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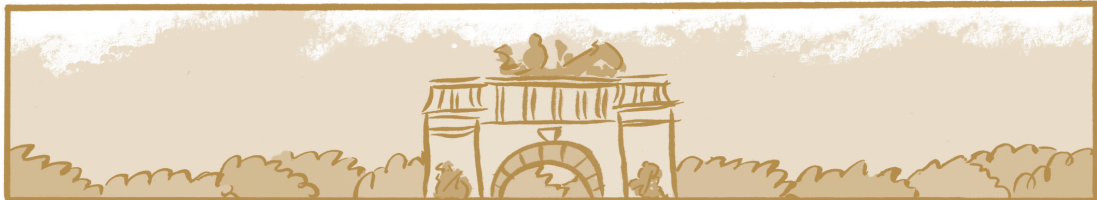
New York Stories

The Best of the City Section of The New York Times



**Advance Uncorrected
Reading Sampler**

*Edited by
Constance Rosenblum*



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More New York Stories

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The New York Times

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Her Private Serenade

His Cheerful Whistling Floated through the Window of
Her West Village Apartment, and Captured Her Heart.

If Only He Knew.

JOHANNA BALDWIN



(Paul Degen)

IT'S possible I had seen him before, but not until Christmas Day did I actually notice him. That's the day he became part of my life. Normally I would have been with my family. This season was different. Not only had I run out of money, lost someone I cared about and needed to be alone, I also wanted to stay home and write. That's what I was doing the morning of Dec. 25 in the top-floor apartment of the brownstone on West 11th Street when I heard him for the first time.

His music was coming from the east. It was a clear sound, joyous. It was a Christmas carol, although I can't remember which one. From the windowsill, I couldn't see much, even with my face pressed against the glass. The only thing I could see was his footprints. It had snowed all night, and the snow was still falling. I could hear a whistling sound moving past my building, but all I could see was the image of a man who was wearing a hooded parka and walking his dog.

Although the whistler and I never met, we spent the entire holiday season together. Nearly every day, he walked down my street whistling a different melody, mostly show tunes. He was the unexpected, unwrapped holiday gift. Anytime I heard him, I moved to my window to get a glimpse. The priority, of course, was to listen, until the sound faded and then turned a corner.

The first person I told about the whistler was my landlord, an attractive, gigantic bald man who, like me, also stayed in the city for the New Year. He seemed genuinely moved, as if he wished this had been his experience rather than mine. I realized that I had stumbled onto something unique. I had an enviable relationship with someone I didn't know. And in fact, I may not be the only New Yorker with a whistler; one was sighted in TriBeCa last winter.

I wanted to tell my two friends in the building but needed to wait until they were back from their holiday celebrations. They returned in mid-January, and then I waited until the whistler was approaching so they could be drawn in as I had been. When the opportunity came, I rushed downstairs to share the news. The two of them were on separate telephone lines the moment the whistler reached the front of the building. Overly excited, I told them everything I knew about the whistler, which was very little. At the same time, I pointed out the window, suggesting they hurry so that they wouldn't miss him. They looked at me with utter boredom, and continued their phone conversations. Then one of them yawned.

On one of the coldest February nights of record, I was having dinner on Perry Street with an Australian cinematographer and a producer friend when I heard him again. I told the women to listen, then began to tell them all about the whistler and his dog. Again, I didn't know what to say, except that the whistler lifts my spirits whether I'm working or not working, whether I'm having a good or bad day, whether our country is bombing another country or whether anyone has killed one of our soldiers recently.

The women went to the window, blocking my view, and their eyes brightened as they described the whistler back to me. Good-looking. Handsome, even. Why is he alone on a Saturday night? They suggested I introduce myself.

That didn't make sense. The whistler they were describing didn't sound like my whistler at all. I elbowed my way to the window to see for myself. And then I realized it. They were looking at the wrong man with the wrong dog. The man they were looking at wasn't even whistling. The real whistler, who is an older gentleman, had just disappeared off West Fourth Street.

The women suggested that I might be fixated on older men. Then the producer handed me a bag of leftovers and sent me home.

It's not a latent adolescent crush, I later explained to a friend on the phone. He's somewhere between his late 40's and early 60's. His sandy hair is thinning, but still looks good. He wears darkish glasses and dresses more formally than casually. He sometimes wears a bow tie, but on the one and only warm day of spring, he wore a T-shirt. I knew he wouldn't be wearing a T-shirt this spring day because there was a snowstorm outside. I figured I wouldn't even see him because of the ice coming down.

We continued talking on the phone, and somewhere between the subjects of money and men, we both heard him. The whistler was outside in the storm. I opened the window and stuck the phone outside so that as he whistled down the street, my friend and I could both hear him. She laughed, and I knew she understood what I did, that the whistler was the neighborhood alchemist who could transform an ordinary something into the extraordinary without knowing it.

Eventually it really did become spring. The whistler started wearing T-shirts, his steps seemed to be lighter, even his whistling was impossibly more upbeat. "Almost Like Being in Love" was his song of the day. If the whistler was happy about spring, I would try to be the same.

HAVING a relationship with someone you don't know is never disappointing. He will never say he is going to call you and then not call. He will never promise to do something for you and not do it. He will never say he is going to show up and then keep you waiting, or, worse, not show up at all. He will never ask you to do something you can't do. He will never let you down. He will never say the wrong thing.

The weeks of rain and thunderstorms did their best to stand in the way of summer's arriving. I'm not sure what confuses me more: relationships with people I actually do know or New York weather. Whatever the answer, the sun fought through the rain and finally won. We all knew we would see the sun again; we just didn't know when we would see it or how long it would last. Just as I'm pretty sure I'll see the whistler again. I just never know when.

Inevitably the day will come when I won't see him anymore. It won't be a dramatic day filled with emotion. There will be no letter or phone call, no flowers. There will be no abandoner and no abandonee. There will be no tears or blame, and the experience won't be entangled with frustration or hope. It will be as natural as the changing seasons, just like the day when a person looks back and realizes it's not winter anymore.

Whenever that day comes, I'll be grateful then as I am now. And yet I'll probably never thank him because I don't know the whistler and the whistler doesn't know me.

August 7, 2005

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The Unthinkable, Right around the Corner

The Convoy of Police Cars Races down the City Streets,
Sirens Blaring, Red Lights Flashing.
They're There to Protect. But They Also Terrify.

FRANCINE PROSE



The “critical response vehicle surge,” a fixture of the post-9/11 city. (*Photograph by Ramin Talaie, 2004; photo illustration by The New York Times*)

THE first time I saw it happen, in 2004, I was walking down 14th Street along Union Square on my way home, wondering what we were going to have for dinner that night. A dozen police cars came squealing around the corner, pulled up to the sidewalk, and parked with their back wheels on the curb.

My heartbeat went from zero to 60 (or whatever the actual cardiac equivalent is) in less than 60 seconds. The attacks of 9/11 hadn't been all that long ago, and I wondered: Had something else happened? Was there a "problem" in the Union Square subway station? I thought of my husband, my sons. I ran through a mental list of friends and loved ones. Where were they? Were they in danger? Was everyone O.K.?

By now, I know better. What I witnessed was what the police called a critical response vehicle surge.

Maybe a lot of New Yorkers are already familiar with this term, but I had to look it up. That's the phrase for what you see when you're turning the corner onto Broadway, or Fifth Avenue, and suddenly 50 police cars appear, red lights spinning, all of them streaming in rapid (or slow and steady) formation down the avenue. Or they blare their sirens as they speed along Flatbush Avenue, waking up your children, or they rattle the cobblestones on Hudson Street.

I suppose I knew on some level that all this activity signified antiterrorist alertness in our toughened-up post-9/11 world. A drill, a show of force, an effort at deterrence, all rolled into one. An unpredictable but firm presence and a speedy response time constitute Homeland Security 101.

But don't try to set your watch by these demonstrations. That's the entire point. Every day, as many as 76 cars, each from a different precinct in the five boroughs, converge in one place, "combat-park" with their backs to the sidewalk, receive a terrorism briefing and get assignments to speed off to multiple locations.

The officers have their Hazmat gear. They have been taught how to deal with chemical, biological and radiation attacks, and have been given special training on how to handle disasters in key locations, like the subway. These drills are never at the same hour of the day, never along the same route as the day before. In fact, they're planned to take place where and when we—and the terrorists—least expect them.

The city is not going to be caught off guard again, as we were on 9/11. Though the strange thing is that the vehicle surge exactly brings to mind my memory of 9/11: streams of police cars racing into the city, red lights

spinning, as I rode out to the airport to catch a flight that was about to be canceled.

Now that I know what the readiness drill is called, and what it's designed to do, I can relax and stop being reminded of the time it happened for real. I can calm down and quit asking what any reasonable human being would wonder when several dozen police cars tear by, lights flashing, sirens wailing. Hey, what's going on? Now that I know, I can spare myself the adrenaline rush.

That last sentence is a total lie. Even if you're pretty sure you know what's going on—Hey, whatever, it's probably only a critical response vehicle surge!—some part of you still thinks: Did something happen?

So you watch the police cars speed by. You stand around, you ask someone who asks someone else. Finally, the word goes around. Police drill, or something. Nothing.

Whew. For a few seconds you feel relieved. Then, depending on whether you're an optimist or a realist, you might think: "Great! We're safe!" or "We dodged a bullet this time. Something's going to happen, sooner or later." And that's not a happy moment.

Some people seek out adrenaline: auto racers, sky divers and extreme skiers. Perhaps I'm an oversensitive, overbred urban puppy. But still, if you're not expecting it, a shot of response-vehicle heart-pumping hormones can't be that great for your health. We're Pavlovian creatures. Nature and nurture have conspired to train us to react with fight-or-flight alarm to certain cultural signals: flashing lights and loud noises. First we get the jolt of fear, then the reassurance. Be still my heart; it's only the good guys keeping us safe.

I can't quite remember what the experts ultimately decided about the health hazards of the airborne poisons that residents of Lower Manhattan breathed from September 2001 until that Christmas. So I don't imagine that we will find the time and resources to study how the critical response vehicle surges affect the pulse and blood pressure of ordinary New Yorkers, especially the old and the young.



PERHAPS the best thing that can be said for the training drills is that they're probably more enjoyable than many things the police are called upon to do in the course of a normal day. The police do a great deal for us, they lead stressful lives, and I'm all for combining a show of force aimed at deterring Al Qaeda with a challenging, companionable interval in a hard-working officer's morning or evening.

If we're going to have to live with vehicle surges, I hope they save lives. Actually, I hope the surges are never called upon to save lives. I hope they're never tested.

But as a realist, I worry. I hope these surges won't need to save enough lives to stack up against the minutes by which, for all we know, they're shortening the lives of the otherwise peaceful New Yorkers who happen to be strolling down 14th Street, wondering what to cook for dinner, when, suddenly, out of nowhere, police cars screech up to the curb.

January 27, 2008



What do Francine Prose, Suketu Mehta, and Edwidge Danticat have in common? Each suffers from an incurable love affair with the Big Apple, and each contributed to the canon of writing New York has inspired by way of the *New York Times* City Section, a part of the paper that once defined Sunday afternoon leisure for the denizens of the five boroughs. Former City Section editor Constance Rosenblum has again culled a diverse cast of voices that brought to vivid life our metropolis through those pages in this follow-up to the publication *New York Stories* (2005).

The fifty essays in *More New York Stories* unite the city's best-known writers to provide a window to the bustle and richness of city life. As with the previous collection, many of the contributors need no introduction, among them Kevin Baker, Laura Shaine Cunningham, Dorothy Gallagher, Colin Harrison, Frances Kiernan, Nathaniel Rich, Jonathan Rosen, Christopher Sorrentino, and Robert Sullivan; they are among the most eloquent observers of our urban life. Others are relative newcomers. But all are voices worth listening to, and the result is a comprehensive and entertaining picture of New York in all its many guises.

Delightful for dipping into and a great companion for anyone planning a trip, this collection is both a heart-warming introduction to the human side of New York and a reminder to life-long New Yorkers of the reasons we call the city home.

"New York is the plural city par excellence, the place of many tales. This new collection, taken from the pages of the city paper, gives us a new luxuriance of New York stories, neither neatly splashy nor narrowly sociological, but instead with the spice and eccentricity and plural energy that New Yorkers will recognize as ours and non-New Yorkers may wish was theirs."

— **ADAM GOPNIK**, author of *Through the Children's GatGate: A Home In New York*

"The pieces in this collection are as alive now as they were when they first saw newsprint. Reading them again, even across a distance of years, was like bumping into old friends."

— **THOMAS BELLER**, author of *The Sleep-Over Artist and How to Be a Man*

CONSTANCE ROSENBLUM, the longtime editor of the *New York Times* City Section and former editor of the newspaper's Arts and Leisure Section, is the author of *Gold Digger: The Outrageous Life and Times of Peggy Hopkins Joyce* and *Boulevard of Dreams: Heady Times, Heartbreak, and Hope Along the Grand Concourse in the Bronx* and editor of *New York Stories: The Best of the City Section of the 'New York Times'*.

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