's get out of here, it's too literary.—Let's go get drunk on the Bowery or eat those long noodles and tea in glasses at Hong Fat's in Chinatown.—What are we always eating for? Let's walk over the Brooklyn Bridge and build up another appetite.—How about some okra on Sands Street?

Shades of Hart Crane!

"LET'S GO SEE if we can find Don Joseph!"
"Who's Don Joseph?"

Don Joseph is a terrific cornet player who wanders around the Village with his little mustache and his arms hangin at the sides with the cornet, which creaks when he plays softly, nay whispers, the greatest sweetest cornet since Bix and more.—He stands at the jukebox in the bar and plays with the music for a beer.—He looks like a handsome movie actor.—He's the great super glamorous secret Bobby Hackett of the jazz world.

What about that guy Tony Fruscella who sits cross-legged on the rug and plays Bach on his trumpet, by ear, and later on at night there he is blowing with the guys at a session, modern jazz —
Or George Jones the secret Bowery shroud who plays great tenor in parks at dawn with Charley Mariano, for kicks, because they love jazz, and that time on the waterfront at dawn they played a whole session as the guy beat on the dock with a stick for the beat.

Talkin' of Bowery shrouds, what about Charley Mills walkin' down the street with bums drinkin' his bottle of wine singing in twelve tone scale.

"Let's go see the strange great secret painters of America and discuss their paintings and their visions with them — Iris Brodie with her delicate fawn Byzantine filigree of Virgins —"

"Or Miles Forst and his black bull in the orange cave."

"Or Franz Klein and his spiderwebs."

"His bloody spiderwebs!"

"Or Willem de Kooning and his White."

"Or Robert De Niro."

"Or Dody Muller and her Annunciations in seven feet tall flowers."

"Or Al Leslie and his giant feet canvases."

"Al Leslie's giant is sleeping in the Paramount building."

There's another great painter, his name is Bill Heine, he's a really secret subterranean painter who sits with all those weird new cats in the East Tenth street coffeeshops that don't look coffeeshops at all but like sorta Henry Street basement secondhand clothes stores except you see an African sculpture or maybe a Mary Frank sculpture over the door and inside they play Frescobaldi on the hi fi.

AH, LET'S GO BACK TO THE VILLAGE and stand on the corner of Eighth Street and Sixth Avenue and watch the intellectuals go by. — AP reporters lurch-

ing home to their basement apartments on Washington Square, lady editorialists with huge German police dogs breaking their chains, lonely dikes melting by, unknown experts on Sherlock Holmes with blue fingernails going up to their rooms to take scopolamine, a muscle-bound young man in a cheap gray German suit explaining something weird to his fat girlfriend, great editors leaning politely at the newsstand buying the early edition of the Times, great fat furniture movers out of 1910 Charlie Chaplin films coming home with great bags full of chop suey (feeding everybody), Picasso's melancholy harlequin now owner of a print and frame shop musing on his wife and newborn child lifting up his finger for a taxi, rollpoly recording engineers rush in fur hats, girl artists down from Columbia with D. H. Lawrence problems picking up 50-year-old men, old men in the Kettle of Fish, and the melancholy spectre of New York Women's prison that looms high and is folded in silence as the night itself — at sunset their windows look like oranges — poet e. e. cummings buying a package of cough drops in the shade of that monstrosity. — If it's raining you can stand under the awning in front of Howard Johnson's and watch the street from the other side.

Beatnik Angel Peter Orlovsky in the supermarket five doors away buying Uneeda Biscuits (late Friday night), ice cream, caviar, bacon, pretzels, soda pop, TV Guide, Vaseline, three toothbrushes, chocolate milk (dreaming of roast suckling pig), buying whole Idaho potatoes, raisin bread, wormy cabbage by mistake, and fresh-felt tomatoes and collecting purple stamps. — Then he goes home broke and dumps it all on the table, takes out a big book of Mayakovsky poems, turns on the 1949 television set to the horror movie, and goes to sleep.

And this is the beat night life of New York.