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A lifetime of New York minutes

From the first visit at age 16, he was hooked

By: Edward Rutherford

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Times Square

The first time I ever saw New York I was 16 years old, and I was all alone. My parents had sent me around the world.

In Canada, I had visited family friends in Toronto and then been put on the train to Brockville, where one of my father's dearest friends lived with his wife — a lovely lady who owned and trained horses, including the show jumper Big Ben. She even let me get up on that great horse for a moment. I say a moment, because it didn't last long. I must have moved; Big Ben thought I was telling him something. He moved too. And I fell off. But I had been up on him, and that was enough, and after that I felt ready for anything.



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Central Park



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The Frick Collection: Whistler's oil on canvas, titled: "Harmony in Pink and Grey: Portrait of Lady Meux, 1881-82." (AP PHOTO)



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The Chrysler Building (left) and the Empire State Building. (CNS)



A 25-foot tall replica statue of the Egyptian god Anubis passes in front of the Statue of Liberty while taking a tour of New York waterways this month. The statue was traveling to announce the upcoming exhibit "Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs" at the Discovery Times Square Exposition. (AP)



"Imagine" memorial to John Lennon in Central Park's Strawberry Fields. (AP)



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Egyptian art gallery at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (AP)

Including a visit to New York by myself.

If sending a teenager alone to the Big Apple seems a little strange in the modern world, I should stress right away that my parents were loving and caring. But they came from the generation where children were sometimes sent across the British Empire with nothing more than a label attached to them, by which obliging porters, pursers, and railway conductors could safely convey the child from place to place.

They were sure — and they were quite right — that I could fend for myself. But they were maybe not too well-informed about the city itself. Relying upon the advice of a provincial office of the Thomas Cook Travel Agency of the day, my well-meaning parents had booked me into a hotel on the then-infamous Times Square, in the mistaken belief that, being central, it must be respectable. Once there, I was told to make contact with some friends who lived in Midtown and who would show me around.

So it was that I found myself in a narrow and dingy room on the 20th floor of my hotel on Times Square. I put in my call to my parents' friends, but to my delight, they didn't answer. For that evening at least, I had the city to myself.

So I walked out, down Broadway and on to 42nd Street, and saw movie houses showing films unlike anything I had ever seen before, and watched the milling crowds, and ate a hot dog from a stand and was very happy. It was getting quite late before I finally got back and decided to turn in, and I had just got ready for bed when, from the room next door, I heard a woman's voice. It was harsh, husky, and strangely plaintive.

"He hated you," it said. "Don't tell me he loved you. He hated you."

There was a faint reply, but I could not hear the words. Then the husky voice again.

"You bitch. He hated you. And I hate you... Oh, why don't you go back to California?" Then there was a crash. I think it must have been a plate.

This went on for some time. There were more sounds of breaking crockery. Then finally a scream followed by what sounded like a gunshot. Then silence.

So this, I thought with some excitement, is New York.

I never discovered whether anyone was shot in that hotel that night. But the next morning my parents' friends were still not answering their telephone, so I had the day free.

And it was on the boat trip round Manhattan Island that afternoon that I really fell in love with New York. Passing by Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty was fine, of course, but it was the huge harbour itself and the magnificence of the Hudson River that really stirred my soul.

Thanks to the mid-century conversion to containers, and the move of the cargo facilities to New Jersey, New York's

old waterfront — where once the hundreds of tall ships' masts were the first skyscrapers — was returning to the quiet of the time when it was Indian hunting grounds. But even if I knew little of this, or of the Erie Canal, or the huge railroad system that opened up the West, I sensed that these great waterways were the path into the huge spaces of the continent, and I felt a thrilling sense of big skies and of adventure.

The next morning, I didn't even try to contact my parents' friends, but spent a wonderful day walking in Central Park and seeing the splendid apartment houses and great museums on Fifth — the Metropolitan, the Guggenheim and, perhaps the most delightful of all, that strange palace, apparently transported from the days of the Roman Empire, the Frick Collection, with its spectacular collection and intimate atmosphere, perhaps my favourite cultural haven in the world.

By the time my visit ended the next day, I'd decided New York was the most exciting place I could ever hope to live.

It was many years before a job in the book business accomplished this. Remembering the splendours of the Frick, I looked for a rental apartment near Fifth Avenue, and was thrilled to find one, right beside the magnificent building of the New York Public Library. But there were still a few things I had to learn.

I might have cared to know, as I now do, that close to this spot in 1776, George Washington had beaten his half-trained troops with the flat of his sword as he tried to get them to stand and fight the terrifying Redcoats. Or I might have discovered that the library was previously the city's huge water-distributing reservoir. Or even that after the world-renowned success of London's Great Exhibition of 1851, with its huge Crystal Palace, the New Yorkers had copied it with their own smaller Exhibition and Crystal Palace, on the park just behind the library. All that would have been interesting.

But what I really needed to know — and what I soon discovered — was that at the time I rented, the park behind the library turned at night into a venue for drug dealers and for other activities that I could see from my window, but cannot describe in print. No wonder the rent was affordable! I didn't care, though. This was life, and I cheerfully told my parents that I was living on Fifth Avenue.

These were the years when I began to learn about New York in its many aspects. Our offices were close by the Chrysler Building, and I came to love its beautiful art deco form, and the eerie shadow its great spike casts against the low cloud on certain days. I learned the story of how, in the mad rush to build the world's tallest building, that spike was erected on a single windy afternoon, adding 158 feet to the building and catching its rivals by surprise, just one day before Black Thursday in the Crash of '29.

I came to frequent the Lincoln Center with its two vast Chagalls, and make friends with an actress who took me to Brooklyn to meet her grandparents — her grandmother who had been fired from a bank in the '20s when it was discovered she was Jewish, and her grandfather, a dentist who preferred to play the piano, and who made his patients wait until he'd finished his piano practice before he would fix their teeth.

I went with Italian friends who told me gleefully how, when the Empire State Building was being constructed, all the workers, including the Mohawk Indians, ate in the cafeteria at lunch time — except the Italians, who brought their own packed lunches because they knew that only Italian food was edible!

I had Irish friends, German friends brought up in the Upper East Side's Little Germany (it used to be on the Lower East Side) who had changed their family name back at the time of the First World War, Russian friends who took me to the Russian Orthodox Easter Vigil in the cathedral off Park Avenue. These were some of the people who taught me that within the great city, there are a thousand universes.

New York gave me two other gifts. One was a winter of discontent when, day after day, I would go to the Wolman skating rink in Central Park, skating round and round, wondering what to do with my life, with the loudspeakers so appropriately playing that wonderful Donna Summer/Barbara Streisand duet *Enough is Enough*. "I can't go on," they would sing, and I knew how it felt.

But strangely, once I had finally taken the decision to write, it was the Frick Museum that showed me the way. For it was in there, while I was trying to think of the right subject, that I suddenly saw the wonderful picture, by John

Constable, of Salisbury Cathedral. Salisbury — Sarum as the locals know it — the place of my birth, a place which, along with nearby Stonehenge, has one of the longest and richest histories in England. New York pointed me back to England.

But only for a while. With Sarum going on bestseller lists around the world, I married and returned to New York. To live happily ever after?

Not quite. For there was still the problem of accommodation.

For the first time, my wife and I decided we should try to buy an apartment. And here we encountered that other great institution: the Co-op Board, the collection of residents in an apartment building who will only allow apartments to be sold to people of whom they approve.

We found an apartment. Nothing fancy, but nice. We got our mortgage together, got references from respectable people — and got nowhere. The chairman of the co-op board didn't turn us down. He refused to see us at all. He didn't want authors in the building. (He may have had a point there). But just as bad, my wife worked. We had to give up.

In the end, we did find a co-op board on the West Side that would have us. It was only a short walk from Lincoln Center. I was happy. But we did hear from the real estate broker what happened at the building that had turned us down.

The seller had finally asked the chairman in despair: "Well, what sort of person can I sell the apartment to?" The chairman replied: "Somebody solid. Someone like..." And he named a certain financier. The next week, the financier was indicted.

Since then I have raised children in New York, lived in several apartments, written quite a few books, including New York, whose plots and characters have grown out of my research and the family stories of so many of my friends.

The city has given to me, as it does to every visitor, its amazing gifts of history, culture, and bracing spirit. There's just one thing about which I remain unsatisfied.

If, somehow, I should ever sell more books than has ever been done in the history of man — and nothing in New York is impossible — if I should ever get so mind-bogglingly rich that even the toughest co-op board chairman will let me live in his building despite the fact that I am an author, then I shall not buy an apartment at all. I am going to buy the Frick, and live in it!

Edward Rutherfurd is the author of six novels, including London, Sarum, The Princes of Ireland, and The Rebels of Ireland. His latest novel, New York, is already a New York Times bestseller. Rutherfurd has lived in London, New York, New Hampshire, and Ireland. He currently divides his time between New England and Europe.

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