

THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

New York, Boston, Concord, Vermont

November 2013

This is my first visit to New York. It is midnight at JFK airport, I have just arrived from Heathrow. It's bitterly cold with a sharp, strong wind. I'm late and I'm worried the person whom I'm staying with will be badly inconvenienced. He lives in Brooklyn and it looks as if it'll be many more hours before I get to him. I have no phone, there are no cabs and no buses and no subway trains. About forty people are queuing at the dimly-lit cab rank - there is no sign of a cab. This is a major airport in a major city of the United States. I wait assuming that cabs will soon come in a little yellow swarm. But nothing. A guy approaches and asks where I wish to go - I tell him, and he says he can take me. He says it'll be ninety dollars - I'm desperate, so agree. We walk through the freezing wind to his car; as I walk I ponder the expense and tell him I've changed my mind - I think I might try the cab-rank again. I schlepp back towing my suitcase in the wind and dark to find the queue even longer, and still no cabs. I contritely return to my rip-off driver and change my mind again. I wonder how he knows how much to charge when he doesn't know where I'm going in Brooklyn? Two New York clichés in moments of arriving: I'm ripped-off, and I'm staying with someone called Bill Schumaker.

Bill is kind enough not to show much irritation when I eventually arrive in the early hours - except to be surprised, but not unduly, by the rip-off. His apartment is in the basement of a non-descript part of Brooklyn. It is shabby and shows the usual signs of a man who lives on his own: an untidy kitchen and a sprawl of artefacts and mementoes and books and papers; the most striking feature is a wooden carving, about six feet tall, of a life-size brown bear taking up most of the space in the sitting room.

In the morning I set off to explore New York. At the subway, the workings of the ticket machine are a mystery to me. After a short time of puzzling, I ask a determined-looking girl - clearly on her way to work - if she can help. It's a touch-screen machine - how was I to know? She brusquely shows me

the workings and I choose the 20 dollar option for the day as I'll be doing a lot of getting on and off. I feed the necessary dollar bill into its maw, but then it demands another one dollar. The girl says it's a tax. I say I don't have a dollar, only large bills. The girl slips a dollar coin of her own into the machine and it spews out my ticket. I express my gratitude for her help and her very kind donation. She grunts and steps briskly off to her New York job. A kind act, but not graciously done.

Earlier I ask Bill about New York and his recommendations; he gives me some typical tourist sites to visit, of which I'm not interested. I ask him which are the poorest areas as I have an idea that is where you get a truer feel for a city: throughout the world, the wealthy parts of a city are similar to each other but the poorer parts are different in their own way. He is a geography teacher so I assume his knowledge of the New York demographic is extensive. He says, implausibly, that there are no longer any poor areas in the Big Apple. I decide to visit the commercial art gallery district. I get off the rather grim and uncomfortable train and emerge into a New York street where my first sight on the streets of Manhattan is a soup kitchen. It's a cold day but sunny and there are tables and chairs on the pavement. Eating at them are the poor who need to be fed at a soup kitchen; all are black and many look very well-fed already – and, Bill, there *are* poor areas of New York.

I pass on down to the see the art galleries, most of which are disappointing in their unoriginal desperation to be fashionable. A gallery has a one-man show titled 'Filthy Lucre'. I enter expecting to see, in cutting-edge New York, a lacerating exposé of the art world's greed. There are a few weedy installations with flaccid ideas, such as a globe with the world's different paper currencies pasted onto the site of each country. There is the usual attractive twenty-odd-year-old girl at a computer (in London they are always the public school progeny of minor English aristocracy) I assume she is the New England equivalent. I attempt a joke, based on the exhibition's title, and ask her what percentage of the sales of the work the gallery takes from the artist? She doesn't understand – in London, it would be considered an impertinent question – in New York, she neither doesn't understand why I'm asking nor that I'm trying a rather feeble satirical tease about commercial art galleries.

I go to the High Line, the one-and-a-half mile-long defunct elevated railway line on Manhattan's West Side now converted into a park. I ascend and find it's a narrow walkway and, despite it being November and cold, is crowded with walkers going in both directions and therefore endlessly negotiating a way around each other. And, being November there are no flowers or flowering shrubs, just disappointing tall dry grasses and weeds -putting me in mind of Thomas Hood's rhyme: "No shade, no shine, no butterflies, no bees, No fruits, no flowers, no leaves, no birds, November!"

Being elevated one gets a view of New York not normally seen – such as looking down on the diggings of the foundations of a new skyscraper.

For lunch, I go into an average busy café curious to see how ordinary New Yorkers spend their lunch hour. I join one of the queues for the lunch counter which slowly depletes until I reach the counter where I look to order. A girl behind the counter brusquely asks for my ticket. I say, what ticket? She, in exasperated tones, says I first have to get my order by ticket, and waves me towards another long queue. I queue again and, after eventually getting my ticket, queue again for the food counter where another short-tempered girl slaps my order onto a tray. I retire to watch the natives browse and sluice.

After my first ever trip in a Yellow Cab – which is surprisingly cramped – I go to the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art where there is a long queue to get a ticket. All big national art galleries have a homogenized atmosphere with homogenized worshippers. But every gallery new to me always has a favourite painting of mine never before seen by me in the flesh, which never disappoints. Afterwards, as a respite from crowds, I disappear around the corner into Central Park and, despite experiencing only a fraction of its beauty, I am restored. The next day, Bill and I walk to Prospect Park a vast green space in the middle of Brooklyn designed by the same people who created Central Park. Bill takes me to the site of the Battle of Brooklyn fought in August of the year of the Declaration of Independence. The Americans lost this one to the British. He also takes me, rather proudly, to Wall St. The maxim 'form follows function' is exemplified here – the function being the expression of wealth; this is successfully achieved here with a bombastic display of architecture, of which Albert Speer would have been proud.

To get to Boston, Bill tells me the trains are bad and it's better to go by bus – which is what I do. It's a double-decker coach, and has a loo – it's a four and a half hour journey. The coach is packed full of young people going home for the Thanksgiving holiday. The seats are crammed together so tightly there is very little legroom or space to move. Most of the kids must have been having a good pre-Thanksgiving time last night for they all fall asleep, except, unfortunately for me, the girl behind me who is on her phone. She constantly says 'like' as a verbal tick:

“ I'm at this party, like, and this guy, like, comes up to me, like, and like, says do you wanna come out with me, like”. *And* in a New York drawl; and without drawing breath for the whole journey. I was relieved when we got to Boston - before she was found dead.

It was late and getting dark when we arrive. This is a tale of “the kindness of strangers”:

In England, while looking online for somewhere to stay for two nights in Boston, I find on Airbnb an “awesome studio in downtown Boston”. I book it. I'm not sure of the exact definition of 'downtown' but I don't think it should be located at the last stop on a subway – as this 'awesome' studio appeared to be; it would be like getting a tube train in London and getting off at Ongar, in Essex. I trek from the subway at the end of the line through suburban Boston in the dark and cold, towing my suitcase, trying to find my bed for the night. I find the address and press the bell of a small apartment house, but nobody comes. After a while, a girl walks up to the door and opens it - while it's briefly ajar I slip in and ascend the stairs and, in a corridor, find the room number I've been given. I knock and eventually the door is opened by a rather camp young man in T-shirt and shorts, who I have clearly disturbed. He has no knowledge of Airbnb and shuts the door. I now have nowhere to sleep. I go out into the dark and cold streets, tugging my suitcase, pondering on my predicament when I see a young man in a well-lit lobby of an apartment block. I go in and ask him if he knows of the address I've just come from and if he has heard of an Airbnb room there. He too has no knowledge. But he gets out his laptop, sits on the cold hard floor and searches Airbnb for me. There is no record on their site of this address. I am still stuck without a bed and it's getting late. I ask the guy if he could find me a hotel room in central Boston. With kindness and grace, he

searches the net and finds me a room for \$150. He scribbles down the address. At that moment his girlfriend appears coming down the stairs from their apartment. She is a little annoyed because by this time forty minutes have elapsed and she has started to get worried. He reassures her and they wish me luck and say goodbye. The way in which he carried out, what to him was a simple and natural act of helping a stranger in trouble, shows a person with innate kindness. And the kindness doesn't end there.

I catch probably the last train out of 'Ongar'. As the subway approaches central Boston I realise that, although I have the hotels address I have no idea where it is and at which stop to get off. I ask the person next to me if they have any idea where the address and hotel is? At that, all the nearby passengers, eager to help, simultaneously get out their phones and access their online maps of Boston. There is a general consultation amongst the carriage and I am informed of the stop where I should get off and the directions to the hotel. Unfortunately, by now the train has gone through my stop and I have to travel to the end of the line in Cambridge and change to get the train back. Eventually, I arrive at Opera, my stop. Emerging from the subway into the night and the freezing wind I am still at a loss as to which direction to take for my hotel. Again, I see a lone man in a well-lit lobby, this time in an office block. I enter and ask him how to get to Eversley St. He explains, but it's quite complicated. I venture out in search of the hotel and cross a busy four-lane street and walk into the biting wind trying to remember his directions and to find a park I have to first cross. As I walk a smart SUV cruises to a halt next to me – it is the man from the office block lobby. He gestures to me to get in, which I unhesitatingly do. He has made the effort to get out his car and drive across the four-lane road to find me. He takes me to my hotel and drops me off, and with good grace dismisses my expressions of gratitude, and drives away. Yet again, another person who thinks it only natural to be kind to a stranger. Three acts of kindness in as many hours.

The next day, through the graces of the hotel and its computer, I manage to contact Airbnb who still have my booking for the second night in 'Ongar'. It is not in the building I found, but at the back of it and, inexplicably, with the same room number as the one in the front. Initially, the key won't open the door and when I get in there is no one there and no 'awesome' apartment. It is pokey, with nothing except a bed in a small bedroom and a tiny kitchen

with an empty fridge. And there is no no heating. I sit and write a letter to the owners suggesting they go to a dictionary and look-up the meaning of 'awesome', and of 'downtown'.

For those interested in the colonial bid for independence in the 1770s, Boston has a dedicated walk called the Freedom Trail. One follows a line of rust coloured bricks laid into the pavement, starting on Boston Common and taking you to all the significant historic sites. My first visit is to the old Granary Burying Ground. Some of the great signatories of the Declaration of Independence are buried here, most notably John Hancock whose name has become synonymous with the word 'signature' because he wrote his so ostentatiously large on the document. –and Benjamin Franklin's parents and Paul Revere and the five victims of the Boston Massacre, in 1770 - one of the many slow-burning resentments that triggered the Revolutionary War.

The trail takes me to the Old State House in front of which the Boston Massacre took place and where, on the east balcony, the Declaration of Independence was read out to the crowd below. And then to the Old South Meeting House where, in 1761, the revolutionist James Otis gave a speech of which John Adams later wrote: " Then and there the child independence was born". And in which in 1772 five thousand Bostonians gathered to protest British taxation and the Boston Tea Party followed. And then to Paul Revere's house from which he rode out at midnight to warn the citizens of Lexington and Concord that " the British are coming". I stand in the cobbled square in front of the house with a few other visitors - Americans. Parked in front of the small green clapboard house, is a lone car – which is unusual as cars are banned from the square – I say to the assembled family behind me: "Do you think that's Paul Revere's car?", to which there is a puzzled silence – who is this ignorant Englishman? I then say, "I bet Paul Revere wished it *was* his car", to which there was a realisation that this ignorant Englishman was making a joke. They laugh – sort of.

And then to the Old North Church where Paul Revere had two lanterns hung in the steeple. They were to be used as a warning signal to his back-up riders, in Charlestown across the river, about the movement of British

troops. The back-up riders were there in case Revere himself didn't make it to Lexington and Concord.

The next day I'm in Concord, Massachusetts – I don't have time to go to Lexington, although it's the site in 1775 of the first deaths between the two belligerents in what is at first a civil war. Outside Concord, in quiet, undulating countryside is the North Bridge, a simple wooden bridge over the river. This is the site of the first battle of the Revolutionary war where, as Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "the shot heard round the world" was fired.

Emerson was born and lived in Concord, attracting a coterie of other writers: Louisa M Alcott wrote *Little Women* here, and Henry Thoreau who wrote *Walden* here, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Because of all this literary concentration, Henry James dubbed Concord: "the biggest little place in America".

Across the fields from the North Bridge, I see a curious big old house which I wander over to inspect. It's called the Old Manse and is made of plain-wood clapboard with a shingled hipped-roof and tall Georgian windows. I see it's open to the public so go in and find I'm the sole visitor. The guide, a very attractive girl, a student at nearby Harvard doing holiday relief, tells me it is Nathaniel Hawthorne's family home and he was born and lived here. She said she normally waits for a small crowd to gather before she takes them on a tour but today there is nobody, so she and I stroll through the house together. It is, of course, a museum, but it's untouched: It has Hawthorne's furniture and the plates and implements in the kitchen are his; there is his bed; there is his chair and his little sloping writing desk in a study he shared for a while with Emerson. The desk faces a blank wall – it was originally at a window looking out onto the pleasant rural scene, but Hawthorne said the view distracted him so had the desk moved to face the blank wall. Out of that same window late in the afternoon of April 19th 1775 his father looked out across that same pleasant rural scene to the nearby North Bridge where he witnessed the fighting and the bloodshed of the battle.

Also in that window, engraved into the glass by Nathaniel Hawthorne with a diamond ring, is a little declaration in his handwriting saying: "Nat'n

Hawthorne. This is his study". On a neighbouring window is engraved, but in his wife's hand, the following: "Una Hawthorne stood on this sill January 22d 1845 while the trees were all glass chandeliers – a goodly show which she liked much – tho only ten months old".

Back in Concord, I am studying, on the war memorial, the names of those killed in the battle when I'm approached by an old man, a white man, clearly a local. He is intrigued that I'm English – maybe he's old enough still to be holding grudges against us and wants to talk about the Revolutionary war? But no. He wants to tell me about a black slave who died here in 1773. This is what he told me, reciting the whole thing, word-perfect, from memory. First the later citation, then the epitaph:

JOHN JACK

'A Freedman. A native of Africa, he was sold into slavery and came into the possession of Benjamin Barron, a shoemaker, of Concord, Massachusetts. Upon her husband's death, the Widow Barron allowed Jack to pay for his freedom from wages earned as a shoemaker. Dying, he named lawyer Daniel Bliss as the executor of his will.'

Shortly thereafter, it became necessary for Bliss to write an epitaph for Jack. A dozen Concord families, including the town pastor, owned slaves at the time, and Bliss, a Tory, felt it was hypocritical that those who clamoured for freedom from England denied the freedom to others. This opinion figured prominently in Jack's epitaph, which was printed in a London newspaper and became world-famous:

God wills us free; man wills us slaves,
I will as God wills; God's will be done.
Here lies the body of
JOHN JACK
a native of Africa who died
March 1773 aged about 60 years
Tho' born in a land of slavery,
He was born free.
Tho' he lived in a land of liberty,
He lived a slave.
Till by his honest, tho' stolen labors,

He acquired the source of slavery,
Which gave him his freedom;
Tho' not long before
Death, the grand tyrant
Gave him his final emancipation,
And set him on a footing with kings.
Tho' a slave to vice,
He practised those virtues
Without which kings are but slaves.

Afterwards, following the old boy's directions, I visit the grave 'at the back of the hill' as he put it, in the Old Hill Burying Ground. It's located 'back of the hill' so that, even in death, he is segregated from the white peoples' graves 'front of the hill' - but it had a good grey slate headstone with the epitaph finely carved upon it.

Later in the day, I drive up into Vermont to visit an old friend from England who lives near St Johnsbury in the northeast. She was married and now divorced. After a career with Christie's and Sotheby's she is now a prolific novelist of historical romances in the Georgette Heyer mould; she writes under the pen-name of Miranda Neville, although her married name of Fanny Mallary strikes me as just as good a name for a writer of historic romances.

The following day she insists on taking me to the Fairbanks Museum and Planetarium in St Johnsbury, saying it is one of the most eccentric museums. She is right. The entrance hall has a stuffed snarling 1000lb polar bear; and, there is a full-size bare-teethed, bloody-clawed grizzly; then a bison and a moose and tree branches with scores of small birds from Central and South America; Egyptian mummified cats and crocodiles; there is a diorama of an Abenaki Indian settlement; a muskrat colony; creeping pythons; a doll collection; cases of rocks and minerals; Civil War relics, including the Confederate leader, Jefferson Davis's checkerboard; a collection of thousands of flying insects each one spread and pinned to a board; it has a Planetarium and an 'Omni Globe', a revolving 60-inch model of the world which, with the touch of a button, tells you everything from volcanic action in the Pacific to language patterns in Africa; and a meteorology centre. In the 19th century when Mr Fairbanks created the collection in a specially built eccentric Romanesque building, he wanted 'to bring the world to St. Johnsbury'. He certainly did.

I thank Fanny for the introduction to such a weird museum of curiosities. I am leaving to go for Thanksgiving to friends further north in Vermont so I

say goodbye to Fanny, little knowing it will be for the last time as within two years she would die. There was no indication.

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My hire car has a sat nav which is an essential friend - a female voice - on these disparate travels. Until that is, 'she' decides she's going to kill me. The snow gets thicker on the ground as I get further north and my friends Robert and Shari Kiener live in remote thickly conifer-clad hills near Stowe. It's dark and 'she' tells me to take a left and drive for six miles, after a mile the metalled road turns into a track - knowing the Kieners live in woods I assume this is the right way. After about two miles the road gets narrower and pot-holed and thickly covered in snow - and my petrol is low. I'm beginning to not trust 'her'. Suddenly I see twin lights ahead, and slow down, two big dogs appear in my headlights and then a woman with a hat with torches attached on either side. I stop and ask her if I'm going in the right direction. She is shocked, even horrified, and tells me to turn round immediately as the track will soon be impassable to an ordinary car. And then, in the dark, she and her dogs are gone, like an apparition. I turn round with difficulty and start driving back expecting to see the Woman of the Woods - but there is nothing.

I eventually find the Kieners who remark that I had a narrow escape as the extensive forests go on forever and are wild. However, Robert, who is a journalist, finds the story funny - it's he who christens her the Woman of the Woods. The next day he takes me into a clearing and points to a high wooded ridge in the remote distance saying that is where I was and where I would have ended up in the dark and cold, lost and alone and out of gas.

I cook a turkey for Thanksgiving but Robert and Shari are not interested in the celebration - perhaps it's me, as a foreigner, that has more interest in US history. The next day the Kieners take me for a drink at the Von Trapps' hotel which they opened when they escaped from Nazi Germany, it's now run by their grandson.

After a few days, I drive five-hours back to New York and catch a flight back to England. On the plane, I think about the kindness of my friends, and the kindness of strangers.

Robert Tilleard

