

# FOREVER 21

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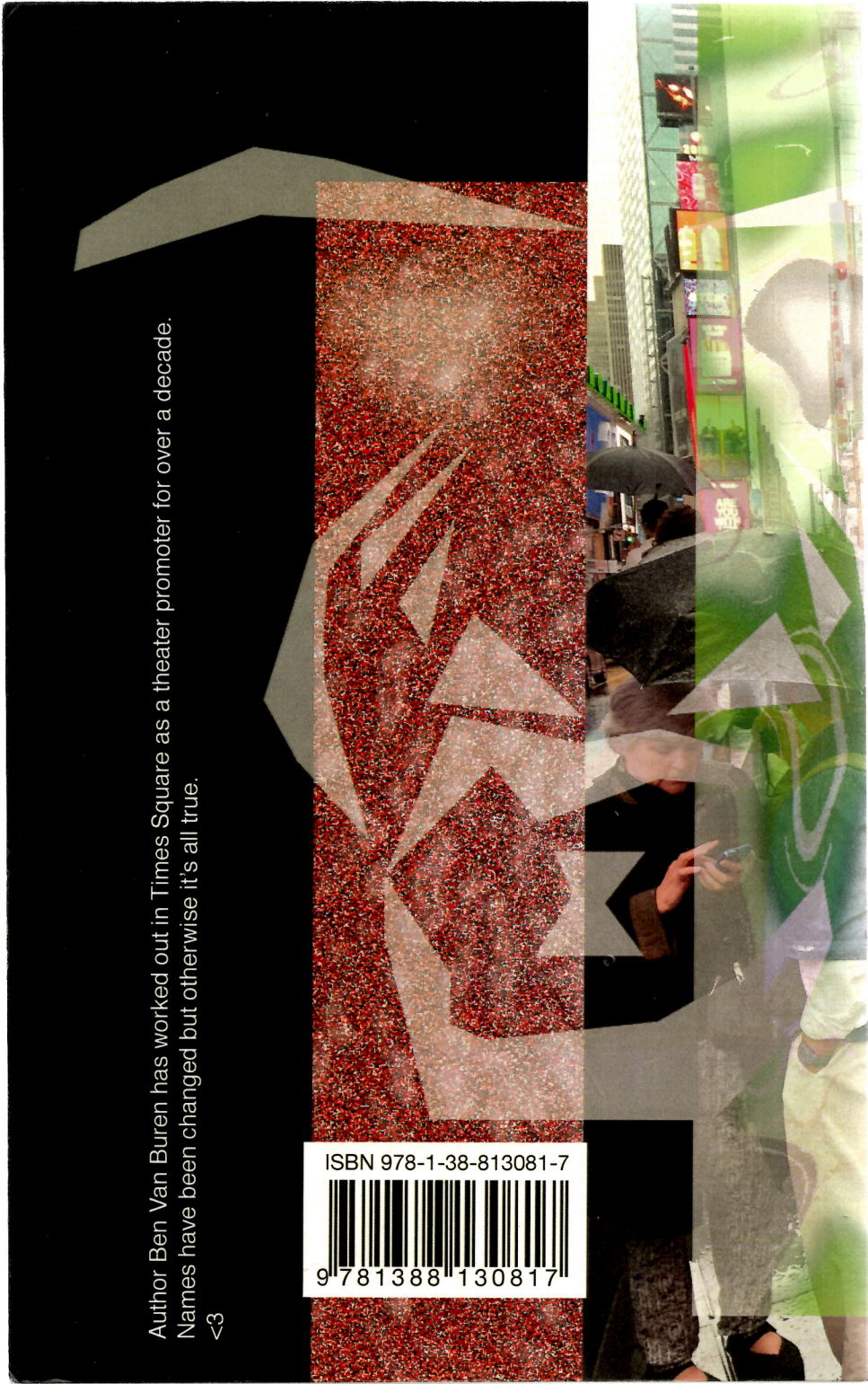


Author Ben Van Buren has worked out in Times Square as a theater promoter for over a decade.  
Names have been changed but otherwise it's all true.  
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*Forever 21*

by

A Goodly Squire

Yonkers International Press 2018

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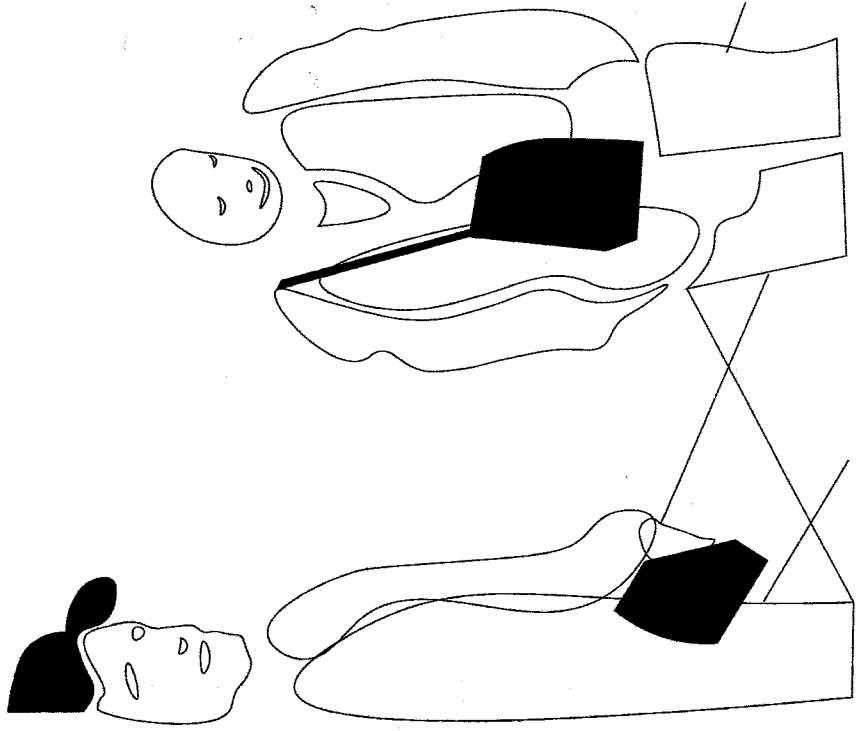
"... left what we felt

At what we saw."

*A Postcard from the Volcano, Wallace Stevens*

**There wasn't enough time**

I'm sitting on the N train when suddenly Spiro is leaning over me saying hello and asking if my internets are working. He's headed from 49th to 42nd to pick up tickets for *Beautiful* and he needs to know if the show is at 2pm or 3pm today. It's 1:30pm now, and my phone is slow to load the answer. I shout that the show starts at 2pm as Spiro flees the train. He's only got half an hour.



Rich and C.

**I'm not going to lie, all I really remember is the weather**

The first couple of years are a blur. Katie got offended when I made a joke about Christ so I bought her a coffee.

Rob the boxer, who had an identical twin brother who was a famous comedian, lent me \$20 when I needed it.

Phyllis got mad at me when I exposed her as a promoter to a customer. She also threw eggs out of her apartment window at the cars that played loud music.

The frozen wind kept everyone but us from the island for long stretches of the winter.

Drinking \$3 cups of sake with Aaron upstairs at the old Teriyaki Boy on 48th, listening to stories from his sex life.

Franklin wearing a toolbelt stuffed full of flyers.

Margot sprinting across 7th dressed in costume as a Chicago Girl, shouting, "I'm guilty."

The year that TDF started putting their own Patron Service Representatives around the booth and we all thought that it was the end of theater promotions in Times Square.

The family who couldn't afford the Spider-Man tickets after waiting in line and whose disappointment glowed red in the light of the LED boards that list what's for sale.

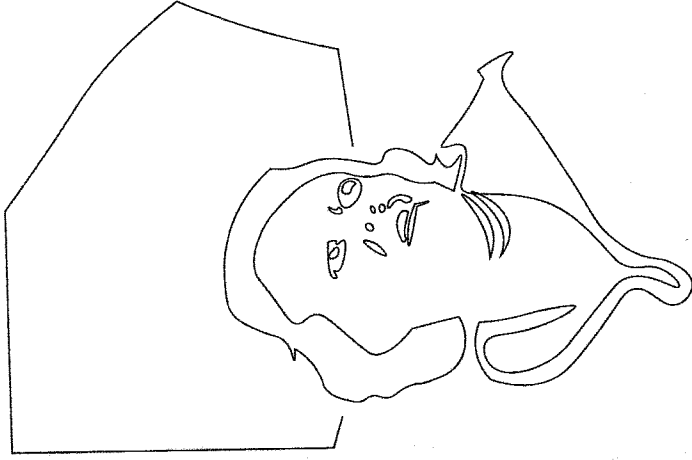
Peter, the Rude Boy who occasionally shows up wearing a beautiful suit, looking for Franklin.

At Teresa's rent controlled apartment on 72nd she told us stories about being famous in the 80s. I wore jeans and a v-neck t-shirt and got drunk.



Rich told me how Aaron was over at a one of the company management offices when he saw a check on a desk made out to Rich. The next day Aaron calls up that same office and casually offers to do all of Rich's shows for half the price. The company said yes and it nearly ruined Rich.

British Michael would send me to get a milk and a Lucky Seven from the corner store. Once he won three times in a row and each time I got to go back for another ticket. Happy to be his errand boy.



A patron faces the board.

“Mmmmmmmmm”

Franklin thinks for a moment before answering.

Yes and no. Even though we all don't work for the same people there is a sense of being very guarded from outside interference, which can lead to a sense of entitlement, which is not necessarily a good thing. Promoters are only as entitled to that space as anyone else. But they tend to close ranks if they see something as a general threat. Unfortunately a lot of them do think it's ok to be friendly with hustler and scalpers, and anyone else who's trying to rip off the tourists, which is fucking bullshit.

Is there some sort of central authority you could appeal to?

When Jimmy Gatens ran TKTS, yes. And to some extent with Billy yeah. I love Billy. But I think it's still a messy environment.

How do you mean?

The fact that it's completely... Well that's not true... Alright what characterizes the mess is the fact that the booth is ill conceived in the first place. The new booth is ill conceived it just adds to a sense of chaos. The old booth wasn't a pretty design, but it worked well.

Say more about that.

The new booth faces the traffic on 47th and there is no extra space except for the sidewalk. So after people buy tickets there is nowhere to go... It's a set of steps where people gather, but it's meant to function as a ticket booth for up to 10 hours a day. It should face the other way, so that the crowds can line up in without blocking the pedestrian traffic on 47th street. Its ill conceived, beautifully executed, but ill conceived.

companies?

That's difficult because a lot of the time it was—and certainly it's changed now—a lot of it was down to loyalty with company managers and general managers. It wasn't about how much it cost but the fact that you had always worked for them and they knew they were going to get a specific product. So in terms of dealing with competition it was so non-specific. More often than not I sort of just wanted to work on the projects that I thought I'd be best suited to.

And the original booth?

It functioned. It functioned much better than the present one does. The present one functions terribly.

You are unique. You sort of invented theater promotions around TKTS. Maybe you could talk about the autonomy of your company.

Well it's all about autonomy... Now there seem to be a few different models.

AKA as a good example.

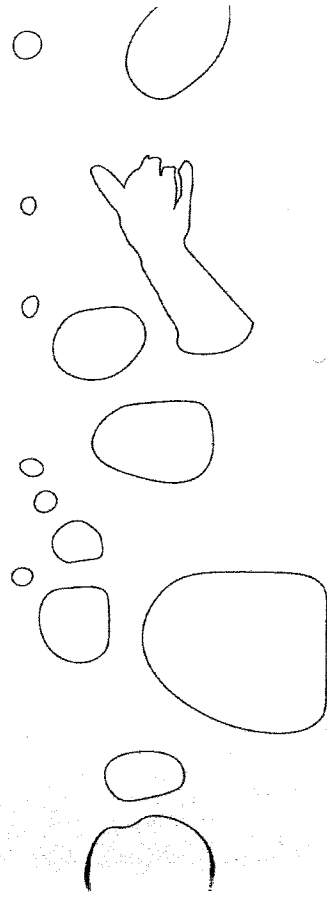
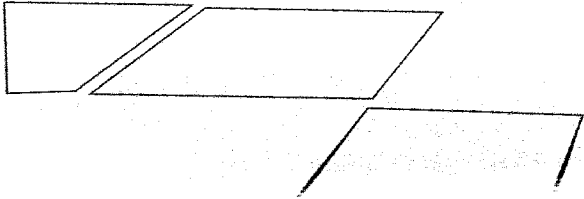
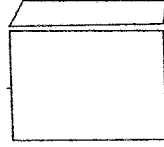
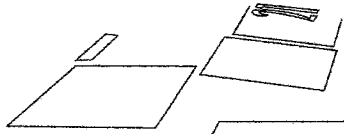
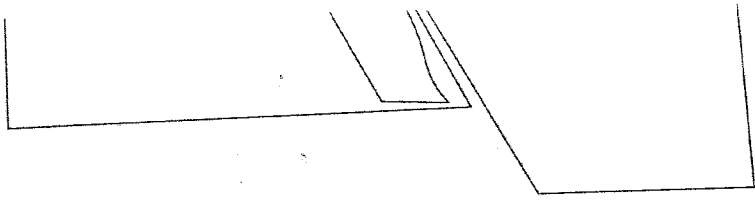
Not for long.

What's the brief history of your work out there?

People used to work independently until I came along. And for one reason or another I decided to incorporate and employ other people. Mainly because I had too much work, and it seemed unfair to spread myself too thin, and I was turning work down that I didn't want to turn down, so I incorporated. And that was the first kind of model like that out there. Other people started gradually doing the same thing.

It's a very loose form with me. The only thing I expected of people was to turn up and be honest. That was really it. Dress how you like, behave as you like as long as you are civil and be honest. Of course, part of the problem with that is that if you develop a reputation for honesty, or, if the *job* of the prompter is perceived as being that of an honest person it becomes very easy for people to behave dishonestly because the perception has already been set that the person can be trusted in that environment. And several producers hooked up on that idea fairly soon...

Why do certain shows go with certain promotional



The boards are explained by a tour guide.

### **Redbeard, (The Re-seller)**

How long have you worked out here?  
15 years.

What do you do?

I sell tickets to people who want to see great shows that are sold out.

Is it hard work?

I try to get along with the people and I'm honest and I tell the truth.

What did the Square used to be like?

It was very rough a lot of people were here that weren't honest people but now they're all honest so now it's much easier for me.

Have you ever been arrested?

As many times as I was married.

How many's that?

Six.

How'd you get started?

I used to stay in the Edison hotel most of the time waiting to get the tickets with a couple of my other friends I'm not going to mention any names.

Any crazy stories from working out here?

I once went to the Edison hotel with two women it was a lot better than one, trust me.

Anything else?

I've seen moments of violence there was the threat of a bomb there was a bag there that we didn't know what was in it and we had to call the bomb squad and make sure everything was OK.

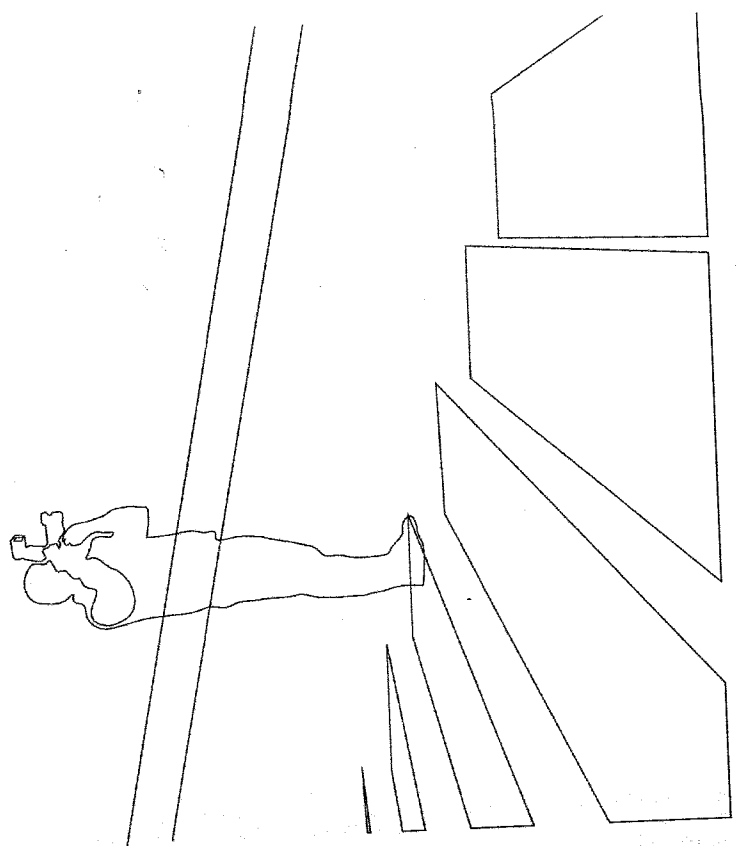
How is it different out here these days?

There is a lot of prejudice sometimes here, but most of the time its nice.

If you could change anything what would you change?

More women.

No.



Taking in Times Square from atop the red steps

**Long Day's Journey Into Night ends with the line, "Then in the spring something happened to me. Yes, I remember. I fell in love with James Tyrone and was so happy for a time."**

It's beautiful day in June and I'm waiting to meet Franklin down in Union Square. He is late and hates to be. Its lunchtime and nearly every bench is full of people eating out of their laps, watching the leaves dance in the trees. Franklin wheels his bike with one hand and waves to me with the other as he approaches. He apologizes and we talk about *Long Day's Journey Into Night* before he passes me a grocery bag full of flyers for the new show.

"Where were your seats?" He looks at the ground when he asks.

"They were good. Half-way back in the orchestra on the right." He keeps his eyes on the ground, listening intently.

We talk about the actors for a while. We have different favorites but both agree that the man who played the youngest son was the weak link. Franklin's fading purple hair rides the breeze as he shifts his weight from one foot to another. Thick white socks puff out of his black Doc Martins, and a chain glistens on his hip. The sun is all over his crisp white t-shirt. We transition to talking about work when Franklin mentions Eugene O'Neill's birthplace. I emphatically agree that yes, totally, it's crazy that on 43rd and Broadway, right in the heart of Times Square, there is a tiny brass plaque next a Starbucks to mark the birthplace of Eugene O'Neill.

The actual shop talk but is brief. I'll be the only person working for Franklin's shows while I'm at the booth. I will arrive an hour before the booth opens and stay until showtime. There is really only one rule.

"Remember, it's 'they', not 'we'."

It's common to hear the promoters around TKTS refer to TKTS with the collective pronoun "we." For example, if you ask a promoter if TKTS sells *Wicked*, you might hear, "We don't have that show." Or if you ask what hours TKTS is open, you might get, "We open at 3pm on Monday for the evening shows, and at 10 on Wednesday for the matinée."

Every promotional company tells their staff not to tell these small lies, but they also know that being able to hide in plain sight isn't bad for business. Franklin is the only employer I know that truly insists on the distinction.

My first job around the booth was prompting a show called *Altar Boyz*, in 2007. I had gone to Times Square looking for a job in a theater and asked the first person I saw with fliers in their hand how they got their job. I was 18, I was new to the city, and I had dreams of being on Broadway. My interview was at the company management office in the Actors Equity building on 46th, right off of 7th. This was the first time I entered an office whose business was theater.

Martian Entertainment, where I had my interview, chose to stay true to its name right down to its interior decoration. Foregoing the traditional office aesthetic of well lit, well ventilated, and made up of only right angles, Martian Entertainment had chosen a futuristic theme that involved multi-colored cube-shaped sconces in the hallway, chrome-colored plastic furniture in the waiting area, and a particularly horrendous green carpet. But, of course, on the walls were show posters. There is really only one rule if you have an office on the West side of midtown Manhattan and you work in the theater, you have to have at least one show poster on your wall. Of course, ideally, your walls would be covered in show posters. Posters of hits, signed. Directly behind Ryan, the kind eyed company manager who interviewed me, hired me, and managed me for several years thereafter,

was a poster for *Altar Boyz*. Above the red and gold title of the show is a cartoon of its main characters, Matthew, Mark, Luke and Juan enthusiastically leaning out of the windows of their tiny tour bus. Their mission? To parody the boy bands of the late 90s by attempting to save the world with Christian pop music. Ryan described *Altar Boyz* as a hilarious musical comedy that is completely unoffensive to anyone of the Christian faith.

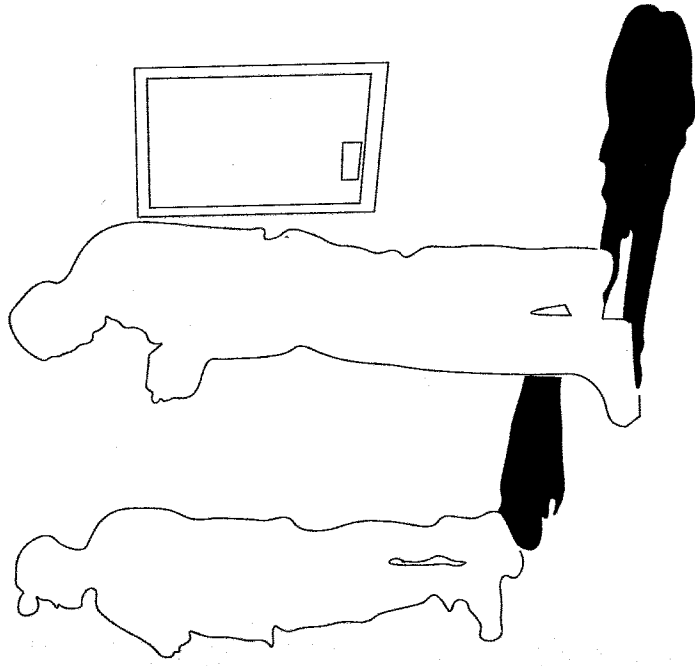
"It's really for everyone," he said, and I agreed as quickly as I could. Nodding my understanding that my job would be to target that specific demographic of everyone.

Years later, at a meeting with a very famous producer—so famous that when he sat cross legged on top of his desk he appeared to float in the cosmos of show posters that hung floor-to-ceiling over every inch of office wall space—I would find myself agreeing with the same sentiment. This time the show in question was a play. A bad play. And despite being a bad play and not being particularly comedic, it was this producers hunch that this show, *his* show, would satisfy the family musical crowd too.

All the promotional companies are different. Some have you wear a uniform, some have you write little reports at the end of the shift, but most insist that you bend the truth about the shows you work for.

To work for Franklin is a small honor. He doesn't have that many shows, but the shows he does have all come from decades old relationships with managers and producers. They trust him. He does things his own way.

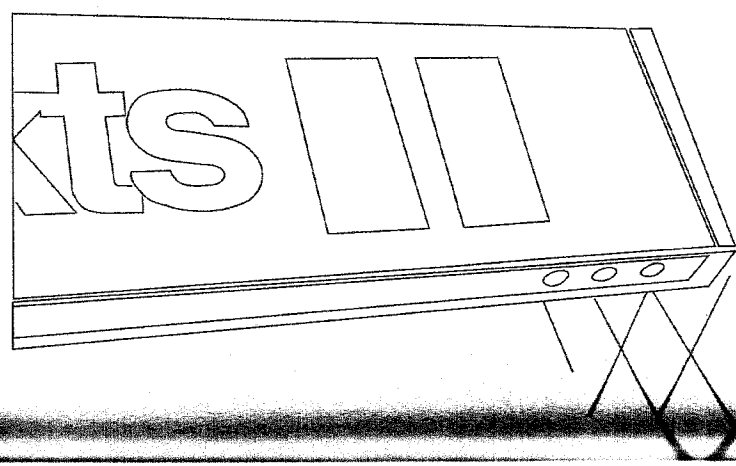
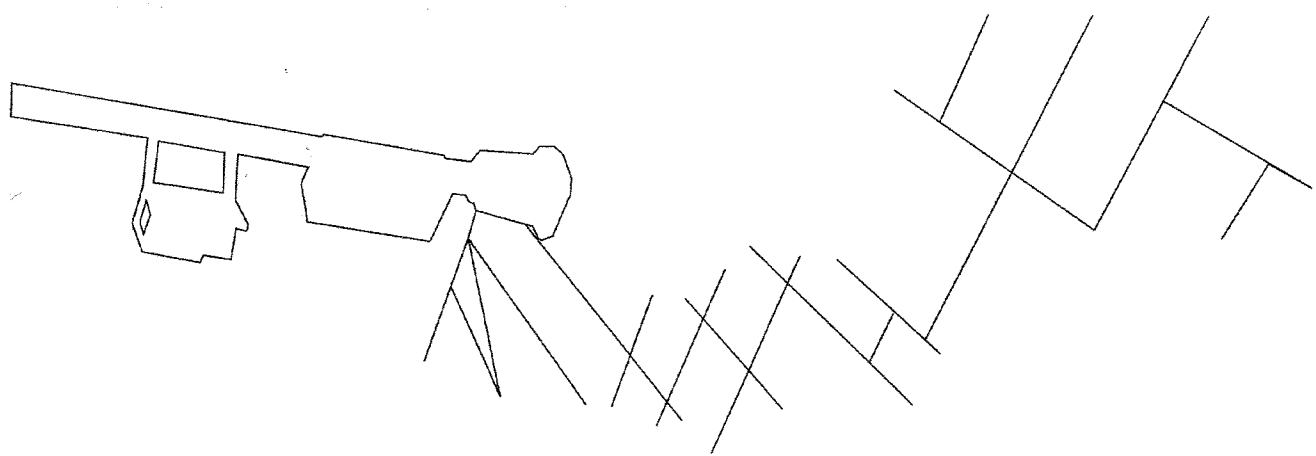




Rehearsal in progress

### **Times Square in All Weather**

In 2008 I bought a digital tape recorder at Sam Ash on 48th street. I wanted to interview people who have work outside in Times Square. I couldn't tell you if my intentions were pure or not. There was sincerity there, but also a sense of wanting to pick low hanging fruit. I was 20, I was newish to the city, and my dreams of being on Broadway were re-adjusting themselves. Here were people 2, 3, almost 4 times my age who had been returning to Time Square for decades to sell tickets, to promote shows, to make some money. It's an easy place to return to. The money is there and if you're into theater there's plenty to see.



The Board as seen from the Red Steps

**There's a new chain mexican spot on 41st, and its healthy, how about there?**

Mo is of a medium height and well built. His hair and beard are trimmed very close to his head, and finished in sharp angles. We meet at the Dos Toros on 40th. He is carrying a gym bag. I've got my backpack. It's been awhile since we've met up. We talk about work, and about who is up to what these days. Mo runs a reselling company and he tells me that he is moving the bulk of his operation online. We talk about the app Today Tix. We speculate that they probably aren't making any money but that they are looking to get bought out. "Having users is all anybody cares about these days," says Mo. We don't go too deep, but we do talk about who has died.

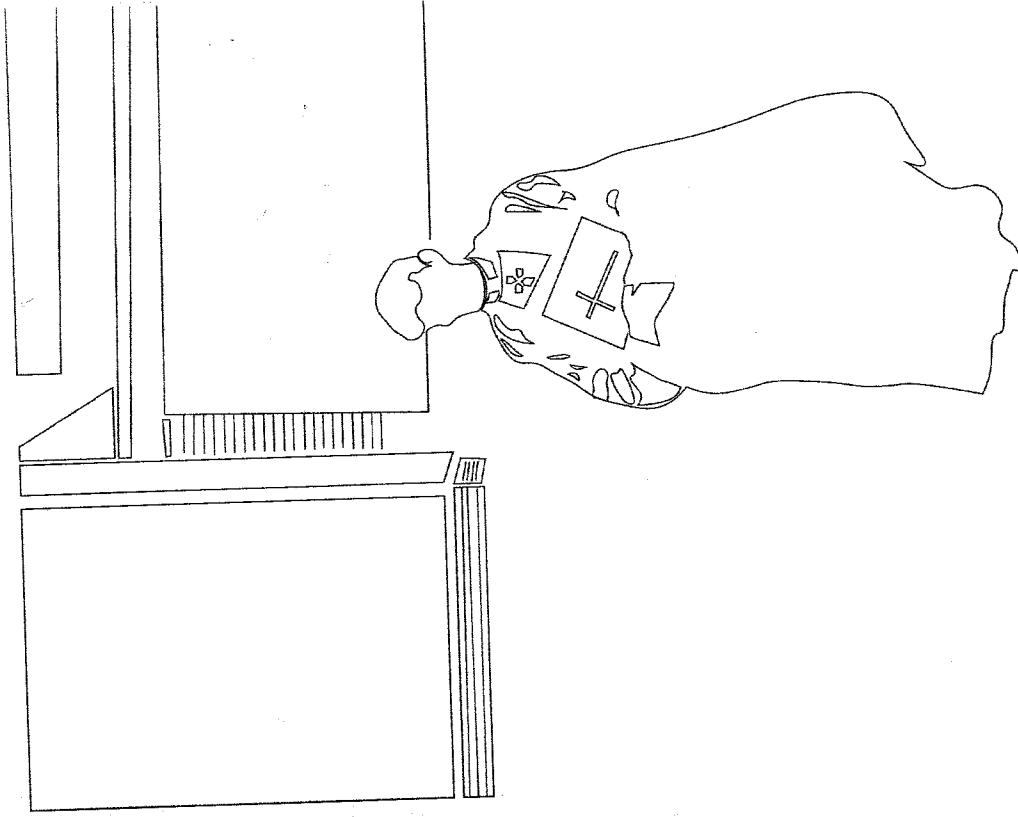
Jamar I hadn't know about. He had trouble with his heart. The last time I saw him his face was swollen. He was out on 47th and Broadway swinging his lanyard around his finger, selling comedy tickets.

Redbeard I knew about. Short and squat, with a bushy white beard. An old New York Jew, who called me bubby, and who always shouted himself hoarse in a thick accent. He was constantly arguing with his fellow scalpers, always on defense. He was a swindler with a bad limp and a habit. In the summer he would pull one of the red folding chairs they put out on Broadway and sit massaging his knee—his pale skin glowed beet red with sunburn and exhaustion. He was in pain toward the end. The last time I saw him he was limping toward the steps of the Evergreen Diner on 47th where he sat and asked for change

Rich, Mo hadn't known about. Rich lived his next door to his parents in Staten Island. He was 76 when he passed, his parents had died within a week of one another the month before. He had an identical twin brother. They installed pool liners in the summer.

Throughout the year Rich passed out fliers around TKTS. He was a playwright. It took me a year to realize that all of the exciting up-and-coming productions Rich was working on were always only ever up-and-coming. He wore a baseball cap year round, even on deadly cold winter days. He told me stories of promoting for *Damn Yankees* and having to wear an old-fashion pinstripe Yankees uniform, which he seemed to enjoy. He told me about the Duffy Theater which, before it was torn down to make way for the American Eagle on 46th and Broadway, he had helped renovate. Rich had a van that he would disappear into for a few hours every day at TKTS.

Since I started writing this in 2016 Irving has died. He always wore a rangers jacket and spoke out of one side of his mouth.



A priest visits Duffy Square

**Mitch, Mama, Winston, L.A., Mountain, Troy, Hammel, Redbeard, Spiro, Roy, Irving.**

**BEN:** Mountain and Troy?

**MITCH:** No. Pete. Not Mountain, another guy. Mountain's a millionaire. He played pick six, he's tremendous with the horses, he played a pick six for a million dollars. He's a millionaire. Bought a house for 900,000, it's already paid for. His partner is in a place where you get ready to die. You know he's dying? Irving?

**BEN:** Oh really?

**MITCH:** Remember Irving with the Ranger jacket?

**BEN:** Absolutely.

**MITCH:** He's dying. Somebody told me he's in a hospice. So what does that mean?

**BEN:** It's end of life care.

**MITCH:** He's in that. I like the guy, but you know there's a lot of guys...

**BEN:** Hey, but what actually happened with Troy?

**MITCH:** He robbed everybody. Listen listen listen, I'm going to tell you what happened to Troy. Troy was working for this guy, Spanny. Spanny owed all the brokers money. Spanny was a gambler, an older guy and Troy was the one out working the tickets. Spanny owed all the brokers money: 100,000, 80,000 you know, whatever. Spanny used to get tickets from them on consignment, Troy would sell them for him and he'd blow it somewhere. At the end of the week Spanny would see the brokers over by Port Authority to give them something. He'd short them, but he would give them something. Let's say he takes in 5,000 he'd give

the broker 2,200. He wouldn't fuck them all together. So anyway what happened was Spanny died, maybe 3, 4 years ago. But that's how Troy was getting his tickets. So when Troy went the brokers they all said, "We can't give you any tickets your boss owed us all kinds of money." But this was a thief they were talking to! Troy is an out-and-out thief! And he got so enraged that he said to himself, "You know what I'm going to beat these motherfuckers." Because Troy's not going to run around like me asking if anybody's got an extra ticket, like a mooch. When you're used to making 600, 800, 1,200 a day you're not waiting outside the fucking theater saying, "Excuse me, do you have an extra ticket, sir?" How you going to make do on that? So anyway he got enraged. These brokers didn't know he was desperate and that he's a professional con artist... He was making things up with Federal Express, with fake business cards, he had a whole fake operation. He beat one Broker for 14,000 telling him he had a connection to a lot of Billy Elliot Tickets. He beat about nine brokers, altogether for about 100,000. He took money off everyone and ran to Atlantic City. He beat me for 100. He Beat Samera for 500. She still thinks she's going to get the money back, she's mentally ill anyways. He beat this Jewish guy who used to come to the line. You know, Roy? Beat him between 8,000 to 12,000. Because they all trusted him! He was saying, "I have a connection to get a lot of tickets, we are going to make 80,000 each..." But they didn't know he was a professional con artist! So he'd get 12,000 here 10,000 there. He beat Jay for a few dollars, black Jay. Altogether, maybe 150,000. And he's hiding in Atlantic City right now.

BEN: I saw him a couple of summers ago in a park off 9th avenue. We said hi but I could tell something was up. He was on his way to Vegas for some boxing match.

MITCH: Who, Troy?

BEN: Yeah, he was on his way to a boxing match. Did you ever do the Olympics with him?

MITCH: I only did them once. 1996, in Atlanta.

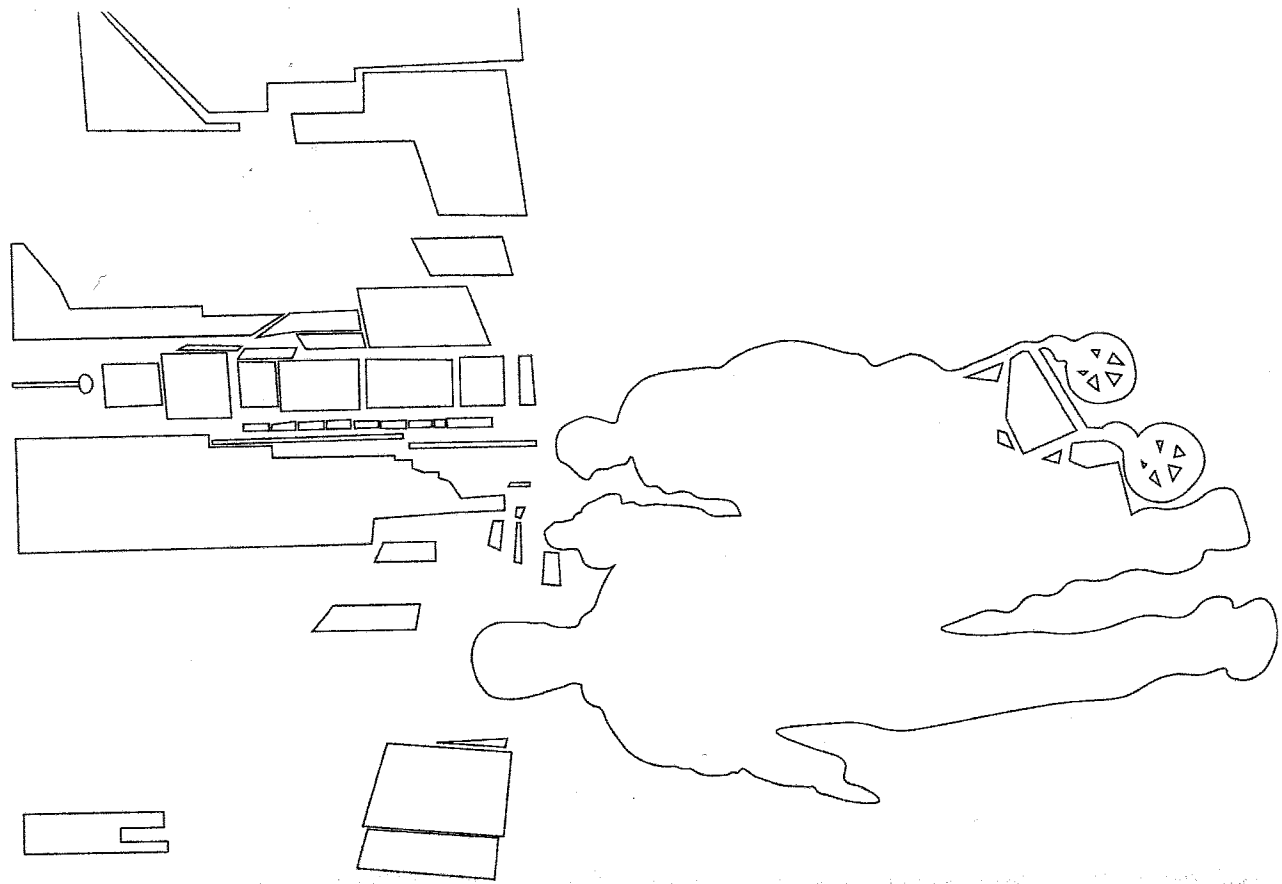
BEN: Together?

MITCH: I didn't see him there, I was with somebody else.

BEN: Jeremy, you know Jeremy? Jeremy and Jay and I talked about going to the World Cup in Rio but we never did.

MITCH: But I'll tell you the biggest score I've ever landed.

BEN: Yeah, tell me.



Mitch, Winston, Gypsy, Marty



## Jon

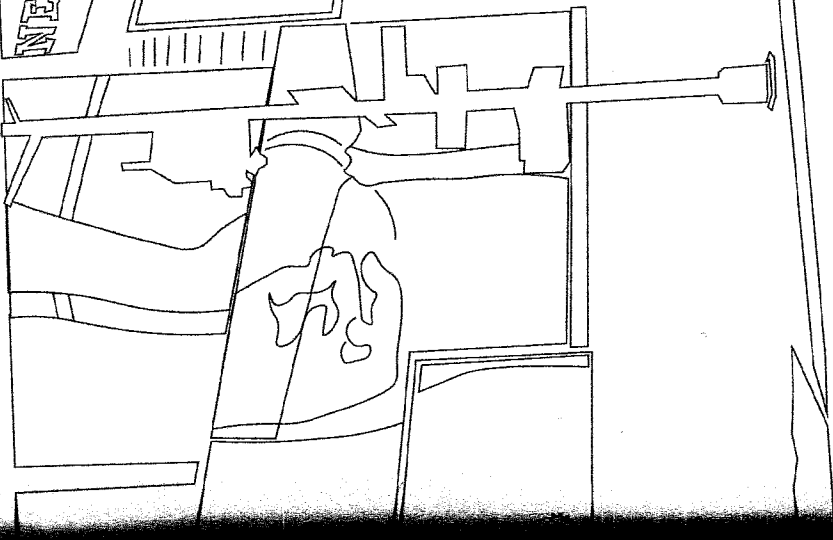
When the sun goes behind the Marriott Marquis around 2pm the video billboards start to glow a little brighter, no longer having to contend with the light of day. The noise is loud and dull. The jackhammer over my shoulder is competing with the traffic going down 7th. Above me an advertisement for a car becomes a beer, women in underwear, "Visit Turkey," Kinky Boots the Musical. The cycle is endless.

It's a typical weekday in early September. TKTS is going to open at 3pm to sell tickets to the the 8pm shows and the crowd of promoters is growing. I spot Jon walking towards me and wave hello. He's tall and blond and always rolls up the sleeves of his uniform. A White polo shirt with a name tag pinned to it that reads, "Broadway Ambassador Jon." He gives me a big hug. We don't keep up with each other much online, but in person Jon gives big hugs and wants to know everything that's going on. Darrell, the head of security at TKTS, is directing customers into the snake of stanchions that form the line at TKTS. The crowd doesn't look too bad today. Jon runs his fingers through his hair, puts his weight on one hip and tells me how his two most recent auditions went. The cycle is endless.

NEW

NEWSIES

MOTOWN



Panty billboard

### 2008, the first interview

**SPIRO:** When I was 14, 15 years I came here to get laid. I actually went to 8th avenue, 45th, 46th, the storefronts had prostitutes, you'd go right inside and there'd be prostitutes. The Westies—I'm not going to give you any names—these were tough guys, the Italians were scared of them... It's so safe now. I love it here. Back then ticket scalping, there was so much more money in it, 'cause there were no fake tickets around, so Madison Square garden was easy to work. There are 20 guys around there now, but there used to be 500 guys around. Box office price was five or six dollars, and you could get \$20 a ticket. There was so much more money at the garden, baseball, football, there was more—

*Inaudible. The wind cuts in.*

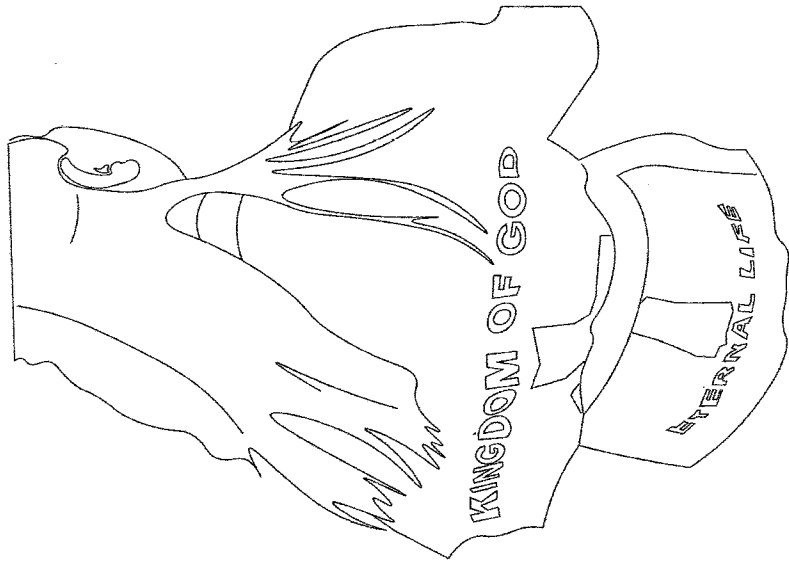
—It was easier to make money on the street back then. Much easier. Scalpers now are promoters and everybody wants to make money. And then there's the internets.

**BEN:** *Nervously,* What was it like out here? What's different?

**SPIRO:** This area, actually, was rough. 42nd between B'way and 8th was all terminals, valiums, prostitutes. It's a good place if you're getting high, you know. And this area here where you get your tickets at TKTS was very easy to get robbed at. Guys were always watching, three or four guys watching, gonna try to rob you. A lot of three card montes. Blue Fin was a pinball place where they used to... a lot of shady characters being in there. The cops would come with a van every day to get the kids that were supposed to go to school. American Eagle was a Howard Johnson's—I know you remember that. There was no security at the TKTS line. It used to be wide open, the security was hired because of knuckleheads like me. The only thing we had to worry

about were the under-covers and the uniform cops. The cops had a guy who would hide up in the Marriott, and look at the line and watch us. "Ah! we got those two junkies, go get 'em!" And they would come get us. If they were nice they'd just give us a summons.

Yeah. guys started seeing what you were doing and they wanted to get in on it. But theater stuff is a select type of people. Because it takes a lot of patience. You got to know about tour groups, who has the seats, what kind of show is good, certain times of year, matinee or evening... Because if you're not knowledgeable about what shows are good, what sells, you're gonna lose money. You know if a guy has six *Priscilla's* for 50 each I'll buy 'em, or if a guy has six *Mormon*, that's good, or six *Wicked*, that's good. And you see the panic that people get when they have tickets to sell don't you? I mean, I'm a normal person now, but you put six tickets in my hand and I'm gone, obsessed, out of my mind. You see the personality change of Jay and Justin? You pass an invisible line.



### **Promoting**

**BEN:** So OK. First of all TKTS is a discount theater ticket vendor in the Times Square area—it's kind of confusing because it's in the Times Square area but it's actually on Duffy Square which is the top part of Times Square. And they have a line. That forms daily. And the promoters usually work on the 7th avenue side of The Booth, (which is what some promoters call TKTS), and the resellers (which promoters call scalpers) work on the Broadway side. So when there is a line at TKTS promoters stand around it and offer people fliers or try to talk to them. We see what they are thinking about seeing and then try to sway them in another direction, usually by pretending to give unbiased advice... Then, when the line dies we fall back and hang around the LED boards that list all the shows for sale and try to talk to customers. Some promoters, usually the ones who work for small shows that really need the sales, really work hard, but others just hang out and talk to each other.

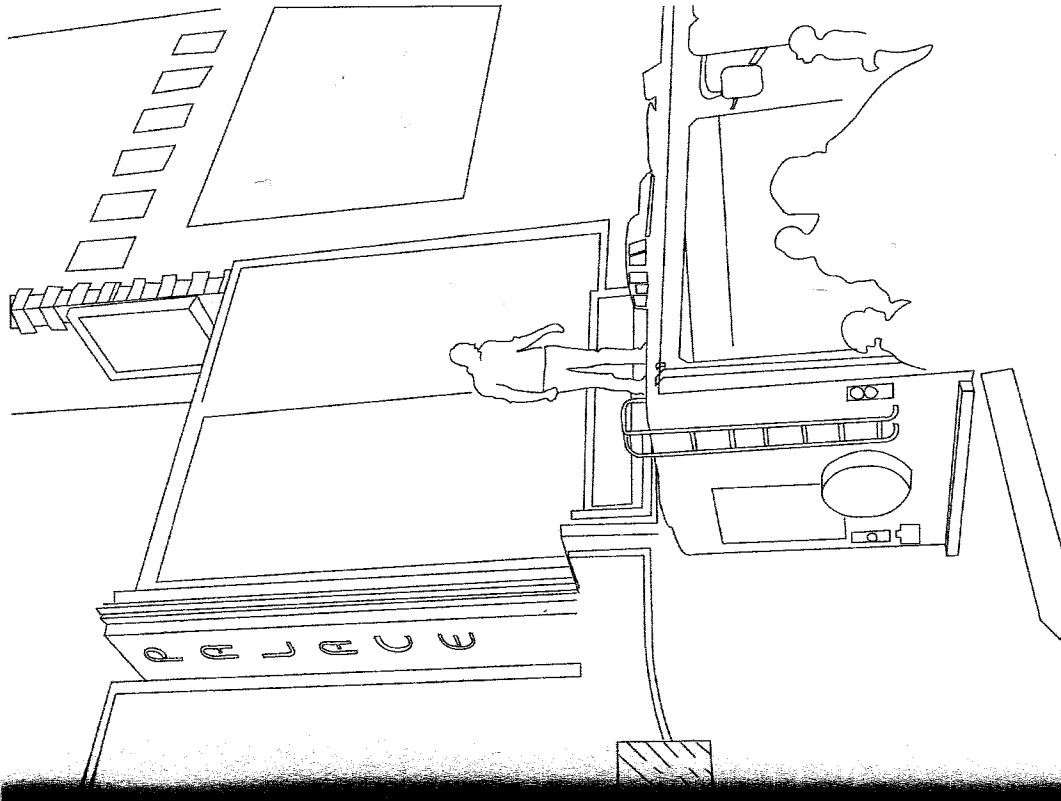
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After the line dies I'm standing by the board when two maybe-Germans start to read the list.

"Any questions? Need any help with the shows?"

She cracks a smile but keeps her eyes fixed on the board, he stares at me from behind sunglasses.

"Yeah," (definitely German) she laughs, "What's good?"



Mitzvah Tank

"Excuse me, do you work here?" It's about 4pm and I am busy watching some ominous looking clouds gather to the South. Do I work "here?" I work on 47th and 7th, yes, but that's not what they mean. They want to know if I work for TKTS. I hold up my stack of flyers and say that I work for one particular show but that I would be happy to help.

"Oh," my being a promoter doesn't seem to phase her, "Well do you know how much *Beautiful* is here?"

I tell her.

"Oh. OK."

It's a higher price point than she expected, but she doesn't want to tell me that that's an issue. She crosses her arms. I wait for the next question.

"Hey what else do you recommend? We've seen almost everything."

So I swing over to one of the shows I'm working for today, *An American In Paris*.

"Two soldiers, after the war, decide to stay in Paris and become artists and inevitably fall in love with the same woman," but the plot isn't what's important here, "It's based on the film with Gene Kelly" (a name she knows) "and it's got unbelievable, technically demanding and virtuosically performed, choreography by Christopher Wheeldon" (a name she doesn't know but which sounds important) "who was recently knighted, in fact..." I take a breath in through my nose before continuing. Without making eye-contact I know she's listening. "It's got a 28 piece orchestra—very studiously arranged Gershwin tunes—if you want prototypical, large, classically produced, American musical theater, full-stop, I'd say that's your best bet."

She's nodding, her lips twitch towards a smile at the right moments. My tone slows as I reach the end, "It won more awards than anything else last season" (awards mind you, not Tony awards), I pause, give a quick shrug and trail off with, "It sells very well here...". My tone is the invisible icing on the cake. Not quite masculine, not quite effeminate, a perfect blend of affected authority and solidarity. Sick, no? I lean back on the board as she leaves happy.



This was after they pedestrianized Broadway, but before they repaved it. During that time the street was painted blue. Toast's red hair was a clean wave of color, except for where the scar from the childhood burn ran through it on the right half of his head.

TOAST: I never asked permission or apologized for shit.

TROY: That's not what I said either. I said you'll forget what you've said when you're sober.

BEN: So how long you been working out here?

TOAST: 7 years.

BEN: What've you been doing?

TOAST: I've done tour busses, I worked for a jewelry store, um, both tour bus companies, City Sights and fuckin Grey Line. I've done fliers for restaurants, bars, things like that. I was a bouncer for two years, I do everything! Anything and everything, if it makes money I do it. You know what I mean? I'm not scared of doing nothing. You want to tell me, "Hey here's 12 dollars-an-hour to toss this nigger out the bar," nigger 220 pounds, "Get out my bar man!" like fuck! I'm not scared, I'm a mixed martial artist, I don't give a fuck. You know what I mean? Right now I do comedy, because I'm allowed to be a professional asshole. It's what I do. I can hit on your girlfriend the whole time, you can laugh at me and you'll still hand me money for doing it. And there's a bunch of times when I hit on your girlfriend and you laugh at me and I fuck your girlfriend the next day when you're at the Yankee game. I do me, I get paid to hang out man. I don't have a "job"—when my friends in Jersey... I'm an antisocial motherfucker, most people who know me are like, "How the fuck do you do your job?" I don't know. I'm an antisocial motherfucker. I don't like you, I don't like Troy, I don't like Jay, I don't

like Jeff, I don't like nobody. I like me, myself and my shot of fuckin' whiskey. If your not suckin my dick get the fuck off it. Its that simple. But, I work for the number one comedy club in America, the oldest comedy club in the world: Dangerfield's. I remember watching Dangerfield's comedy hour when I was fuckin seven-years-old. That's the only reason I work for this club. I come out, I have fun, people pay me for it, if they don't like it oh well suck my dick and fuckin walk away from me, if not then fuck you, go to the Ha.

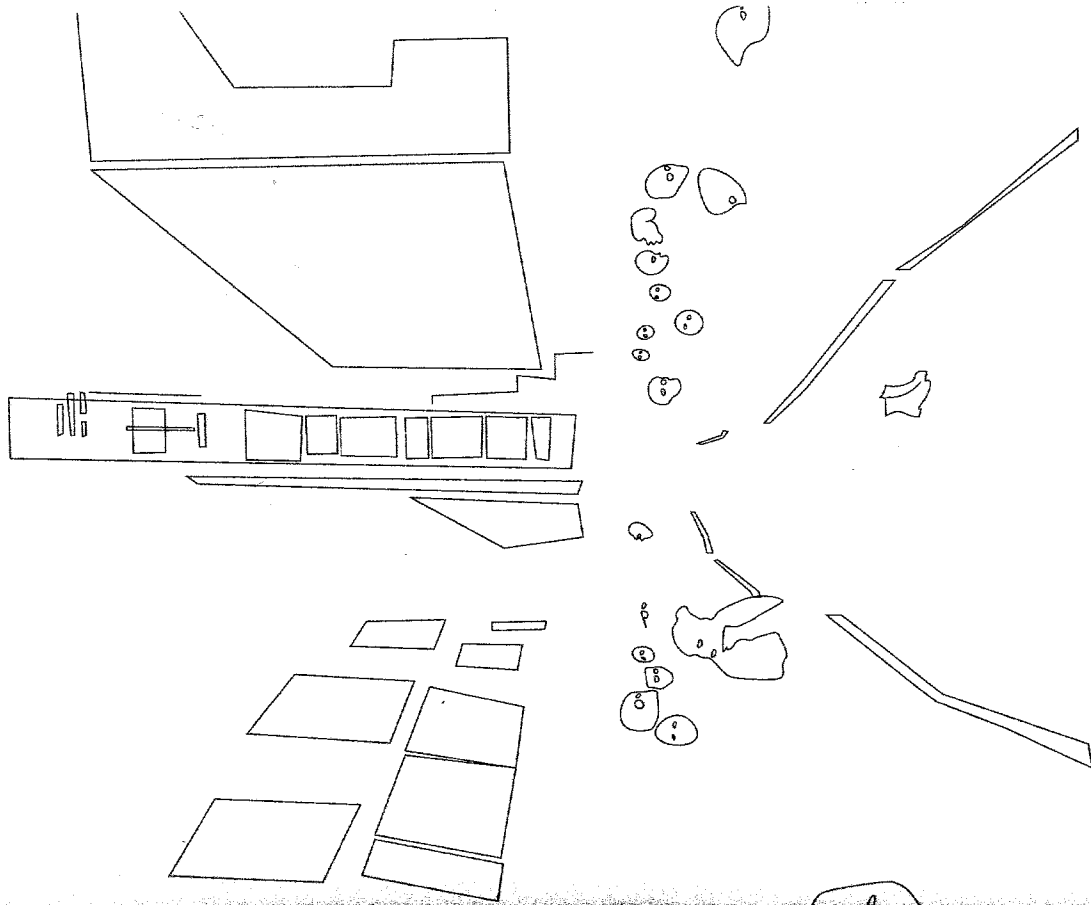
BEN: It's changed out here...

TOAST: See now when I first started coming out and when I first started working here that's two different things. 'Cause when I first started coming out, it was with my step-dad. We used to rob motherfuckers out here. Yeah, I was twelve years old we used to rob you out here; take you for your chain, your wallet, whatever. It was Times Square, pimps, hoes, hustlers, shit like that. Now it's Disney owned Disney operated. Its kosher now. Like I'll sell you a legitimate ticket where ten years back when half you dudes were in high-school I was out here sellin' crack to motherfuckers, man. Like I'm not even playing man I was out here sellin' crack, I was sellin pills, acid, weed, you know what I mean? Like, Times Square has changed over the years, seriously.

BEN: For better or worse?

TOAST: For the better, Always for the better. Shit I would do back in the day I wouldn't dream of doing now. Now if you come up and say, "Hey Toast, could I bet a bag of weed?" "Nah I don't know nobody that does none of that shit." Back in the day: "Can I get a bag of weed?" "Oh shit yeah man," I dig in my pocket, "here you go. Oh you want cocaine? That's in my back pocket!" I used to hustle out this motherfucker when I was a kid. We grew up in Jersey, we'd come up here and it's like,

"Get money get money," that's all it was. I'd rob you in a fucking heartbeats, man. I'd put a gun to your chest. You come to an ATM back in the day I'd throw two fingers around your neck. I got a straight razor in between them two fingers. "Let me borrow 50 dollars." You ain't letting me borrow shit bitch you givin it up or you're getting cut! Now-a-days like it's legit man, I give Times Square a lot of credit man, it's legit nowadays man. You got niggers that are like, "We real, we trying to sell you shit, da da da," you know? You got niggers like Troy who's honestly saving you some money on a show, or if it's a sold out show we might charge you a little extra, but fuck, you getting the show a hell of a lot cheaper than if you paid at the box office. We do our thing man, it's a hustle out here.



The Line at Christmas

**Inside Danny's Deli, which is on 47th between Broadway and 8th.**

It's cold outside, but Inside Danny's Deli Korean pop music is playing and the heat is on. I notice Mitch standing by the coffee machines.

"Hey Mitch, how you doing today?" I keep my eyes fixed on the hot water flowing into my cup. Mitch doesn't miss a beat. He answers instantly.

"Ah, I'm alright. I haven't sold a thing."

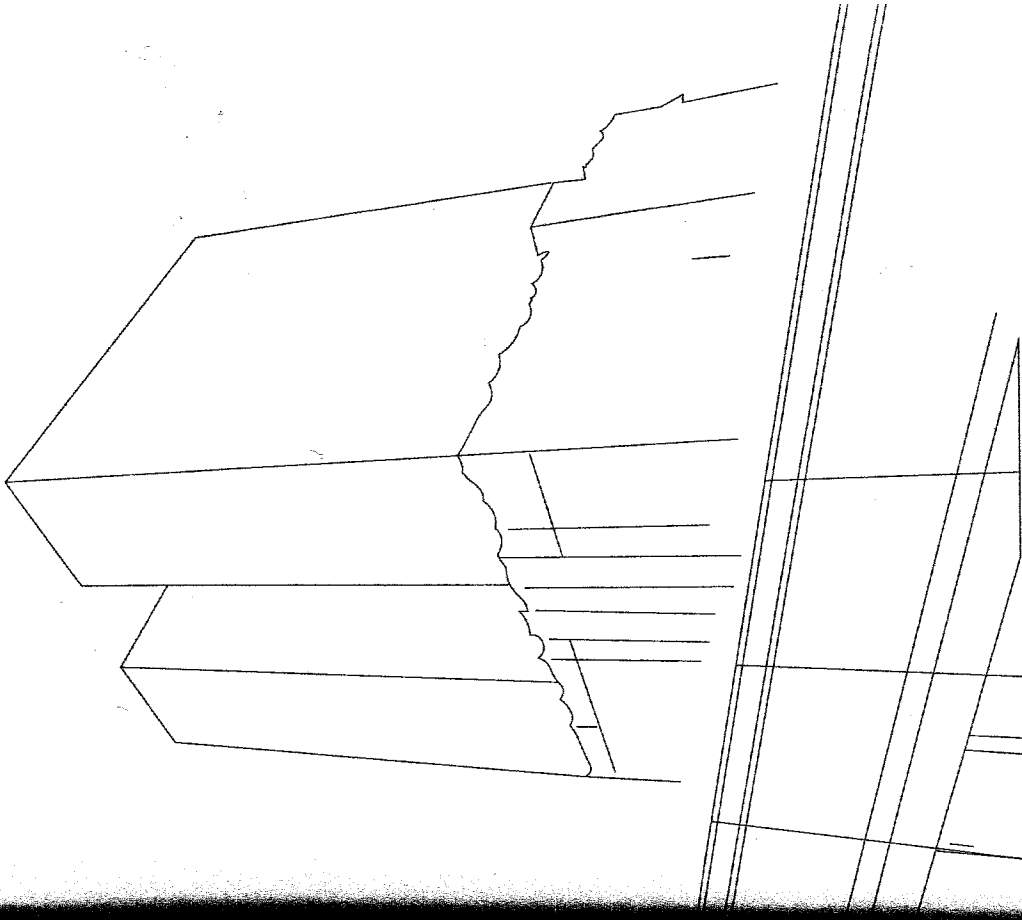
"It looks pretty dead out there."

"There's no money on the street anymore."

I smile and take my time selecting a plastic lid. We make eye contact before walking to the register.

"Now you explain this to me. I've been doing this 45 years, I'm 60 years old, you tell me this, how is it that these guys get away with selling these fake tickets at the Garden?" He throws his arms open wide ready to catch any affirmation that might be coming his way. "Am I crazy? Used to be the under-covers would come and throw you up against the wall and that'd be it!" As he pretends to get arrested up against the fridge I realize that he thinks I'm older than I am. I don't remember the Garden. We both pay and turn to go upstairs. Halfway up Mitch stops and cocks his head backwards to see if I'm still there.

"C'mon, I'll tell you a story."



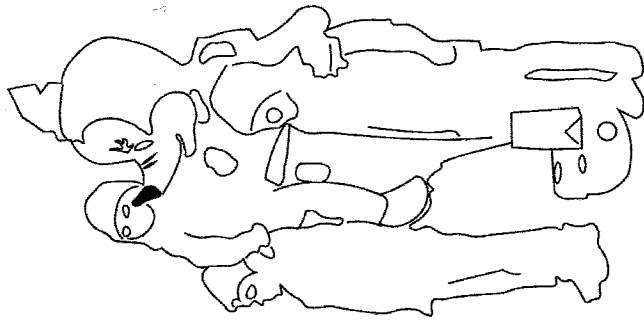
The buildings on 6th Ave as seen over The Booth

There he is. Well lit, on the second floor of Danny's overlooking the registers and the teenagers who chose the K-pop. His leather coat is still on. He sits in the silver metal chair with his hands in his pockets and his coffee remains untouched. The uneven table sways gently as if we are on a boat.

The lines of his face are perfect, somehow. The stubble of his beard, with its patches of white looks perfect somehow, as if intentional. He speaks from a place low in his gut. Sometimes he his speech comes softly and quickly, separated by pauses of decreasing length, so that his sentences skip like a stone on the water. Other times he shouts a single word followed by silence.

I take him in, secretly. Watching like a pervert, feeling like an impostor. What I think I know about myself vanishes for a moment. Some new organization of memories and facts has to be thought up. Surely I can't simply know Mitch well enough to ask him questions over coffee. There has to be some deep and important bond that has formed between us over these past 10 years, a connection so meaningful that I have forgotten its origin and only know the correctness of its sensation. Maybe I am in fact as old as he thinks and we have been working shoulder to shoulder all these years. I am conscious of the way I am wearing my face. Aware of the acting, so familiar, such an important part of all things. And, of course, he is acting for me.

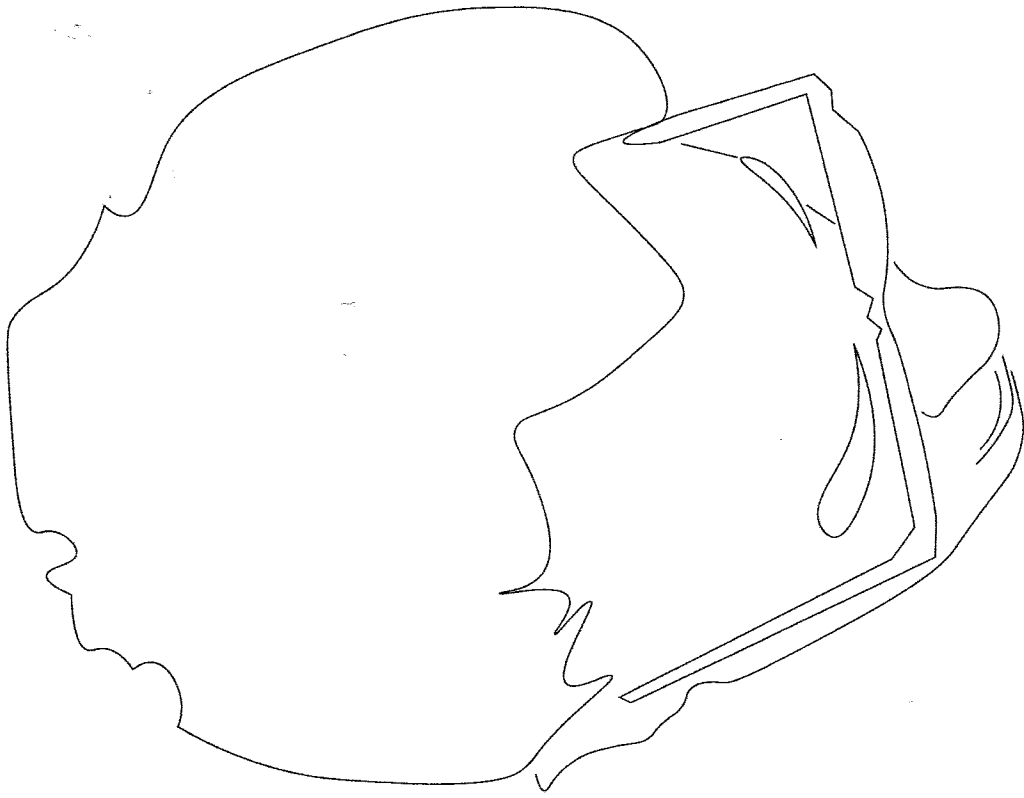
A new understanding of the world in which Mitch wants want to tell me a story must be remembered.



Family photo

SPIRO: Back then, I was playing with a band and I started shooting heroin. *wind* had to sell all the equipment. My friends all got strung out on dope so we had to sell all the equipment piece by *wind* piece. *wind* We were down to the last *wind* I was strung out, it was raining *wind* 1982 *wind* had no money *wind* I was sleeping on the street, shitting in my pants. I was dope sick. So I go to Sam Ash with my Sure mic *wind* got it for 150 dollars, I say, "Can you buy this off me for 10 dollars?" and he says, "Get the fuck out of this store."*wind* "Come on guys I just wanna get 10 dollars for this microphone" *wind* he said, "Get out I'm going to call the cops." So I go outside and I'm trying to sell it in front of the store and finally some guy comes out gives me ten bucks and tells me to get the fuck out of here, and I got my fix. *wind* 6th months before *wind* store, the one next store, there's Sam Ash and the *wind* they're all thieves these stores, you know that though. We were selling our drum set piece by piece, they give you like sixty dollars for the snare *wind* for the bass *wind* so that's the last piece, the guy paid a couple thousand *wind* wanted to get like 300 for the whole thing. So for the last piece of the instrument *wind* fifty dollars on the receipt upstairs, and we had the same color pen. We put a zero to make it 500. We went downstairs and cashed it for 500, they must have found out, and they were chasing *wind* weren't catching us with 500! We were on the Lower East Side, shooting gallery, three bags of hot city, shoot some dope, *wind* nice and relaxed. Till the next day.





Bren

Stella's is a place I've never been to but have heard stories about from 3 different people. As it's been described to me the upstairs was a typical theater bar, with show posters on the wall and bartenders in bow ties and vests. And downstairs was an all male strip club where men put on elaborate strip shows. Herman told me about how some guys would just come out and strip but others would have imaginative costumes (sometimes made by their girlfriends), different music, and maybe even a whole narrative arc. Apparently the way you tipped was to fold your dollar bill neatly into a smaller rectangle and throw it onstage. Stewart gives me his long, firm handshake and asks me what I've seen. I tell him and he says he saw it too and he liked it. He peeks at my clipboard and asks what I've got. Not much, I tell him and he nods. He looks down the block at the crowds on Broadway marching past the construction site of a new video billboard, the biggest yet.

Stewart has the healthy skin of someone who learned early to train his vices into refined indulgences. He is wearing a blue shirt with a floral pattern, tight dark jeans and black dress shoes. He asks me what I'm up to later and I tell him I'm meeting people at the Mean Fiddler, half-way down the block on 47th. He asks if I know what used to be there before the Mean Fiddler. I say Stella's at the same time that he says Trix and we pause for a moment and he smiles. He gives me another handshake and leans in to pat me on the back. He smells clean, almost sweet.

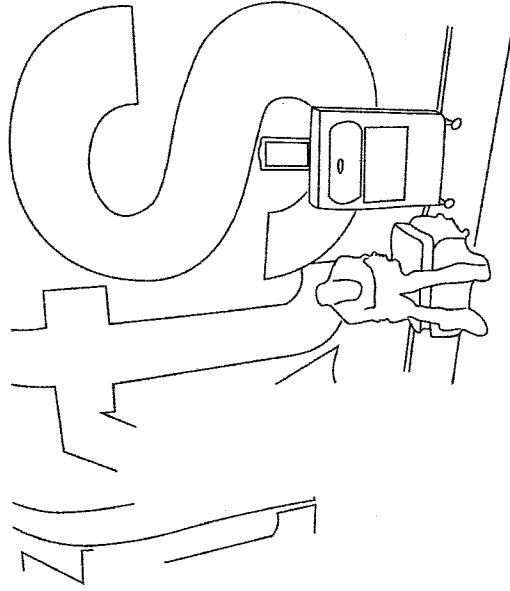


Chris the prompter is ignored

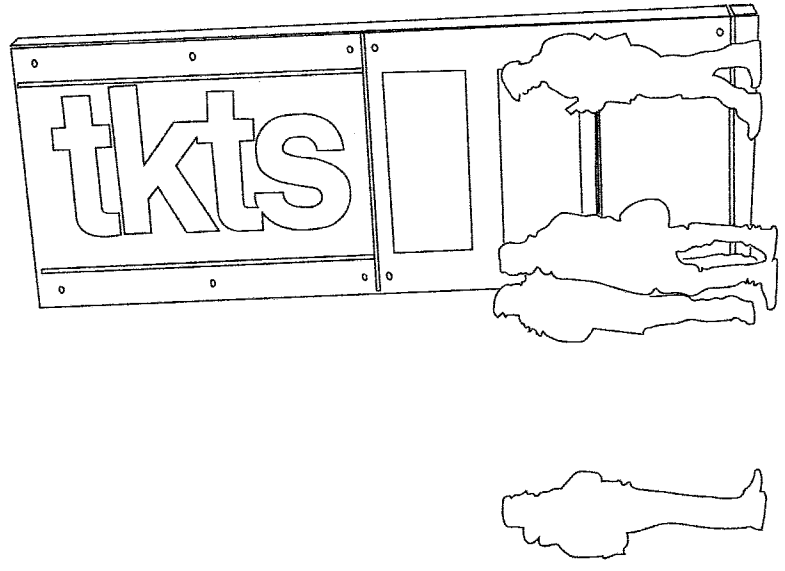
### **Ecstasy and terror**

In a dressing room the light is so perfect that whoever is sitting there, in front of the mirror, can't help but look like they belong. Outside of the stage door we meet and run down to get some food before heading back inside and upstairs to catch up. I ask how it feels to do eight shows a week and she shrugs. Its thrilling, it's a job, but it's thrilling. It all looks so natural, as if this was the plan all along.

It's time to leave so we head through the house toward the lobby. We pass a man watching the news on a small tablet. Looking back I see the stage, resting under the timid fluorescent work lights. We walk up the stairs of the mezzanine to see the set from above. A 1960's domestic interior. A kitchen with faded curtains, well worn appliances, and a table with a stain. So many memories of what a home might be. As we stand there a pipe is lowered from the fly. Silently, effortlessly it descends and interrupts our view with its perfect black straightness. I take a deep breath in and want nothing more than to stand here for eternity contemplating the silent descent and ascent of long metal pipes over fictional domestic spaces. Someone is shouting from offstage left. A door slams and we turn to head downstairs.



A cold child

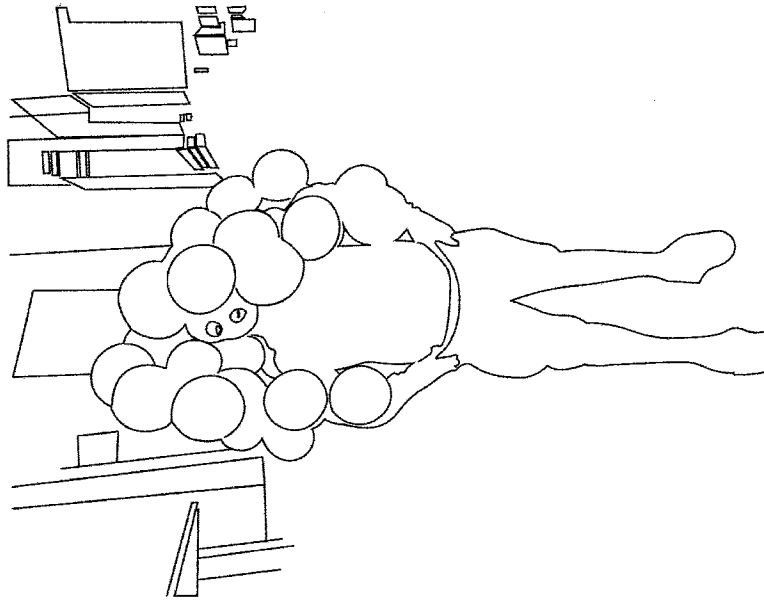


Promoters around the board

### **Working Children**

There is an invisible line between advertising and theater in Times Square. When you work as a promoter on Duffy Square, and you don't make the effort to distinguish yourself from TKTS, you can often feel hurt when a tourist isn't sold by your performance, especially because part of the performance of a good show description is hiding the fact that it's a performance. When the tourist walks away unsatisfied, the promoter can feel hurt, as if a billboard could feel hurt. And so the promoter will commiserate with their fellow actors back in the dressing room. The scene didn't go so well, my scene partner just wasn't cooperating. Luckily there will be others. Countless others.

Near the end of a long day, especially in the summer when everyone is showing more skin, and especially in the late summer when people have had a chance to refine their favorite outfits, sometime in August when this summer's clothes are brought out to make one last glorious appearance, people become mammals again, with spines that curve and a mouth where hands put food. Faces become ovals floating 4 to 6 feet off the ground, hovering orbs. Times Square is for all the mammals, but really Times Square is for teens. And there are two types of teens: the type that enjoys how much they resemble their parents, and the type that is in denial of that fact. From outside the family, leaning against the board tired from a day in the sun, I watch them. And regardless of which type of teen they are they always bear evidence of the effort of those first uncrackings of their identity, their first self-scheduled performances. As I talk to their parents I can feel them observing me. Maybe they are nervous, maybe they are confident, but rarely are they disinterested. I talk to them through their parents, and they talk back. We communicate in that way.



A person wears many balloons



**It's a cold day in January. It's fucking grey.**

It's a cold day in January. It's grey. The crowds have thinned after the holiday rush, and from where I stand in front of Mo's new office building just below 41st the passing faces are familiar. A family of four from Nashville, mother, father and two young daughters all have M&M Store bags; a young couple, he's from Jersey originally she's from Georgia, they met at school and she is up visiting on their winter break; a mother and a daughter from the north of England, staying at the Hotel Edison, loving being in the middle of it all; a young couple from Australia who just quit their jobs and are making their way around the world, tomorrow it's off to Iceland; A mother and a daughter from Westchester, in for a show, walking in easy silence.

The performance of selling tickets on the street borrows from the performance of promotions, but is less of a show because, in fact, I have tickets to sell.

I leave the office wearing the company jacket and holding a tablet to walk up towards the booth. I arrive and take my place on 47th and Broadway, about 20 feet from the red LED board. Re-sellers aren't allowed to be within a certain distance of the booth, and recently security has started putting crowd control barriers along the Broadway edge of TKTS territory to keep us at bay.

There are a handful of sellers out but no real greetings are exchanged. I face the board and start looping my spiel.

"Broadway tickets, no waiting in line, I have tickets for today, I have tickets for tomorrow."

Spiro stops by but he doesn't have anything to sell. He sticks around and talks with a few people. Ina, who is new, young and from Bulgaria is asking him about Cindy when a mother and a daughter from northern England

make their way past the barrier to say hello.

"Have you got anything for *Kinky Boots*?"

Hands are in pockets. The daughter looks up at me with a polite smile. Mother is looking vaguely to the south at everything and anything nothing in particular.

I pop open my tablet case and tap open the price sheet. *Kinky Boots* is too expensive but *Chicago* seems like it might work, so I call the office. Fiona picks up right away and after I ask her if we still have two Chicago for \$110 and she disappears into her computer for a minute.

I let the silence drag on for a moment before offering, "It's hot out." Mother turns to me with a chortle and almost shouts, "Where are your gloves, dearie?" She is done admiring the billboards in the cold and is ready to be a part of moving the experience along.

Fiona says, "Yeah, we can do that." As I am tapping out their order, taking down their names, swiping a credit card some small talk is called for. It being cold out I make another joke about a sauna and that gets us on the topic of how different cultures have different rules concerning how many times you can throw water on the hot rocks and how nice it feels to be rubbed with mixtures of salt, honey and coffee grounds. We all agree that getting whipped by the pine bough is not for us, (which isn't entirely true, I liked it when I tried it). The last piece of info I get is their hotel and room number for the delivery. They are staying at the Edison, the tickets will be there within an hour.

Spiro is still around and tells me to tell Ina about Cindy. He's not wearing a hat, his grey hair is combed back. Thick tortoise shell glasses frame his dark eyes. He is tall but has a bad slouch that comes half from age, half from standing outside in the cold too much.

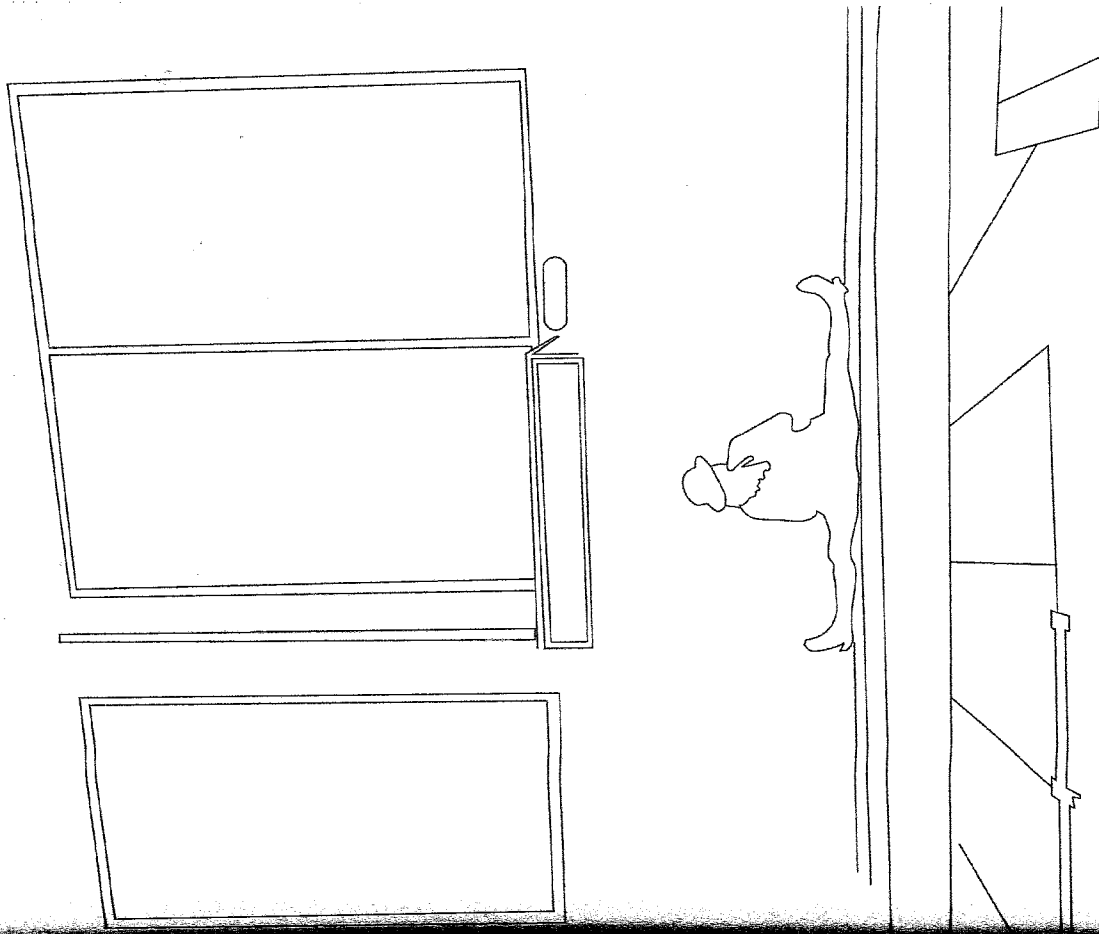
"She and I get along," he says, referring to Cindy.

"You have to work over there for a while," I add, nodding at TKTS.

Ina isn't satisfied. "I don't understand why the people who work over there," she throws her hand at TKTS but really she means the promoters, "Don't like us."

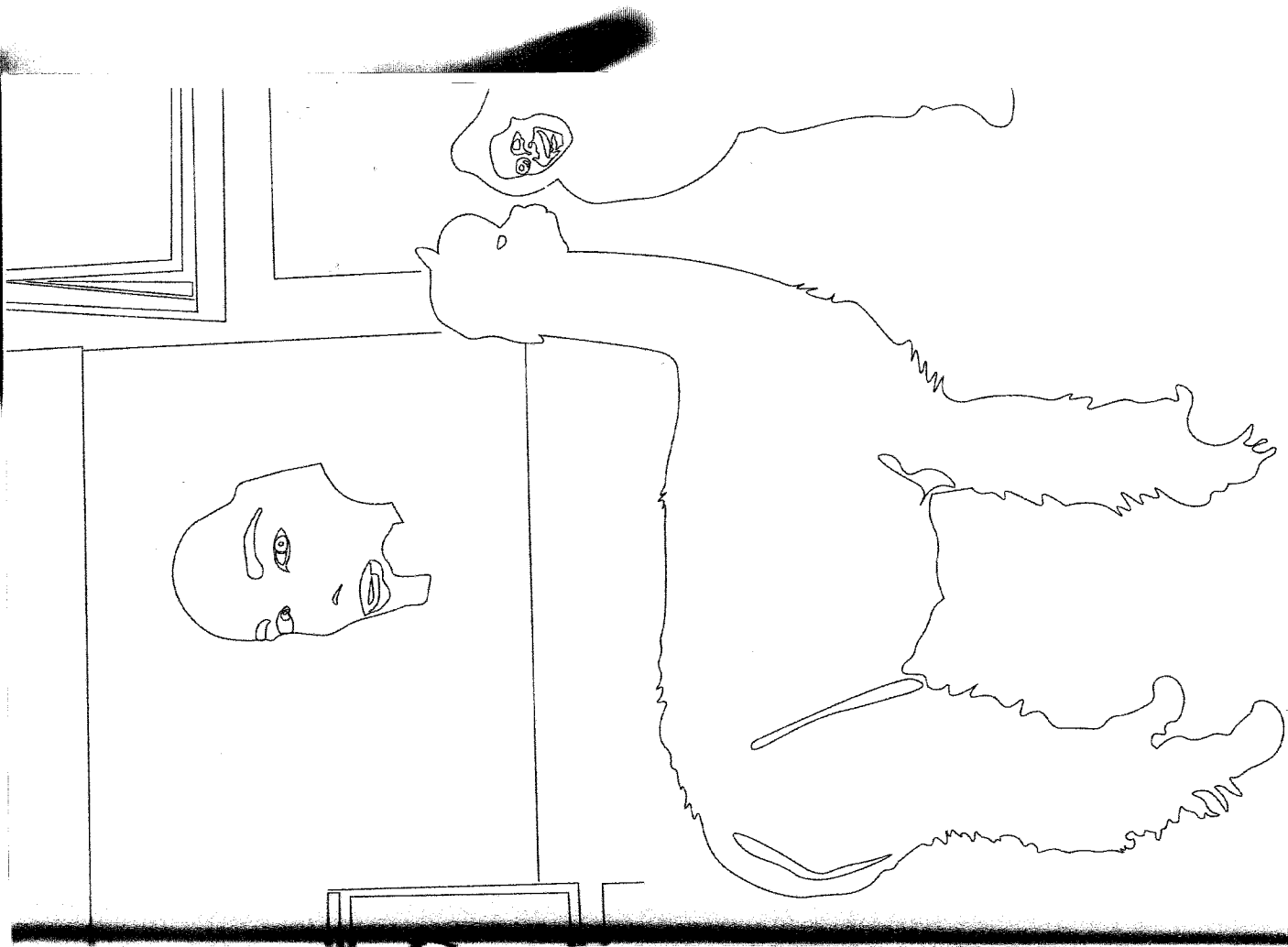
I agree with her and tell her I think it's a silly bit of snobbery. Spiro leaves. It's getting colder out.

Everyone's shoulders are inching towards their ears.

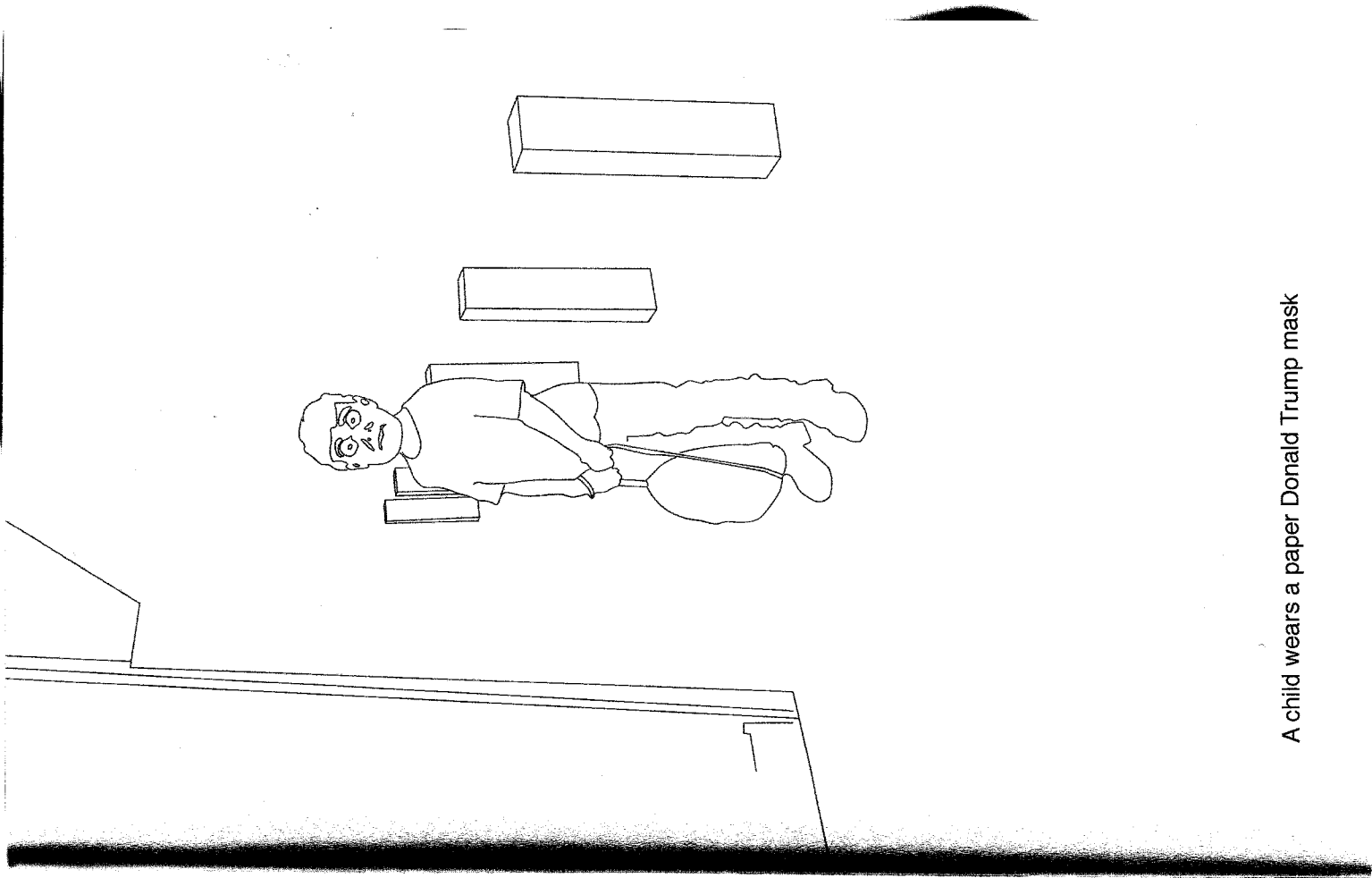


A Chicago promoter faces the line

One day a small square on the billboard across the street from TKTS went black. Around 5pm that day the small black square started to be wiggled back into the belly of the billboard, and we all stopped to watch. A tiny hard-hatted head popped through the new window and looked around. The head was so tiny. The ad, with its familiar smiling actors and legible text had made the billboard seem human sized, but as soon as it was interrupted the screen was revealed to be monstrous. To be heavy with wires and glass and metal and plastic. Satisfied with his observations the head disappeared back into the billboard and moments later another square was slotted into place and turned on.



Someone brought a lama



A child wears a paper Donald Trump mask

### **Mitch and the Well Educated Young Man**

About 30 years ago I'm working Lincoln Center when Pavarotti was big. Remember Pavarotti? I used to be with this guy who would give me 6 tickets every performance. They were \$30 seats and I used to give him 65 a-piece and sell them for 150, 250 a-piece, easy. And no struggling like here, this was like a handout. I used to make myself 500 a day. Anyway there was a guy whose name was Sheldon who died of cancer, and he liked me. I did him a favor one day I gave him tickets for the Nicks. Anyway I went down to meet him on a Tuesday night and he says, "Listen I have a live customer for you." And he had brought the customer comes down too. The customer didn't speak any English, he was from Japan. I think he owned a Toyota company or something. But he came with his son and the son spoke English. So the son says,

Are you Richie?

I am.

Sheldon says you sell tickets. You're honest.

Yeah, yeah I'm honest.

Can you get me 23 seats for the Saturday matinee?

23 seats! I didn't have them so I would have to buy them. I told him, "That will be very expensive, and they won't be all together, they'll be grand tiers, orchestras, parquees."

He says, "No problem."

I kept saying, "They're a lot of money."

He says, "I'm staying in the Waldorf Astoria. Here's my number."

Kid was an educated kid, he was a little younger than me. So I went to all the brokers, nobody had any tickets. I went here I went there. I had a couple of cancellations, some obstructed views. I couldn't get any seats. I went all over, to Connecticut, had to borrow money because at the time I was broke. And I got them. I laid out close to 3,000. Now I call the guy up on a Thursday, 10:30 at night.

Who is this?

Richie, I got your tickets.

Oh thank you thank you!

Can you come outside? (There was a coffee shop downstairs.) He kept saying, "Oh thank you thank you." He was bowing up and down the whole time.

I got the seats, I tell him. He looked shocked like he had just had a baby or something.

How much do I owe you?

Well these are not my tickets, these are from big brokers, from Connecticut... \$44,000. I'm just taking a shot with the guy, because you can always work your way down. I mean I tell that to you now and you look like you just came out of Bellevue hospital! What am I buying a Rolls Royce here?

"OK," he says.

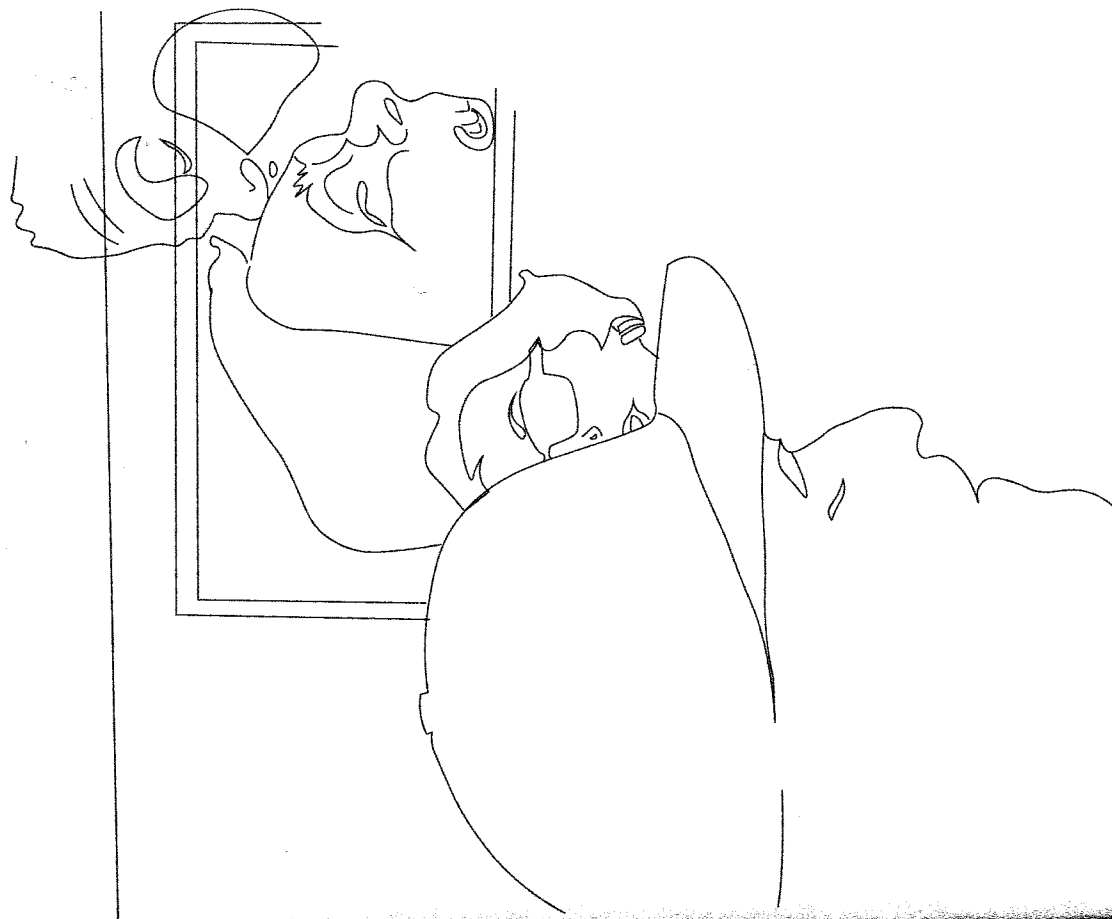
So I say, "meet me at 11 o'clock in the morning, I'll meet you outside." I came, he was there. He handed me an envelope and said, you want to count it? No, thank you, I trust you.

I put it right in my pocket jumped in a cab and went

back to Queens. 44,000 dollars. The other guy I work with said I could have asked for 100,000. But this was a once in a lifetime opportunity! I would have been happy getting 7,000, 8,000. But listen listen listen suppose you are a multimillionaire and you have all these clients here on business and you want them to all see this last performance of Pavarotti, 44,000 is nothing to you. I was shaking the night before. I said to myself is this guy really going to come with this money or am I in the fucking twilight zone? He handed me an envelope and asks if I want to count it.

I jumped in a cab, back to Queens and I'm sitting on my bed counting this fucking money. 10,000, 20,000, 30,000, 40,000, 44,000. I blew the money anyway. I was a gambler, I was a schmuck, I was a young kid, 32, 33, 34. I bought a TV, a couple of things, shoes, stuff like that. ONCE in a blue moon.





A man, a woman, and a bus advertisement

**Forever**

In Forever 21 the music is loud and full of bass. Looking over the side of the escalator the drop is farther than I expected. As the first floor recedes above me I notice the incredible whiteness of the decoration. White, plastic, and polished. I take the escalators three floors down to the bottom level. Here, at the very bottom of the ocean a group of teens sit on a semicircular couch and look at their phones. The music and the light drift down from above.

