

AMERICA DAY BY DAY



Simone de BEAUVOIR

'A great living document of America in the forties' **SCOTSMAN**

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SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

Simone de Beauvoir was born in Paris in 1908. In 1929 she became the youngest person ever to obtain the *agrégation* in philosophy at the Sorbonne, placing second to Jean-Paul Sartre. She taught at the lycées at Marseille and Rouen from 1931 to 1937, and in Paris from 1938 to 1943. After the war she emerged as one of the leaders of the existentialist movement, working with Sartre on *Les Temps modernes*. The author of several books including *The Mandarins* (1954), which was awarded the Prix Goncourt, Beauvoir was one of the most influential thinkers of her generation. She died in 1986.

ALSO BY SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

FICTION

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The Blood of Others

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The Mandarins

The Woman Destroyed

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SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR
AMERICA DAY
BY DAY

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
Douglas Brinkley

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To Ellen and Richard Wright

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Foreword

I teach an experimental course called ‘American Odyssey’ in which college students spend a semester reading classic works while travelling around the country on the Majic Bus to visit historical sites and meet writers. The curriculum includes fifty books, ranging from *Leaves of Grass* to *The Color Purple* to *On the Road*. Recently, I’ve added a new title: *America Day by Day*, a forgotten gem by Simone de Beauvoir, long out of print.

Beauvoir journeyed to America in January 1947, armed with an effusive letter of introduction from her soulmate Jean-Paul Sartre and ecstatic about experiencing four whirlwind months. Although she did not intend to write a book, she kept a detailed diary of her observations, which was published in France in 1948 as *L’Amérique au jour le jour*. At the time of her trip, two years before the publication of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir was considered more of a café society curiosity than a feminist trailblazer. Even in 1952, when the book was translated and published in England as *America Day by Day*, it generated few sales and little notice. But with the passage of time, *America Day by Day* emerges as a supremely erudite American road book – that distinctive subgenre based on flights of fancy rather than flights from economic hardship, as in John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*. In broader sociological terms, her critique outpaces William Least Heat-Moon’s *Blue Highways: A Journey into America*. In the realm of pure prose style, it easily transcends Henry Miller’s *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*. And, for my money, in the field of European highbrow loathing of the cruder aspects of our democratic experiment, it is preferable to Charles Dickens’s haughty *American Notes for General Circulation*.

Raised as a bourgeois Catholic schoolgirl in Paris following World War I, Beauvoir was an intuitive sociologist, although

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her more poetic passages show an unexpected empathy for those afflicted with loneliness. It's these flashes of authentic compassion for the common people she meets that make *America Day by Day* so endearing. Although she regularly mounts her soapbox to denounce everything from atomic weapons to bad food, she exudes maternal kindness to everyone she meets, regardless of his or her narrow politics or jingoistic worldview. Although cynical about the hegemonic intent of the United States government, she displays a keen appreciation of 'American dynamism' and the GIs who had liberated France from the Nazis. Leaving all her preconceptions back in Montparnasse, the indefatigable explorer made the transatlantic journey ready to embrace America with her 'hands, eyes, mouth'.

Beauvoir's story begins with her 'smooth flight' from Paris to Newfoundland to New York's La Guardia Airport. Embraced upon arrival by the Condé Nast set at a gaggle of cocktail parties, cheered on at Vassar College, where she took part in a symposium called 'Women's Role in Contemporary Society', gossiped about as the 'prettiest existentialist' by Janet Flanner in the *New Yorker's* 'Talk of the Town', Beauvoir made a significant splash. The *New York Times Magazine* even commissioned an article from her – 'An Existentialist Looks at Americans' – which appeared on 25 May 1947. Although much of her itinerary revolved around her well-arranged lecture schedule, she allowed plenty of free days for aimless explorations and journalistic pulse taking. Beauvoir, like an anxious literary traveller, wanted to pinpoint the intellectual fountainhead of the nation that produced the likes of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Dos Passos. The first chapters of *America Day by Day* take place in prosperous post-war Manhattan, where Beauvoir was overwhelmed by the cult of American consumerism, disturbed by our national attraction to luxury cars and Madison Avenue come-ons, and angered at the anti-communist groupthink mentality she encountered wherever she went. She perfectly captures the alienated sensation of being a stranger in Gotham:

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Between these houses that have existed without me for years, for centuries, these streets were travelled by thousands of people who were not me, who are not me. But now I'm walking here. I go down Broadway; it's really me. I'm walking in streets not yet travelled by me, streets where my life has not yet been carved, streets without any scent of the past. No one here is concerned with my presence; I'm still a ghost, and I slip through the city without disturbing anything. Yet from now on my life will embrace the contour of these streets, these houses. New York will belong to me; I will belong to it.

A reader is struck not only by the meticulous descriptive passages on American history and geography but also by Beauvoir's ability to encapsulate our national psyche ('Optimism is necessary for the country's social peace and economic prosperity') and to comment so deftly on our shortcomings ('even people of goodwill . . . refuse to articulate clearly the current conflict between justice and freedom, and the necessity of devising a compromise between these two ideas; they prefer to deny injustice and the lack of freedom').

Just because Beauvoir is a refined tourist in an America that stood, in Winston Churchill's words, 'at the summit of the world' does not mean her adventure is a tame one. There is an indisputable truth to her matter-of-fact observation that 'as in all big cities, people use a lot of drugs in New York'. Her attempt to get high on a marijuana cigarette in the Plaza Hotel with a shaggy cabal of Greenwich Village idlers is a hilarious misadventure. Her radical-chic ability to embrace all aspects of shadowy bohemia without a tinge of guilt or paranoia sparkles throughout. Sexually liberated, she meets men on the road – including, in Chicago, a thinly disguised Nelson Algren, who becomes her lover – and alcohol consumption is a prominent part of her travels.

Clearly a voyeur of America's transient underbelly, Beauvoir is able, like George Orwell in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, to penetrate the haze and blue smoke of our nation's tenderloin districts deeply enough to offer detached insights into desolation

row. In Chicago, with Algren as her guide, she learns first-hand about the world of morphine addicts and petty thieves, murderous gangsters and midnight cops. 'America is a box full of surprises,' she writes, intoxicated by her walks on the wild side.

As one would expect, feminism is discussed openly. Although she often compares the American women she encounters with European women, what Beauvoir finds most peculiar about feminism in America is that women disdain others of their sex, that sisterhood is just a slogan bandied about rhetorically by the enlightened few. As she explores everything from our national horror of prostitutes to mass frigidity, she sounds more like a precursor to Camille Paglia than Betty Friedan: 'Woman is much less comfortable in this masculine world, where she has only recently been admitted as an equal,' she writes. '[Their] inability to prove themselves concretely is a constant source of irritation, which, in their confusion, they readily turn against men.'

Beauvoir's peripatetic journey by automobile, train and Greyhound bus took her from coast to coast and back, and illuminating sections of the memoir are devoted to Hollywood, the Grand Canyon, Reno, New Orleans, Las Vegas and San Antonio. Always amused and exhilarated by the lapdog friendliness of urban and rural folk alike, she is also flabbergasted that these same good-natured people embody the volatile, schizophrenic mixture of 'strictness and hypocritical licence'. An eternal rebel, she has an uncanny eye for the shallow extravagances of American culture and an abolitionist's rage at the evil of segregation south of the Mason-Dixon Line. While San Francisco and Chicago are celebrated in *America Day by Day*, other cities get scorched: 'Williamsburg is one of the sorriest shams to which I've ever fallen victim,' or, 'I dearly hope I'm never fated to live in Rochester.'

Like Georgia O'Keeffe before her, who once said, 'If you ever go to New Mexico, it will itch you for the rest of your life,' Simone de Beauvoir was spiritually enveloped by the high desert terrain she encountered on the enchanted road from Santa Fe to Taos with the Sangre de Cristo Mountains hovering in constant

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view. To Beauvoir, the richly textured curves of the adobe walls and abandoned pueblos were national heritage sites of untold mystery more potent than all the 'discouraging' marble monuments in Washington DC that induced 'boredom'. Toward the end of her journey she lectured at Smith and Wellesley on the metaphysical novel, providing her the opportunity to sightsee around Boston and to reflect on her recent American travel discoveries. 'Emerson and Damon Runyon belong to the same world. You cannot understand Chicago, Los Angeles or Houston if you forget that they are haunted by the troublesome, propitious, irritated or complacent ghosts of the old Puritans,' Beauvoir writes. 'If you want to find a way into the difficult heart of America, it's in Concord that you will find the key to open the first gate.'

A mix of literary and sociological references and perspicacious musings, *America Day by Day* brims with philosophical speculation and memorable aphorisms. After attending a Louis Armstrong concert at Carnegie Hall, Beauvoir writes, 'The American public has more or less murdered jazz, but they still love it.' Travelling through the Mojave Desert for a hundred miles past curio shops and jackalope stands, she observes, 'Tourism has a privileged character in America: it doesn't cut you off from the country it's revealing to you; on the contrary, it's a way of entering it.' And, at last, in a line that could serve as a motto for the whole Beat Generation ethic: 'All these mass-manufactured fates are haunted by a thousand dreams of escape.'

For women, and men, who want to experience vicariously Jack Kerouac's open road with less macho romanticism and more existential savvy, *America Day by Day*, hidden from us for nearly fifty years, comes to the reader like a dusty bottle of vintage French cognac, asking only to be uncorked.

Douglas Brinkley

New Orleans, 15 October 1996

A slightly shorter version of this foreword appeared as 'The Existential Tourist' in the *New York Times Book Review* of 11 August 1996.

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Preface

I spent four months in America – very little time. Furthermore, I travelled for pleasure and wherever I happened to be invited. There are vast areas of the New World I haven't even glimpsed. As a private individual, I crossed this great industrial country without visiting its factories, without seeing its technical accomplishments, without making contact with the working class. Nor did I enter the elite circle where US politics and economics are hammered out. Yet alongside the fuller pictures that more competent people have drawn, it does not seem useless to me to recount, day by day, how America revealed itself to one consciousness – mine.

In place of a serious study, which would be presumptuous for me to attempt, I can offer a faithful account [of my travels]. Because concrete experience involves both subject and object, I have not tried to eliminate myself from this narrative: it is truthful only because it includes the unique personal circumstances in which each discovery was made. That is why I have adopted the journal form. Although written in retrospect, this journal – reconstituted from notes, letters and memories that were still fresh – is scrupulously accurate. I have respected the chronological order of my amazement, my admiration, my indignation, my hesitations and my mistakes. Frequently, my first impressions become clearer only as time goes by. For the topics that seem important to me, I have noted how one passage is related to another. But I insist that no isolated piece represents a definitive judgement. Indeed, often I never arrived at a fixed viewpoint, and it is the whole collection of my indecisions, additions and corrections that constitutes my opinion. No selection has been exercised in telling the story: it is the story of what happened to me, neither more nor less. This is what I saw and how I saw it. I have not tried to say more.

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January

25 January 1947

Something is about to happen. You can count the minutes in your life when something happens. Strokes of light sweep the ground, shining red and green; it's a gala evening, a late-night party – my party. Something does happen: the propellers turn faster and faster, the engines engage. My heart can't follow them. In a single movement the red beacons are crushed to the earth. In the distance, the lights of Paris flicker, sober stars rising from a dark blue abyss.

There. It's happened. I'm flying to New York. It's true. The loudspeaker called out, 'Passengers bound for New York . . .', and the voice had the familiar accent of all voices heard through loudspeakers on station platforms. Paris–Marseilles, Paris–London, Paris–New York. It's only a trip, a passage from one place to another. That's what the voice was saying; that's what is written on the steward's blasé face. Because of his job, he finds it quite natural that I'm flying to America. There is only one world, and New York is a city of the world. But no. Despite all the books I've read, the films, the photographs, the stories, New York is a legendary city in my past; there is no path from the reality to the legend. Across from old Europe, on the threshold of a continent populated by 160 million people, New York belongs to the future. How could I jump wholeheartedly over my own life? I try to reason with myself – New York is real and present – but this feeling persists. Usually, travelling is an attempt to annex a new object to my universe; this in itself is a fascinating undertaking. But today it's different: I feel I'm leaving my life behind. I don't know if it will be through anger or

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hope, but something is going to be revealed – a world so full, so rich and so unexpected that I'll have the extraordinary adventure of becoming a different me.

The smooth flight is already a promise: I've already escaped myself. The earth has slipped to the bottom of an alien ether. I am nowhere: I am *elsewhere*. And what time is it? What season are we in? It's summer in the Azores, in the shade of broad straw hats. The ground of Newfoundland is covered with snow and frost. It's eight o'clock in Paris and two o'clock in New York. Time and space are intertwined. My dreams are less extravagant than this great wing I'm attached to, gliding motionless between clouds and stars.

I've slept. I open my eyes. In the black sky carpeting the abyss, horizontal, stationary fireworks suddenly explode: stars, webs, circles, showers of multicoloured lights. Water trembles between the glittering chandeliers. It looks like Venice gone mad. Or some great victory being celebrated on earth . . . 'Boston,' says the stewardess. The Puritan name evokes a city of sober stone. Traced in fire and gold on the velvet of the plain, its image looks giddy. Boston. America. I look avidly. I can't yet say, 'I'm in America.' In only a minute I could crash to the ground, but I'm in a sky that belongs to no continent: *the* sky. Beneath me the night gathers again; America is sleeping. But in the distance fireworks explode from a new celebration: a city, a village. It seems that in this country the stones and bricks change at night into blazing spangles; every little village is a glowing Christmas tree.

Descending from sky to earth is a small ordeal. The limpid, weightless air thickens into an atmosphere hugging the terrestrial crust and swept by eddies. The splendid flight becomes applied navigation. My temples throb, my ears hurt; my eardrum becomes that membrane described in the natural history books: it tightens, it vibrates, it hurts. I was only a gaze, an expectation: now I have a pocket of a stomach, a bony box of a skull, a membrane of an eardrum – a whole machinery of

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separate and ill-fitting parts. I've closed my eyes; when I open them again, all the stars in the sky have rolled onto the earth. It's a glittering mass of gems and precious red stones, ruby fruits, topaz flowers and diamond rivers. I haven't known such splendour and such passionate desire since childhood. All the treasures of *The Thousand and One Nights* that I dreamed of back then and that I never glimpsed – here they are. All the fair booths I didn't go into, the merry-go-rounds with wooden horses, Magic City, Luna Park – here they are. And the stage sets at the Châtelet Theatre, the birthday cakes, the crystal chandeliers lighting up the night in rooms full of music – these are given back to me, given to me. That holly branch hung with necklaces, bracelets, clusters of transparent, glossy candy that I so badly coveted one Palm Sunday – here it is. I will hang these sugar jewels around my neck, my wrists; I will crack the crystal between my teeth; I will crush the shining sugary fruit against my palate and savour a taste of cassis and pineapple on my tongue.

The plane descends; it pitches. Bound to the winds, the fog, the weight of the air, it is living a turbulent life among the elements; it belongs to nature. It descends. The strings of pearls become streets, the crystal balls are streetlamps; it is a city after all, and the very words of childhood are too impoverished to name its promises. A factory smokestack sways in the sky. I make out houses along an avenue, and I think, 'I will walk down those streets.' The smokestack sways a second time; we are circling around. The woman next to me murmurs, 'The engine's making an odd noise.' We turn, leaning on one wing, and I think quickly, 'I don't want to die. Not now. I don't want the lights to go out.' The smokestack has disappeared. The red beacons draw near, and I feel the thud of the wheels touching the runway. We were just waiting our turn; an airplane lands at La Guardia every minute.

The elements are conquered, distances annihilated, but New York has vanished. To rejoin it, you have to go through the narrow tunnel of terrestrial life. Papers are passed from hand to hand; a doctor perfunctorily examines our teeth, as if we were

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horses for sale. We are led into an overheated hall, and we wait. My head is heavy; I'm stifling. People had warned me, 'It's always too hot in America.' This dulling heat, then, is America; and this orange juice handed to me by a young woman with shiny hair and a practised smile is also America. It will have to be discovered slowly; it will not let you devour it like a big piece of candy. The Christmas trees and luminous fountains are far away. I will not catch another glimpse of that festive face; it doesn't shine for those who bear down on the land with all their human weight. My name is called; a bureaucrat examines my fine visa made of stiff paper, decorated with red seals like a medieval charter. He nods his head. 'You come from a beautiful country,' he says, 'but you've come to an even more beautiful one.' He asks me for eight dollars. Then the customs officers rummage idly through my suitcase, and I enter the great round hall where people get bored and doze off. I'm free, and on the other side of the door, New York is waiting.

DP [Denise Perrier, from the French cultural services] has come to meet me; I don't know her. But off I go, borne away beside a young woman I've never seen, through a city that my eyes don't yet know how to see. The car drives so fluidly, the road beneath the wheels is so smooth that the earth seems as evanescent as air. We follow a river, we cross a metal bridge, and my neighbour says suddenly, 'That's Broadway.' Then, all at once, I see. I see broad, brightly lit streets where hundreds and hundreds of cars are driving, stopping and starting again with such discipline you would think they were guided from above by some magnetic providence. The regular grid of the streets, the immovable stop signs at the perpendicular intersections, the mathematical sequence of red and green traffic lights all create such an impression of order and peace that the city seems silent. The fact is, you don't hear a single honk or exhaust backfiring, and now I understand why our American visitors are surprised by the awful screeching of brakes at our street corners. Here the cars glide by on a blanketed roadway punctuated by

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rising geysers of steam. It's like a silent film. The shiny cars look like they've just left the showroom, and the pavement seems as clean as the tiles of a Dutch kitchen. Light has washed away all the stains; it's a supernatural light that transfigures the asphalt, that wraps a halo around the flowers, silk dresses, candies, nylon stockings, gloves, bags, shoes, furs and ribbons offered in the shop windows. I look avidly. I will probably never find this silence, this luxury, this peace again; I will never again see those ramparts of black lava around Central Park, those gigantic dominoes of stone and light. Tomorrow New York will be a city. But this evening is magical. We drive around without finding a parking space. This is an obligatory rite, and I give myself over to it with a neophyte's curiosity. In the restaurant decorated with red and gold palm trees, the dinner is a meal of initiation; the martini and lobster taste of the sacred.

DP has booked me a room in a huge hotel at Forty-fourth Street and Eighth Avenue. She asks how long I can stay. 'As long as she likes, if she behaves herself,' says the manager with a big smile. This seems to be a stroke of luck; it's not that easy to find lodging. DP leaves me, but I don't go up to my room. I walk across Broadway. The air is soft and humid, a southern winter; after all, New York is at the same latitude as Lisbon. I walk. Broadway. Times Square. Forty-second Street. My eyes have no memory; my steps, no plan. Cut off from the past and the future, a pure presence — a presence so pure, so tenuous that it doubts itself. All the world seems in limbo. I say, 'This is New York.' But I don't completely believe it. No rails, no tracks — I have not traced my path on the surface of the earth. This city and Paris are not connected like two elements of the same system. Each has its own atmosphere, and the two do not coincide, they do not exist together, and I couldn't have passed from one to the other. I'm no longer in Paris, but I'm not here either. My presence is a borrowed presence. There is no place for me on these sidewalks. This strange world where I've landed by surprise was not waiting for me. It was full without me; it *is* full without me. It is a world where I am not: I grasp it in my

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perfect absence. This crowd I'm jostling, I'm not part of it; I feel invisible to every gaze. I am travelling incognito, like a phantom. Will I manage to reincarnate myself?

26 January

In the middle of the night, in the depth of sleep, a wordless voice suddenly says, 'Something has happened to me.' I'm still sleeping, and I don't know if it's a great happiness or a catastrophe. Something has happened to me. Perhaps I've died, as so often happens in my dreams. Perhaps I'm going to wake up on the other side of death. As I open my eyes, I'm afraid. And then I remember: this is not quite the otherworld. It's New York.

It wasn't a mirage. New York is here; everything is real. Truth bursts in the blue sky, in the soft damp air, more triumphant than the night's unreliable charms. It's nine o'clock in the morning. It's Sunday. The streets are deserted. A few neon signs are still lit. Not a pedestrian, not a car; nothing disturbs the rectilinear grid of Eighth Avenue. Cubes, prisms, parallelograms; the houses are abstract solids and surfaces; the intersection, an abstract of two volumes – its materials have no density or structure; the space itself seems to have been set in moulds. I do not move; I look. I'm here, and New York will be mine. This joy is familiar. Fifteen years ago I was leaving the train station, and from the top of the monumental staircase I saw all the rooftops of Marseilles at my feet. I had a year or two to spend alone in an unknown city. I didn't move; I just looked, thinking: 'This strange city is my future; it will be my past.' Between these houses that have existed without me for years, for centuries, these streets were travelled by thousands of people who were not me, who are not me. But now I'm walking here. I go down Broadway; it's really me. I'm walking in streets not yet travelled by me, streets where my life has not yet been carved, streets without any scent of the past. No one here is concerned with my

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presence; I'm still a ghost, and I slip through the city without disturbing anything. Yet from now on my life will embrace the contour of these streets, these houses. New York will belong to me; I will belong to it.

I drink orange juice at the edge of a counter, sitting in a polished booth on one of three armchairs raised on a little dais; little by little, I take on flesh and blood, and the city grows familiar. The surfaces become façades; the solids turn into houses. On the pavement the wind stirs up dust and old papers. Beyond Washington Square, the grid begins to bend. The right angles break down; the streets are no longer numbered but have names; the lines curve and tangle together. I'm wandering through a European city. The houses have only three or four storeys and come in opaque colours somewhere between red, ochre, and black. Sheets dry on the fire escapes that zigzag against the façades. These sheets that promise sunshine, the shoe-shine boys posted on the street corners, the rooftop terraces – they vaguely evoke a southern city, yet the worn red of the houses makes one think of the London fog. The fact is, this neighbourhood is like nothing I've ever seen. But I know I will love it.

The landscape changes. The word 'landscape' suits this city that's been deserted by men and invaded by the sky. Rising above the skyscrapers, the sky surges through the straight streets; it's too vast for the city to tame, and it overflows – it's a mountain sky. I walk between the steep cliffs at the bottom of a canyon where no sun penetrates: it's filled with a salt smell. Human history is not inscribed on these carefully calibrated buildings; they are more like prehistoric caves than the houses of Paris or Rome. In Paris, in Rome, history has permeated the bowels of the ground itself; Paris reaches down into the centre of the earth. In New York, even the Battery doesn't have such deep roots. Beneath the subways, sewers and heating pipes, the rock is virgin and inhuman. Between this rock and the open sky, Wall Street and Broadway bathe in the shadows of their giant buildings; this morning they belong to nature. The little black church with its cemetery of

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flat paving stones is as unexpected and touching in the middle of Broadway as a crucifix on a wild ocean beach.

The sun is so beautiful, the waters of the Hudson so green that I take the boat that brings Midwestern tourists to the Statue of Liberty. But I don't get out at the little island that looks like a small fort. I just want to see a view of the Battery as I've so often seen it in the movies. I do see it. In the distance, its towers seem fragile. They rest so precisely on their vertical lines that the slightest shudder would knock them down like a house of cards. When the boat draws closer, their foundations seem firmer, but the fall line remains indelibly traced. What a field day a bomber would have!

There are hundreds of restaurants in these streets, but they are all closed on Sunday. The one I find is packed. I eat hastily, rushed by the waitress. No place to rest. Nature is kinder. Within this harshness, New York becomes more human again. Pearl Street with its elevated train, Chatham Square, Chinatown, the Bowery. I am beginning to get tired. Slogans run through my head: 'City of contrasts.' These alleys smelling of spices and packing paper at the foot of façades with thousands of windows – that is one contrast. I encounter another contrast with each step, and they are all different. 'A vertical city', 'passionate geometries'. 'thrilling geometries' – such phrases are perfect descriptions of these skyscrapers, these façades, these avenues: I see that. And I've often read, 'New York with its cathedrals.' I could have invented the phrase – all these old clichés seem so hollow. Yet in the freshness of discovery, the words 'contrasts' and 'cathedrals' also come to my lips, and I'm surprised they seem so faded when the reality they capture is unchanged. People have told me something more precise: 'On the Bowery on Sundays, the drunks sleep on the sidewalks.' Here is the Bowery; the drunks are sleeping on the sidewalks. This is just what the words meant, and their precision disconcerts me. How could they have seemed so empty when they are so true? It isn't with words that I will grasp New York. I no longer think of grasping it: I will be transformed by it. Words,

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images, knowledge, expectations – they won't help me at all. To pronounce them true or false makes no sense. It is not possible to confront things here; they exist in another dimension – they are simply here. And I look and look, as astonished as a blind man who has just recovered his sight.

27 January

If I want to decode New York, I must meet New Yorkers. There are names in my address book but no faces to match. I'll have to talk on the telephone, in English, to people whom I don't know and who don't know me. Going down into the hotel lobby, I'm more intimidated than if I were going to take an oral exam. This lobby stuns me with its exoticism, an unnatural exoticism. I'm the Zulu frightened by a bicycle, the peasant lost in the Paris metro. There's a newspaper stand and a cigar stand, a Western Union office, a hairdresser, a writing room where stenographers and typists take dictation from clients – it's at once a club, an office, a waiting room and a large department store. I perceive around me all the conveniences of everyday life, but I don't know what to do. The slightest action poses a problem: How do I get postage for my letters? Where do I mail them? Those flutterings near the elevator, those white flashes, I almost took them for hallucinations. Behind a glass window, letters fall from the twenty-fifth floor into the depths of the basement – the mailbox. At the newspaper stand there's a machine that spits out stamps. But I'm confused by the coins. One cent, for me, seems like both one *sou* and one *centime*; five cents is then five *centimes* but also five *sous* (that is, twenty-five *centimes*). For ten minutes I try in vain to get a telephone line; all the machines reject the nickel I stubbornly keep sliding into the slot meant for quarters. I remain sitting in one of the booths, worn out. I want to give up: I hate this malicious instrument. But in the end I can't just stay wrapped in my solitude. I ask the Western Union employee for help. This time

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someone answers. The faceless voice vibrates at the other end of the line: I have to talk. They weren't expecting me, and I have nothing to offer. I simply say, 'I'm here.' I have no face either; I'm just a name bandied about by mutual friends. I say again, 'I'd very much like to see you.' It's not even true, and they know it; it isn't them I want to see, because I don't know them. But the voices are almost friendly, natural. This naturalness already comforts me, as a kind of friendship. After three calls, though, I close my address book, flushed.

I go to the hairdresser; I feel less uprooted. In every city I've known, these places are much alike – the same odour, the same metal dryers. The combs, the cotton balls, the mirrors have no personality. Surrendering to the hands massaging my skull, I'm no longer a ghost: there's a real meeting between me and these hands – it's really me turning into flesh and blood. But even this moment isn't entirely routine. For example, I notice that I don't have to hand the hairpins one by one to the girl doing my hair: they're attached to a magnet she wears around her wrist, and a magnet removes them when my hair is dry. This little trick amazes me.

Everything amazes me, both the unexpected sights and those I've anticipated. I didn't know that in front of the apartment buildings in the elegant neighbourhoods there would be a greenish canvas canopy marked with a big number and extending onto the sidewalk, as if announcing some kind of wedding. A porter stands on the threshold, so every building really looks like a hotel or a bar. The entry, too, guarded by uniformed doormen, resembles the entrance hall of a palace. The elevator is staffed by an employee: it's difficult to receive clandestine visits. On the other hand, in movies I have often seen these buildings without any concierge, similar to provincial apartments in France. You step inside a glass door and find a series of bells corresponding to each tenant; each person has a mailbox. You ring the bell, and a second glass door opens. I also recognise the broad, flat doorbells I've seen in films. They make a more muffled sound than French bells do.

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What disconcerts me is that those movie sets that I'd never really believed in are suddenly real.

So many small surprises give the first few days a particular grace – I could never be bored. This business lunch in a restaurant on Fortieth Street is perfectly dreary. With its carpets, its mirrors and its polished surfaces, this elegant place looks like the tearoom in a big department store, and of course it's overheated. But in my martini, in the tomato juice, I learn the taste of America. This meal is another communion.

This grace has its price. The exoticism that transfigures each of my moments also leads me into traps. It's a beautiful sunny day, and I want to walk along the East River. But the 'Drive', that broad elevated causeway spanning the river, is reserved for cars. I try to cheat, and I walk along, glued to the wall. But it's difficult to cheat in America. The gears are precise; they serve man, provided he's quietly compliant. The cars hurtling along at sixty miles per hour over this sort of highway come dangerously close to me. There's a square near the water where people are strolling, but it seems impossible to reach them. I muster my courage and cross to the centre line separating the two lanes of traffic, but I have to stand there a long time, planted like a traffic light, waiting for a brief lull so that I can cross over. I still have to jump over a metal railing to get to safety. Under my winter coat, which is too heavy for this sun, I'm more exhausted than if I'd climbed a mountain. A few moments later, I find out that there are pedestrian passageways under the Drive and that it's also spanned by bridges.

The river smells of salt and spices. Men are sitting on benches in the sun: tramps and blacks. Children on roller skates hurl themselves over the asphalt, jostling each other, shouting. Low-cost housing is under construction along the Drive; these vast buildings, which narrow as they rise, are ugly. But beyond them I glimpse the city's high towers, and across the river I see Brooklyn. I sit on a bench looking at Brooklyn amid the noise of roller skates, and I feel quite happy. Brooklyn exists, as does Manhattan with

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its skyscrapers and all of America on the horizon. As for me, I no longer exist. There. I understand what I've come to find – this plenitude that we rarely feel except in childhood or in early youth, when we're utterly absorbed by something outside ourselves. To be sure, on other trips I've tasted this joy, this certitude, but it was fleeting. In Greece, in Italy, in Spain, in Africa, I still felt that Paris was the heart of the world. I'd never completely left Paris; I remained inside myself.

Paris has lost its hegemony. I've landed not only in a foreign country but in another world – an autonomous, separate world. I touch this world; it's here. It will be given to me. But it's not even to me that it will be given; its existence is too dazzlingly clear for me to hope to catch it in my net. The revelation will take place somewhere beyond the limits of my own existence. In a flash I'm freed from the cares of that tedious enterprise I call my life. I'm just the charmed consciousness through which the sovereign Object will reveal itself.

I walk for a long time. When I reach the bridge, the sun is all red. The black trellis of the steel bridge bars the flaming sky. Through this iron gridwork I can glimpse the high square towers of the Battery. The bridge's horizontal thrust and the skyscrapers' vertical lift seem amplified. The light is a glorious reward for their audacity.

I have a rendezvous at six o'clock at the Plaza Hotel on Fifty-ninth Street. I climb the stairs of the elevated railway. This railway is touching, like a memory; it's scarcely bigger than a provincial miniature railway. The walls are wooden; it seems like a country station. The gate is also made of wood, but it turns automatically – no employee. To go through, all you need is a nickel, the magic coin that also activates telephones and opens the doors of toilets, which are modestly called 'restrooms'. We roll along above the Bowery at second-storey level. The stations whizz by: we're already at Fourteenth Street, then Thirty-fifth, Forty-second. I'm waiting for Fifty-ninth, but we rush past – Seventieth, Eightieth – we're not stopping any more. Below us,

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all the streetlamps are lit. Here is the nocturnal celebration I glimpsed from up in the sky: movie houses, drugstores, wooden houses. I'm transported through a wondrous amusement park, and this little elevated train is itself a fairground attraction. Will it ever stop? New York is so big . . .

I've gotten on an express train. At the first station I get off and take a 'local'. I wait for a long while in the Plaza's scented, overheated lobby. It's the same setting as in the restaurant this morning: too many mirrors, too many carpets, drapes, polished surfaces. I wait an amazingly long time, and suddenly I realise that I'm at the Savoy-Plaza; my rendezvous is across the street. Tired, confused, dazed after so many discoveries and mistakes, I sit down at the Plaza bar. Fortunately, everyone's waited for me. The martini revives me. The big, dark, oak-panelled room is overheated and overcrowded. I look at people. The women surprise me. In their carefully coiffed, perfectly waved hair they wear whole flower beds, aviaries. Most of the coats are mink; the intricately draped dresses are sewn with bright spangles and decorated with heavy, unimaginative costume jewellery. All these women are wearing open-toed shoes with very high heels. I'm ashamed of my Swiss shoes with the crepe soles I was so proud of. In the street, on this winter day, I haven't seen one woman with flat shoes. None have had the free and sporty look I attribute to American women. All are dressed in silk, not wool; they are covered with feathers, violets, flowers and flounces. There's too much finery, too many mirrors and drapes; the food has too many sauces and syrups; everywhere, there's too much heat. Superabundance, too, is a curse.

Yesterday I had dinner at DP's with some French people. This evening I'm having dinner at the home of more French people. And after dinner, BC, a Frenchwoman, is going to take me to some bars. When I'm with French people, I sense the same disappointment I felt when I was with my parents during my childhood that nothing was completely real. There was a glass wall between things and me, so all birds seemed to be in birdcages, all fish seemed

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to swim in aquariums, all chimpanzees seemed stuffed – and I so dearly wanted to see the world truly, without restraints . . . I don't like the taste of whiskey; I only like these glass sticks you stir it with. Yet until three o'clock in the morning, I drink Scotch docilely because Scotch is one of the keys to America. I want to break through the glass wall.

28 January

I have a lecture to prepare. I sit down at one of the desks in the 'writing room' amid the murmur of voices dictating reports to stenographers and the clacking of typewriters. It's quiet and subdued; you'd think you were at Bon Marché!★ I decide to sit in one of the bars around Central Park. I don't much like them; they belong to the big hotels and are bathed in the same cosy and respectable atmosphere as the lobby with the luxurious display cases. Although they serve alcohol, they remind me of tearooms for old ladies; whiskey takes on the innocence of fruit juice. These are places where the street doesn't intrude: nothing can happen here. Yet they have a magic for me. Friends whose trips to America I've so envied pronounced these names – the Sherry Netherland or the Café Arnold – with the pride of the initiated. I follow in their footsteps. I have no past of my own, so I borrow theirs. New York still belongs to them. I'm only a newcomer, and it's already something for me to slip into their intimacy with the city. I have the modesty of a guest invited at the last minute.

It's not customary here to do work in places where people drink: this is the land of specialisation. In places where drinks are served, you drink. As soon as my glass is empty, the waiter comes over to enquire; if I don't empty it fast enough, he prowls around me, looking at me reproachfully. This morning the taste

★ A popular Parisian department store.

of whiskey doesn't seem so bad. But it seems wiser to leave before the fourth glass.

I give my lecture to a French audience. I go to a cocktail party at the home of a Frenchwoman. All the guests are French, except for two French-speaking Americans. I'm not, however, in a colonised country where the local customs make it nearly impossible to mingle with the natives; on the contrary, we're the ones who form what they call here a 'colony'. I would really like to leave. I'm quite excited by the time I arrive at the house of AM [Dorothy Nordman], who has invited me for dinner; at long last I'm getting inside an American home. But apart from Richard Wright, whom I knew in Paris and whom I'm delighted to see again, everyone is French. There are even people from the embassy, and everyone is speaking the French of France in a very official tone.

All these French people I meet are pleased to explain America to me – according to their experience, of course. Nearly all of them have a strong bias: either they hate it and can think only of leaving or they shower it with excessive praise, as the collaborationists did with Germany. R, a university professor, is one of these. As soon as he shakes my hand, he asks me to 'promise' to write nothing about America: it's such a difficult, complex country that even twenty years isn't enough to understand it; it's deplorable to criticise it superficially, as certain French people do. America is so vast that nothing anyone can say about it is true. In any case, I must 'promise' to write nothing about the blacks. This is a painful and difficult problem on which no one can have an opinion without a wealth of information that would require more than one lifetime. And besides, why are the French so determined to concern themselves with the blacks? Aren't the intellectual and artistic accomplishments of whites far superior? Even the music of modern white composers has more value than jazz.

V, who is anti-American, explains to me scornfully that this attitude is the only feasible one for a Frenchman living in this

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country; otherwise, he would live in a state of intolerable anger and revolt. No European values are acknowledged here, and V acknowledges no American values. The daily atmosphere seems unbreathable to him. He despises New York.

The servility of R's attitude disgusts me; besides, during the war he supported Pétain – a dyed-in-the-wool collaborator. But I can't believe there's nothing worthwhile in this country. I'm utterly taken with New York. It's true that both camps tell me, 'New York is not America.' V irritates me when he declares, 'If you like New York, it's because it's a European city that's strayed to the edge of this continent.' It is all too clear that New York is not Europe. But I'm even more distrustful of P, another pro-American Pétain supporter, when he contrasts New York – a city of foreigners and Jews – to the idyllic villages of New England, where the inhabitants are 100 per cent American and endowed with patriarchal virtues. We have often heard 'the real France' praised this way in contrast to the corruption of Paris.

I still have nothing to say; I can only listen. But I think that America is a world, and that you can no more accept or reject *a* world than you can accept or reject *the* world. It's a matter of choosing your friends and enemies, of asserting your projects and your singular revolts. America – a piece of the planet, a political system, a civilisation; classes, races, sects and men taken one by one. There are the cops and the robbers, the engineers and the artists, the malcontents and the smug, the profiteers and the exploited. I know very well that every hatred will be the inverse of a love, every love the inverse of a hatred.

29 January

Again I slept late. But there's something in the New York air that makes sleep useless; perhaps it's because your heart beats more quickly here than elsewhere – people with heart conditions sleep

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less, and many New Yorkers die of heart problems. In any case, I'm enjoying this windfall: the days seem too short.

Breakfast in the corner drugstore is a celebration. Orange juice, toast, *café au lait* – an unadulterated pleasure. Sitting on my revolving stool, I participate in a moment of American life. My solitude does not separate me from my neighbours, who are also eating alone. Rather, it's the pleasure I feel that isolates me from them. They are simply eating; they're not on vacation.

The truth is that it's all a holiday for me. The drugstores especially intrigue me. I stop at one on any pretext. To me, they are the essence of American exoticism. I was not really able to imagine them. I hesitated between the tedious vision of a pharmacy and – because of the word 'soda fountain' – the image of a magical fountain spewing out billows of pink and white ice cream. The fact is, drugstores are the descendants of the old general stores in colonial towns and the encampments of the Far West, where the pioneers of past centuries found cure-alls, ointments, tools – all the necessities of life. They are at once primitive and modern – that's what gives them this specific American poetry. All the objects seem related: the same great bargains, the same unpretentious cheerfulness. The glossy paperback books, the tubes of toothpaste, and the boxes of candies have the same colours: one has the vague impression that reading these books will leave a sweet taste in your mouth, and that the candy will have stories to tell. I buy soap, creams and toothbrushes. Here the creams are creamy, the soaps are soapy: this honesty is a forgotten luxury. As soon as you stray from this norm, the quality of the products becomes more dubious. Certainly, the stores on Fifth Avenue will satisfy the most exacting tastes, but those furs, those suits of such international elegance are reserved for the international capitalist. As for the more popular shops, at first their abundance and sparkling variety are astonishing. But if the men's shirts are attractive, the ties are doubtful, the women's handbags and shoes are quite ugly, and in this profusion of dresses, blouses, skirts and coats, a

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Frenchwoman would have trouble finding anything that didn't offend her taste. And then one soon perceives that beneath their multicoloured paper wrappers, all the chocolates have the same peanut taste, and all the best-sellers tell the same story. So why choose one toothpaste over another? In this useless profusion, there's an aftertaste of deception. There are a thousand possibilities, but they're all the same. A thousand choices, but all equivalent. In this way, the American citizen can squander his obligatory domestic freedom without perceiving that this life itself is not free.

I'm strolling alone, looking at the window displays. Those inspired by Dali are worth a look: those gloves flying in trees like birds, those shoes stranded among seaweed – only one or two stores in Paris could offer something similar. If one had to pay to enter, there would be a crowd to admire this fashion theatre. But the show is free, and even the women pass by without looking; everyone in the streets is striding purposefully ahead. Other, less inventive displays evoke the windows you see in big department stores at Christmas time: here's Broadway through the ages, elegant women in turn-of-the-century dress climbing into a carriage in the light of an antique streetlamp. I am certainly a tourist – everything entertains me.

I spend the afternoon and evening with old friends, Spanish communists who came to New York as refugees in 1940. I know that for many refugees, America has been a land of exile, not a place they've come to love. These Spaniards don't like it either. They say life is cruel in New York for immigrants and for the poor.

CL [Fernando Gerassi] is a painter, and like many artists he knew in Berlin, Madrid and Paris, he lives in semi-poverty. But in Europe there was nothing dishonourable about poverty: a poor artist experienced the favours and friendships of bohemian life. By lending him money, people provided one of those services that are natural between friends. Here, says CL, no one would let you die of hunger, perhaps, but offers of a dinner or a loan are alms

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granted grudgingly, making friendship impossible. In any case, even now that they have improved their material situation, my friends live in great isolation: there are no cafés or salons where intellectuals meet; everyone leads separate lives. And the distances are so great, SL [Stépha Gerassi] tells me, that after a day of work one hesitates to spend another hour on the subway to get together. There are people we would like to see, SL says, and with whom we have to limit ourselves to occasional telephone calls – preserved friendships that lose their fragrance like strawberries frozen in blocks of ice. Under these conditions, without peers, without competition, creative effort is particularly thankless. An unknown painter wouldn't know how to elicit the interest of other painters who are unaware of him, or that of the informed public, given that there is no informed public. Almost the only way to be discovered is to hire a publicity agent. One of them has made overtures to CL. He put forward three proposals: a little publicity, a lot of publicity, enormous publicity. With the third proposal, success is assured, claims the agent. The second plan will bring only some opportunities. In any case, even the first plan, which is worthless, is too expensive for a painter who doesn't sell his work.

Returning from a French restaurant where we ate a *duck à l'orange* worthy of Paris before the war, I'm struck by the beauty of the big boulevards under the neon sky. My friends sigh. They are thinking of forbidden Madrid, of Paris, where they neither belong nor work now. And I sense that New York can also be a prison.

30 January

I explore New York neighbourhood by neighbourhood. Yesterday I saw the banks of the Hudson and Upper Broadway. Today I walked for hours along the East River and roamed the German streets around Ninetieth Street. New York gives me all the pleasures of a

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walking trip through the mountains: the wind, the sky, the cold, the sun, the fatigue. When I turn back toward the hotel, around five o'clock in the afternoon, I've walked and looked so much that I'm intoxicated. My legs no longer carry me, but my eyes, tired from seeing, want to see more. Next to my hotel, they're showing *Henry V*, with Laurence Olivier. I go in.

I love the film, but when I leave the movie house, I feel unsatisfied. Those coloured images didn't speak to me of America. Looking at them, I forgot New York. This evening, more than any evening, I would like to grasp it – with my hands, my eyes, my mouth. I don't know how, but I will grasp it. I walk in the same streets where I walked like a ghost Saturday night. I've become embodied. I hear the sounds of Times Square; I see the painted cardboard smoker's round mouth blowing real smoke rings. I jostle people; they see me. And the city is organised around me. I know where my hotel is. My Spanish friends' apartment house and DP's place point me in my favourite directions. I've explored the streets from One hundred and twenty-fifth Street to the Battery . . . on Saturday I was enchanted with my perfect ignorance; this evening I'm quite proud of my expertise. We always find something to feel superior about.

I walk slowly. I want to string the lights around my neck, stroke them, eat them. Here they are – and what can I do with them? My hands, my mouth, my eyes have not taken in this night. There are bars and restaurants here; I'm not hungry or thirsty. The stores – none of the objects they're selling will give me New York. A book would tear me away from New York. But strolling around Times Square won't help either. These people seem to be walking just like me, but they're going somewhere. The night is leading them ceremoniously toward a desired encounter. My desire is nothing but a myth – New York, which is everywhere and nowhere.

I go into another movie house. The black-and-white screen is like morphine, and the actors' American accents move me. The film is entertaining – *Lady in the Lake*. But when I leave, I'm

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disappointed again. I've forgotten New York once more. For a long time, movies represented America for me, and I remember in August 1941, when I crossed into the unoccupied zone under false pretences, how excited I was to find American films in Marseilles. I went to see three a day. But now I'm in America, and nothing can represent it any more.

I drink orange juice in a drugstore and then whiskey in a bar. If America were far away, perhaps the taste of Scotch would restore my memory of it in one fell swoop. Here it's powerless; and how can I get back something I've never found? I return to the movies and choose a newsreel programme so that no other story deflects me from what I'm looking for. I need black-and-white images like a drug, but I would like them to fill me without distracting me completely. After an hour I'm in the street again. It's midnight; the city is bathed in that captivating and cool clarity that the summer sun sheds during the white nights of the Far North; it's impossible to go home and go to sleep. On Forty-second Street the vividly coloured posters announce mostly 'thrillings' – scary films – and 'laff movies' – funny films. I stop. On every side of the cashier's window, warped mirrors reflect the passers-by. I look at myself; for a moment I stand and make faces at myself. My head is heavy. I go in. This time, I almost reach my goal; the film is stupid enough for me to think, 'This is New York, and I'm in a New York movie house.' But I've sought this joy too intensely. It vanishes, and I'm bored. Boredom leads me nowhere. It's two o'clock in the morning; I go back to the hotel.

31 January

What makes daily life so agreeable in America is the good humour and friendliness of Americans. Of course, this quality has its reverse side. I'm irritated by those imperious invitations to 'take life easy', repeated in words and images throughout the day. On advertisements for Quaker Oats, Coca-Cola, and Lucky Strike,

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what displays of white teeth – the smile seems like lockjaw. The constipated girl smiles a loving smile at the lemon juice that relieves her intestines. In the subway, in the streets, on magazine pages, these smiles pursue me like obsessions. I read on a sign in a drugstore, ‘Not to grin is a sin.’ Everyone obeys the order, the system. ‘Cheer up! Take it easy.’ Optimism is necessary for the country’s social peace and economic prosperity. If a banker has generously lent fifty dollars without any guarantee to some young Frenchman in financial straits, if the manager of my hotel takes a slight risk by cashing his customers’ cheques, it’s because this trust is required and implied by an economy based on credit and expenditure.

This amiability is disconcerting. In the afternoon I go to cash a cheque. As soon as I enter the bank, a uniformed employee comes toward me to help. I might think he is waiting for me. He directs me toward a kind of lobby lined with desks; on each desk is a sign announcing the employee’s name to the public. I sit down; I show my papers to Mr John Smith. He’s not some anonymous cog, and I am not an anonymous client; he does me the courtesy of addressing me by name, personally. He okays my cheque, and the cashier immediately gives me the sum I’ve requested. In France, the verification would have been done on the other side of the counter, without my involvement and no doubt grudgingly; then I would have been assigned a simple number. But I’m not a fool. This respect granted the citizen is completely abstract; that same polite smile that assures David Brown that he’s a unique individual will also gratify John Williams, who is unique, too. Nothing is more universal than this singularity recognised with such ceremony. One suspects a hoax. Nonetheless, thanks to these considerations, the American doesn’t need to strain to feel his human dignity. It may be commercial, but the cordiality of salespeople, employees, waiters and porters is never servile. They are not bitter or stiff, and though it is encouraged by self-interest, their kindness is no less real. We’ve held German soldiers responsible for the way

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