

# Streets of Gold

*by* Daniel Harris

I was beyond broke. I kept staring at the dime and the nickel, my total worth: net, gross and real. Fifteen cents, the cost of one 1967 New York City subway token. As the Wall Street types say, that was my liquid.

I had fifteen hours until I would be evicted from my SRO flop on West 71st Street. I lay on my bed, stomach growling, as I heard the night clerk shove the eviction notice under my door. I would have until noon tomorrow to pay. No pay, no room. I was already a week behind in my \$12.50 a week rent. I'd let management hold my passport against my past-due rent. I'd hocked all my musical instruments except my soprano clarinets. If I did get a show gig, I would have to borrow some saxophones and flutes or rent them. I knew that if I were homeless, someone would steal my clarinets and then I was doomed. When I came to the Big Apple seeking my fortune in the concert music business, homelessness in Mayor John Lindsay's crumbling New York City was not on my agenda. My family refused to loan me money: "You could have been a doctor." The intake worker at unemployment said I hadn't worked enough freelance gigs to qualify for benefits. She told me that the day after I spent six hours playing in the subway, which netted a mere twenty-two dollars and eighty-two cents.

When I heard the night clerk enter the elevator, I ran down the seven flights of stairs and out into the cool October night. I watched with envy the limos, taxis, and automobiles that shuttled their cargo of swells and tycoons up and down Broadway to concerts, clubs, hotels, restaurants and who know what delights and entertainments. I walked over to Central Park. The park was the night domain of drug addicts, homeless, and small-change hoods who preyed on the poor and desperate huddled under bushes, overhangs, or bridges, their pitiful belongings in paper bags or tattered canvas sacks. The more violent and experienced Bogarted the park's benches.

I saw a skinny woman watching two men fighting with knives. A woman with a baby asked me for money. An old man masturbated while watching a young couple fornicate under a blanket. A man smoking a joint played Frisbee with his dog. Two runaways with guitars sang folk songs, the girl's voice a silver lark in the threatening gloom. A man with no teeth drank wine from a paper bag. The only difference between Central Park and my SRO flop was they didn't have an address or a roof. What did these pitiful folks do when it rained? Or snowed? My empty stomach cringed at the thought. Depressed by my imminent prospects, I headed back to my final night under a roof with a shower and a toilet.

As I walked across 67th Street, I saw a picket line of union workers marching in front of the ABC television facility. They didn't speak or sing, but walked in a half-block oval in front of the main entrance carrying signs that said things like, "ABC Unfair to Workers." As I approached I saw what looked like a dollar bill on the sidewalk. I picked it up and put it in my pocket. I now had \$1.15 cents. I was almost rich. If I could make \$11.50 playing in the subway before noon, I could keep my crib.

I awoke at 5:30 the next morning. I was beyond hungry. My body cried out for food. I had not eaten more than crackers and peanut butter for over a month. My last can of tuna was a distant memory. There were no crackers. A tin of cat food was beyond my budget. I was ready to eat one of my clarinet reeds. The penny scales at the Rexall drugstore said I weighed 125 pounds, thirty pounds less than I usually weighed. I wasn't strong enough to mug a grandmother.

I showered, shaved and packed up my few belongings in a backpack, wet my clarinet reeds and headed out to the nearest supermarket. It opened at six. I arrived as the manager was raising the gates. I entered the store and headed to the refrigerator section where I selected a small bottle of orange juice. I kept my eyes averted so as not to be tempted to boost some food. At the check-out counter, I selected a small 4-pack of Ritz peanut butter crackers. My favorite young woman was the cashier.

—Is that all you're buying?

—It's all I can afford this morning. Maybe tonight I can buy something better.

—You will get sick if you don't eat your fruits and vegetables.

—Sorry, it's all the money I have.

I gave her the bill I found on the street.

—Daniel, your name is Daniel, isn't it?

—Yes.

—You just gave me a hundred-dollar bill.

—What?

—Look, you gave me a hundred-dollar bill, she said, showing me the bill.

—I found it on the street last night over by ABC. I never looked at it. I assumed it was a dollar.

Suddenly I wasn't hungry. The checkout woman looked more beautiful than ever. I wanted to hug and kiss her. She could have pocketed the c-note and made change for a dollar. Instead, she offered salvation.

—Are you sure this is all you want to buy?

—For now, yes.

—Your change is \$99.25.

When I arrived back at my crib, I paid my back and current rent. I went to my room and slept until noon. I had \$63, fabulous wealth in my small-change economy.

When I awoke, I went to my favorite cheap restaurant on Broadway and ate a stringy steak, baked potato, and salad. The food was so rich I was sick all night.

The next day I auditioned and was hired to play a seven-week gig with the Metropolitan Opera touring company. Knowing I didn't need the gig, kept me relaxed and confident in the audition. The kismet of finding such a large bill on the street totally changed my life. On a chilly October night in 1967, I found gold on the streets of Mayor Lindsey's fading metropolis.

