



### Cruising Times Square in the 1970's

by Jill Dearman

I was still young enough to like am radio. I hadn't been exposed to the much cooler fm stations yet. Sometimes, when we drove into the city, my father listened to Bernard Meltzer's call-in advice show. It wasn't so psychology-based, just heavy on common sense and consumer advice. Women could find out how to get their husbands to pay them a compliment once in awhile, and men could find out how to cancel a scam insurance policy. Meltzer was Dear Abby over the airwaves. Usually we just listened to WABC on the a.m. dial, a top forty station that played plenty of Carly Simon, James Taylor, Harry Chapin and other sentimental singer-songwriters. The one-hit-wonders of the day were often the songs I liked the most. "Alone Again, Naturally," "Lonely Boy" and "Seasons in the Sun" touched an emotional chord in me that I didn't yet have a name for. We took the long way in, over the 59th Street Bridge, and I always hummed "Feelin' Groovy" in my mind. I knew the Simon and Garfunkel song from my sister's record collection.

We both enjoyed the ride for its own sake. Driving was the best part, better than wherever we might be headed. And often we had no clear destination. We would stop for eats sooner than later. My father had driven a cab, even owned his own cab (the big checker kind with rumble seats in the back) for many years. Now he was living on government benefits, sick with kidney disease, divorced from my mother and calling a studio apartment in a Bronx Project his home.

The mood of the city changed as night began to fall.

Times Square was pre-TV screens and only had neon lights and seamy sights to catch a passerby's attention, but there were plenty of both. Crazy Eddie's prices were "in-saaaane" and the people on the street seemed pretty whacked out too. Orange Julius attracted a lot of nighttime customers, who stood outside, not a one drinking juice, but everybody making deals. In the heat of summer, sweaty men and women still wore a bit of fur, even if it was just a hint of it on their wide-brimmed hats or feral collars. The folks who did business in this part of town were mostly black and Hispanic, but the white and Asian ones somehow also appeared black or Hispanic, too. There was something about the way the neon lights outside and the fluorescent lights inside the stores cast a sallow glow over all these bejeweled and exciting creatures of the night. It was theatre on the streets. Who needed to go see "Grease," perpetually playing on Broadway, when the real drama was right under your toes and next to a drunk or dead body?

We drove across 42nd Street and up and down the avenues looking for parking. We cruised around and passed paunchy, bald businessmen bringing young girls in stiletto heels into Tad's Steakhouse and La Scala. Sometimes these same types walked in and out of the Mayfair Bar, making up or breaking up.

I couldn't have been happier back then, sitting there beside my father, who was calm like a Buddhist Monk, behind the wheel, lost in dreams. Squeegee men approached our windshield at what seemed like thirty-second intervals, rags in hand and rank smells exuding from their skin. Dad would roll up his window and advise me to do the same. Once one was gone, the windows came back down till the next

one approached and the trapped-in-traffic dance continued. Yet everybody was cool and knew the rules, and I was thrilled to learn them from a pro.

My mother was terrified by the nocturnal world of crime and danger and other races and vermin crawling out of unknown crevices, but she didn't exist while I was out there with him. I wanted to know more about what he knew, how he sensed which streets to take and what thugs to avoid and which ones to yell "screw you" at. I desired his instincts and felt I had them in me already. I just wanted years to pass and to grow up fast, so I could awake one day with the collective unconscious of the streets at a Ph.D. and not grade school level. I was a visitor with a free pass in the grown-up world. I was grateful to him for taking me there, Saturday after Saturday, where we could walk dangerous tightrope streets without a net, and where I could pick up drug-like memories I would never forget.

And the streets were dangerous, I knew. Like a smart animal, I had enough sense to be just a little bit afraid as we walked past peep shows that cost twenty-five cents a pop, and climbed over garbage that served as a welcome mat to the rats, who were within kicking distance.

The movie posters outside the brightly-lit theatres told the story of what adults did after their kids went to sleep. In these black and white pictures, Oriental girls walked on white men's backs. Their tight bosoms had sparkly nipples, like the fireworks that exploded all over Chinatown on the 4th of July. Some posters just had men playing games with other men. These guys tended to look like Sam Cobra, the mustachioed villain in black leather, who was part of my Johnny West & the Best of the West doll collection.

We passed a half dozen fleabag motels walking in the direction of a Castro Convertible Couch billboard, our North Star, on the way to play arcade games.

Years earlier, before I was even born, my parents sent my sister's picture to the Castro company in response to an ad for child models they had placed in the paper. She didn't get the gig, but I always thought it would have been funny to see her mug up there, pulling the bed out of a couch, while my Dad and I cruised below, out of reach of my mother's safe, plastic-covered world.

I plugged quarters into my favorite pinball machine, the one that said "Rock and Roll!" and had drawings of mop-topped guys playing guitars. As I racked up points and tried for more, my father walked around, always within sight but somehow keeping his eyes focused outward, on the streets. When I'd done a dollar's worth of work, I approached him for more money. He gave me a worn green single and told me to ask the man to change it for me. The guy wore an apron and a change machine on his belt that doled out silver. He took my dollar and looked right past me as he pressed coins out with his thumb. His face carried the grizzled look of a lost man, all salt and pepper stubble and bits of grease from his hands, lingering on his lips.

My father, no longer young, healthy and well-dressed by my mother, bore a haunting resemblance to the Change-Man.



