

It's mid-November and after midnight outside JFK airport. I've just arrived from London on my first visit to New York. It's dark and bitterly cold with a sharp, strong easterly wind. I'm late and I've no phone to ring Bill Schumaker, the man in Brooklyn who's putting me up for a few days. In the distance, I see a long queue at a dimly lit cab rank - there's no sign of a cab, and there are no buses and no subway trains. I wait, assuming that cabs will soon come in a little yellow swarm. But nothing. A guy approaches and asks me where I'm heading. I tell him, and he says he can take me. He says it'll be ninety dollars - in desperation, I agree. We walk through the freezing wind to his car; as we walk I ponder the expense and tell him I've changed my mind - I think I might try the cab rank again. I schlep back, towing my suitcase through the wind and the dark to find the queue even longer, and still no cabs. I change my mind again and contritely return to my rip-off driver. Belatedly, I wonder how he knows how much to charge when he doesn't know where I'm going in Brooklyn - it's a big place. I've hardly arrived in New York, yet I've already encountered two New York clichés: I'm ripped-off, and I'm staying with someone called Bill Schumaker.



Bill shows little irritation when I eventually arrive in the early hours - except to be surprised, but not unduly, by the cabby's rip-off. His apartment, in a run-down part of Brooklyn, is filled with African sculptures, mementoes, ornaments, books, paintings, magazines and papers; a small kitchen with a week of unwashed dishes and, dominating the sitting room, a looming life-size wooden carving of a gorilla. My room is papered with flyers and posters from the Bowery CBGB Club, the founding club of New York punk where Bill was the manager.

Later that the morning, at the subway, the workings of the ticket machine are a mystery. I ask a determined-looking young woman 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. I feed it the twenty dollar bill, but then it demands a further dollar. The girl says it's a tax. I say I don't have a single dollar, only large bills. The girl slips a dollar coin into the machine. The ticket arrives. I thank her for her help and her generosity. She grunts gracelessly and steps briskly off to her important New York job. I imagine her at work, telling of her subway encounter with a dumb limey.

I had told Bill I'm not interested in the usual sites of New York; the wealthier parts of cities are similar to each other but the poorer parts are different in their own way. He is a geography teacher and says, implausibly, that there are no longer any poorer parts. As I come out of the grim subway on my way to the commercial art gallery district, my first sight on the streets of Manhattan is a portable soup kitchen. It's a sunny but cold day and there are tables and chairs on the pavement. Eating at them are the hungry poor. All are Black and most are overweight. But it could be an art installation, and Bill may be right.

I see a gallery with a show called 'Filthy Lucre'. I enter expecting to see a lacerating exposé of the art world's greed. One feeble 'installation' is a globe with each country's paper currency pasted onto it. At the desk is a girl staring into a laptop. She, like the gallery, could be transplanted into any art gallery district in any major world city and not be out of place. She is the usual attractive blond in her mid-twenties. In London, she would be the public-school-educated progeny of minor aristocracy. In New York I assume she's from the Hamptons. I ask her, in the context of the exhibition, what percentage the gallery takes from the artist. She looks puzzled. In London, it would be considered an impertinent question, or a joke - here, she neither understands what I'm asking nor that the question is

a feeble tease about her commercial gallery.

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 long thin 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 fruits, no flowers, no leaves, no birds, November"! Being elevated one has an unusual view of New York, such as looking down on the diggings of the foundations of a new skyscraper.

For lunch, I go to a busy café curious to see how ordinary New Yorkers spend their lunch hour. I join a long queue which slowly depletes until I reach the counter where I attempt to order. A girl behind the counter brusquely asks for my ticket. I say, what ticket? In exasperated tones, she says I first have to get my order with a ticket. She waves me dismissively towards another long queue. After eventually getting my ticket, I queue again for the food counter where another short-tempered girl slaps my order onto a tray.

After my first ride in a surprisingly cramped Yellow Cab, I go to the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, where there is a long queue for tickets. All big national art galleries have a homogenized reverential atmosphere and MOMA is no exception. Before our unquestioning acceptance of mechanical reproduction - pace Walter Benjamin - it must have been astonishing to see some paintings for the first time. Despite my familiarity, to see some paintings 'in the flesh' is a revelation.

Afterwards, as a respite from crowds, I slip around the corner into Central Park and, despite experiencing only a fraction of its vastness it's a haven. The next day, Bill and I walk through Prospect Park 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 1776. The Americans lost this one to the British. He also proudly takes me to Wall St. The maxim by Louis Sullivan, the 'father of the

skyscraper' that form follows function, is exemplified here – the function being the expression of wealth, achieved here with appropriate bombast.

I'm going to Boston and Bill tells me the trains are bad and it's better to go by bus. It's a double-decker coach, and, as it's a four-and-a-half-hour journey, a toilet. The coach is tightly packed with students going home for the Thanksgiving holiday. The seats are crammed together so there is little legroom. Most of the students must have had a good pre-Thanksgiving the previous night for they all fall asleep - except for the girl behind me who for the whole journey is on her phone to a friend. In a New York drawl, she reiterates 'like': " I'm at this party, like, and this guy, like, comes up to me, like, and like, says do you wanna like come out with me, like". I was relieved when we got to Boston before she was found, like, dead.

It was late and getting dark when we arrive.

In England, while looking online for somewhere to stay for two nights in Boston, I had booked on Airbnb an "awesome studio apartment in downtown Boston". I don't think 'downtown' means the last stop on the subway, as this apartment appeared to be. Towing my suitcase through the dark and cold I search for the address.

About fifteen minutes later I find it and ring the bell at 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 find my room number. I knock. The door is opened by a sleepy young man in a T-shirt and shorts. He has no knowledge of Airbnb and slams the door. I now have nowhere to sleep.

I go back out into the dark and cold streets, tugging my suitcase, 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 Airbnb address. He has no knowledge. Unasked, 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 ask if he could find me a hotel room in central Boston. He searches the net and finds me a room for \$150. He scribbles down the address. After about forty minutes his concerned girlfriend appears, coming down the stairs from their apartment looking annoyed. I thank the

man for his kindness and he wishes me well. I return to the subway where I catch the train back into central Boston.

As the subway approaches central Boston I realise that although I have the hotel's 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 of the hotel's address. He gets out his phone to consult its map - as does the whole of the subway carriage. There is a general consultation amongst the carriage and I am informed of the correct stop. But by now the train has gone through this stop and arrives at the end of the line in Cambridge. I change to get the train back. I get off at Opera, my stop. Emerging from the subway into the night and the freezing wind I still don't know the directions to 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 complicated. I venture out in search of the hotel and cross a busy four-lane highway, walking into the biting wind trying to remember his directions: first, I have to find a park and cross it. A large SUV pulls up next to me. It's the man from the office lobby. He gestures to me to get in, which I unhesitatingly do. Clearly, he has gone to his car and driven across the four-lane highway to find me. He takes me to my hotel and graciously dismisses my expressions of gratitude. In Boston, in the space of 2 hours, three sets of people have shown gracious kindness.

The next day, through the graces of the hotel and its computer, I contact Airbnb who say I should have contacted them online on the day of my arrival, since I hadn't, they had cancelled my booking and taken it off the website. I still have my booking for the second night. That evening I find the apartment, but it's not in the building I found the night before, 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 do get in there is no one there and no 'awesome' apartment. It is small and unheated with nothing except a bed in a tiny bedroom and a cramped kitchen with an empty fridge. Being in suburbia there are no restaurants or bars nearby. The next day, I leave a note for the owners suggesting they find a dictionary and look up the meanings of 'awesome', and 'downtown'.

Boston has a dedicated walk called the Freedom Trail. It takes you to significant sites associated with the colonial struggle for independence in the 1770s. A line of rust-coloured bricks has been laid into the pavement as a guide. On my way to start the walk at Boston Common, I ask a woman the way. She alters her journey by several hundred yards to show me the way; although they are all New Englanders, Bostonians, it seems, are a different breed to New Yorkers. At the Old Granary Burying Ground are buried some of the signatories of the Declaration of Independence: notably, John Hancock whose name has become synonymous in the US with 'signature' because he wrote his so ostentatiously large on the document. Also buried here are Benjamin Franklin's parents and Paul Revere and the five victims of the 1770 Boston Massacre - one of the many slow-burning resentments that ignited 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 five thousand Bostonians gathered in 1772 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 admiring Revere's modest green clapboard house. Parked in front of it is a lone car - which is unusual as cars are banned from the square. Standing with me is a family of American visitors. I say to them: "Do you think that's Paul Revere's car?" There is a puzzled silence. I then say, "I bet Paul Revere wished it *was* his car". Slowly there is a realisation that this ignorant Englishman was making a joke. They *sort of* laugh.

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 backup riders across the river in Charlestown that British troops were on the move.

The next day, outside Concord, in quiet, undulating countryside I'm at the North Bridge, a simple wooden bridge

over the river. It's 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 other writers: Louisa M Alcott wrote *Little Women* here; Henry Thoreau wrote *Walden* and Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*. Henry James said of Concord that it's 'the biggest little place in America'.

Across the fields from the North Bridge, I see a large old wooden house. As I approach I see it's called the Old Manse and is made of unadorned clapboard with a shingled hipped-roof and tall Georgian windows. It's open to the public. I go in and find I'm the only visitor. The guide, a girl at nearby Harvard doing holiday relief, tells me it's Emerson's family home. In 1842 Nathaniel Hawthorne rented it with his new wife, Sophia. The guide says she normally waits for more people to arrive before doing the tour but since it's so quiet we might as well proceed. The house has been kept much as Hawthorne left it: the kitchen has the original furniture, equipment and stove - waiting, it seems, for the Hawthorne's to come down for breakfast; upstairs there is his bed; in the study, which he sometimes shared with Emerson, is his chair and little sloping writing desk facing a blank wall; it was originally at a window but Hawthorne said the view distracted him so had the desk moved. 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.

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 in his wife's hand: "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".

In the centre of Concord is the war memorial with the names of those killed in the battle. I was reading the names when an old man approached. He is intrigued that I'm English. He tells me about a freed Black slave who died here in 1773 and is buried 'back o' the hill' in the Old Hill Burying Ground across the way. He recites from heart the citation and epitaph on the headstone of 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.'

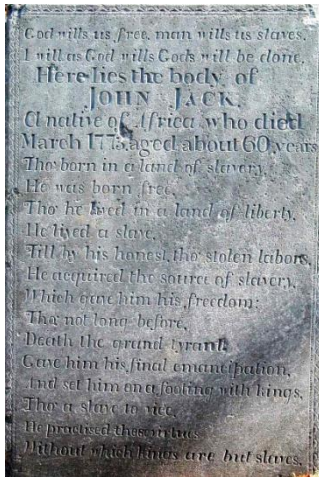
God wills us free; man wills us slaves, I will as God wills;
God's will be done. Here lies the body of

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.

Bliss wrote the epitaph.



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. The epitaph was printed in a London newspaper and became world-famous.

Afterwards, following the old man's directions, I visit the grave. It's located 'back o' the hill' so that even in death he is segregated from the white peoples' graves. It is made of a

good grey slate with finely carved writing.

Later that day, I drive up to 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 writing under the pen-name of Miranda Neville; however, her married name of Fanny Mallary strikes me as good a name for such a writer.

The next day we go to what Fanny says is the eccentric Fairbanks Museum and Planetarium in St Johnsbury. The entrance hall has a stuffed snarling 1000lb polar bear; near it a similar bare-teethed, bloody-clawed grizzly bear; then a bison and a moose and real tree branches with scores of small birds from Central and South America; there are Egyptian mummified cats and crocodiles; a diorama of an Abenaki Indian settlement; a stuffed muskrat colony; stuffed creeping pythons; a doll collection; cases of rocks and minerals; Civil War relics - including Jefferson Davis's checkerboard; a collection of thousands of flying insects each one spread and pinned to a board; there is 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 there is a meteorology centre. In

the 19th century when Mr Fairbanks created the collection in a specially built Romanesque building, he wanted ' to bring the world to St. Johnsbury'.

I leave Fanny to go for Thanksgiving to friends further north in Vermont. I say goodbye, little knowing it will be for the last time - within two years she would be dead from cancer.

My hire car has a sat nav. A female voice issues the instructions. In the deep woods in remote northern Vermont she tries to kill me. The snow is thicker on the ground as I get further north. My friends, Robert and Shari Kiener live in an isolated house in the conifer-clad hills near Stowe. It's dark and the sat nav girl tells me to take a left and drive for six miles. After a mile the tarmac road turns into a rutted 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 see twin lights ahead, two big hounds appear in my headlights and then a woman with a hat made of torches. She looks alarmed. I stop and ask her if I'm going in the right direction. She tells me to turn around immediately as the track will soon be impassable to an ordinary car. And then, in the dark, she and her dogs are gone - the Woman of the Woods has disappeared. I take the advice of the mysterious guide, and iwth difficulty, turn round.

I eventually find the Kieners who remark that I had a narrow escape. 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 to a clearing and points to a high wooded ridge in the far distance. He tells me that is where I was and if I hadn't met my apparition I'd have found myself in the dark and cold, lost and alone and out of gas.

We have a Thanksgiving lunch and afterwards go 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 return the hire car where the assistant is surly and unhelpful. On the plane back to London, I think about the difference between New Yorkers and Bostonians.