

The Bowery Scene

(Memoir, 1981; edited by Charlotte Curtis)

by Rick Rofihe

1. Recently, a cousin of mine stopped over on his way from Beirut, a city which now has most of its politics in the street, but almost no sanitation services. Standing outside my door, he looked down the Bowery and marveled, "They keep it so clean!"

2. My most persistent fantasy is that one day, when I'm gathering up the garbage that the bums have sifted through and scattered on the sidewalk out front, along comes Harry Reasoner. I'm dressed for being with garbage and the story he's doing on the Bowery. He says to me, "How'd you like a square meal and a cup of coffee? You don't mind the cameras, do you?"

3. When the real estate agent sent me to look at the place where I now live, on the Bowery, I almost didn't go. To walk down here is not so much to take your life in your hands, but your change purse. A half-dozen panhandlers at 25 cents, that's...

4. A woman I know who moved from the United States to England was showing me around her neighborhood in London when we came upon a shabby-looking man collapsed on the sidewalk. She ran inside her house and got a blanket for him. After the ambulance she called had departed, she remarked to me, "In New York I used to just step over them."

5. Motorists waiting in traffic on the Bowery are faced with a brigade of bums who are going to wipe their windshields, like it or not, need it or not. Some refuse to pay for the service, while others give change, or bills, or a handy gift. Still others, squirming I disgust, learn that the bums and themselves are participants in the same society and that no matter how much you pay for a car or how

shiny you keep it, a drooling man with dirty cloth can revoke these privileges, if just for a little while, on the Bowery.

6. Last spring, I was wakened by the amplified words "Back on the sidewalk!" I heard it a few times but could not give it meaning. The next day things were different on the Bowery. Police on loudspeakers were ordering bums working the stopped cars for change to get "back on the sidewalk." That evening, one who did not get of the street fast enough was cornered by two policemen who poked around until they found his wine bottle which, with a nightstick, one cracked in his pocket.

7. A bum can be a beacon. Once, outside a fashionable shop on 59th Street, I saw an old hobo spot a half-eaten candy bar still in its wrapper, on the sidewalk. As he contemplated it, some passersby pointed callously, some laughed nervously, some smiled sympathetically, and some acquired what I took to be thoughtful, almost introspective expressions. Nobody ignored him. He was a beacon.

8. Not all bums drink. Not all smoke. Not all ask for money and some will not take it if it is offered.

9. It's no fun being a bum. There are the campfires, but it's not romantic to be cold, hungry, homeless unless you have hope of warmth, food, shelter.

10. It is easy to look out on the Bowery and say, "There are the bums." Encountering one, however, even one who asks to "bum a quarter" or tells you he's "on the bum" the word "bum" slips away in one's mind, perhaps given over to a "man" of "fellow," or probably, no label at all.

11. Last winter, the city, having a surplus of homeless men, charter-bused them nightly up to a dormitory on Ward's island, and, in the mornings, gave them subway tokens to get back to the Bowery.

12. Free thanksgiving diners at a couple of the missions draw hundreds of homeless men and women who usually frequent other areas of Manhattan. The milling and mixing of these people with

needy tenement dwellers and Bowery regulars combine with the classic quiet of Thanksgiving Day to give the area the atmosphere of a religious festival. Some of these pilgrims linger for days, feeling at home on the Bowery.

13. One morning, a platoon of sanitation men descended on the Bowery cleaning up all the wine bottles. That afternoon a U.N. motorcade took the Bowery route to take the Chinese delegation to Chinatown.

14. Some real-estate developers, some co-op owners, some shops that attract mainly suburban customers want to clean up the Bowery, sanitize it, make it safe for money. They can try. Meanwhile, men with plenty of time to pass will pass it with Night Train wine. Incoherent babblers will be released from psychiatric institutions into the cool fats world. Amputees will sling their extras clothes over a crutch. And they'll all find their way to the Bowery.

15. Do I feel at home on the Bowery? A few years ago, I forgot to finish addressing a letter to a friend of mine, a college student. It was mailed with only his name and "University of Toronto" on the envelope. He got it. He wrote back to me that someone once wrote to "Albert Einstein, Europe." He got it. Recently, my mother, who lives in another country, wrote to "Rick Rofihe, Bowery, New York." Do I feel at home? I got it.

