

License to Sticky Beak

One of the great things about New York is its extensive, well organised, well patronised public transport system and its safe streets for walking which I had plenty of time to appreciate during ten years of commuting in and around the New York metropolitan area. My 20 minute walk to the morning train kept mindfulness of the seasons very much at the forefront of my day. After weeks climbing over mounds of dirty snow piled at the road corners I was always keen to spot the first bulbs pushing their shoots up into the wintery air. And I loved the garden with the heavily scented datura that would flower through most of the summer and the magnolia that some Edward Scissorhands thought looked best shaped into a dense lollipop that none the less flowered profusely each May. The train ride provided great people watching; the little clutches of commuters standing on the platform at the precise point the train doors would open, the same people waiting in the same spot to get on the same car each day; the foursome for bridge, well known to the conductors who turned a blind eye to the players popping cardboard advertising posters out of their frames to use the backs as both table and score card; the man who either had a nervous compulsion or the fastest growing fingernails on the planet who whipped out his nail clippers for a quick trim two or three times a week; and of course women putting on their makeup and people drinking their coffee, eating their morning bagel and reading the paper. The train ride was followed by a lemming shuffle from the platform through the northern exit of Grand Central except on those annoying days when heads of state were staying at the Waldorf or there were special sessions at the UN when all auxiliary exits would close and we'd do a reverse shuffle out onto Lexington Avenue before briskly dispersing to our various mid town office buildings. It didn't seem to matter how much money people had or where they worked, most understood and appreciated that the train and a walk was the most convenient and often the fastest way to get to work.

When my work moved across the Hudson River to Jersey City my husband and I followed and a new routine developed. From our apartment there were only a few roads that provided a walking route to my work due to an urban planning nightmare that had cut the heart of Jersey City to ribbons with highways and train lines. The main roads are patrolled by crossing guards, mostly women, almost always cheerful and very much part of their community. Locals would stop to say hi and have a quick chat and I became known as the woman who made chocolate chip cookies occasionally to thank the guards for standing out there in all weathers getting people safely to school and work. A board walk along the Hudson made a welcome change from the streets when the weather was mild and instead of watching Westchester gardens grow I now watched the ever blooming construction sites and sometimes a window cleaner abseiling from the top of the high rise swooping from floor to floor with a bucket in one hand and a squeegee in the other. And on those few days that the weather was truly too disgusting to walk, the light rail gave me a Disney Land style train ride tootling through Jersey City block by block. It didn't get me to work any quicker but it did mean I didn't arrive looking like I'd taken a dip in the river.

Now we are back in New Zealand living in a rural area and more reliant on a car than we ever were in New York. I love being back but oh I do miss my daily commute!