

Crowds

By SHEILAH PEPPER

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Moving from Canada to the United States does not involve any huge cultural change for English-speaking Canadians. However, it does include some adjustments. I moved from the second largest Canadian city at the time, Montreal, to the largest in the U.S., New York City. I had spent numerous vacations in New York, right from childhood, since Montreal is just over 300 miles away. But living there was another thing altogether. In my first week or two, I became sharply aware of the great difference in population density between Canada and the U.S. Riding the bus from my apartment to the office, the seats were filled and we stood jammed in shoulder-to-shoulder holding on to the hand straps for dear life. This was followed by a ride in a jam-packed elevator which whooshed upward at a terrifying speed. It took me about six weeks to get over my latent vertigo and claustrophobia.

At Christmas, the main shopping street and department stores in Montreal were crowded, or so I thought. But they paled in comparison to 5th Avenue and Bloomingdale's on any noon hour and especially on Saturdays.

One Saturday morning, I ventured over to Bloomie's for a much-advertised sale of cashmere sweaters. The scene was frenetic. The sweaters had been literally dumped on one huge table. There must have been a hundred women around the table. I finally got close enough to grab the sleeve of a black cardigan. I pulled on the sleeve. The sweater pulled back. I pulled again. From the other side of the table, a woman yelled, "Lady, that's my sweater!"

I peered across the table. The caller was diminutive and grey-haired but she had a certain glint in her eyes. I realized that, in comparison to this New York shopper, I was a rank amateur. I surrendered the sweater and fought my way out of the frenzied crowd. I justified my lack of fighting spirit by telling myself I had saved \$99!

A few weeks later, a colleague at work asked me if I'd like to save some money on clothes. Being fairly frugal, I took her up on the offer. She met me early on a Saturday morning and we traveled some length on the subway, emerging somewhere in the Bronx, I think.

We arrived just before the doors of a large warehouse opened. The line was almost around the block. I looked down at my high heels and realized why my colleague was wearing sneakers. Once inside, it was very crowded. My friend said, "What do you want to look for?" I said I needed a new suit. She said, "Follow me." She had a shoulder bag which left her elbows free. She elbowed her way to the suit rack.

We found an item I liked. She grabbed it, rolled it up under her arm and we fought our way to the cash register. Then she led me to some chairs and told me to wait. She reappeared about 15 minutes later with a bunch of packages. I got the suit I wanted for about one-third of the downtown Manhattan price. It pays to shop with a New York pro!

Oddly enough, solitude can be found, even in Manhattan. Weekdays, I worked from 8:30 a.m. until about six p.m. most evenings. Because I dealt with foreign markets in the Far East in the days before the fax machine and e-mail, I often worked the long distance telephone from home after seven p.m. so I could speak in person with colleagues in such places as Australia and Malaysia. About once quarterly, we also worked for a couple of hours on Saturday mornings. So Sundays became sacrosanct in more ways than one.

The Sunday New York Times came to the lobby of my building just after six a.m. I got into the habit of picking it up and heading to a nearby coffee shop for their famous sticky buns and strong java. After an hour with The Times, I would head home with a coffee refill and spend the

rest of the morning with the newspaper.

I learned from colleagues that once in a while, they would enjoy a total chillout Sunday. This involved stocking up on reading materials, good coffee or tea, bagels, sandwiches, and chocolates, then spending the entire day in bed reading. In an otherwise very busy life, it was one way to actually find time for serious reading and serious relaxation!

Not too long ago, a lady who had spent her life here in rural East Texas commented to me that she didn't know how people could live in a large apartment building. She lived in a very rural area of this county. At night, it is pitch black and very lonely. It's hard for me to understand how anyone can relax at night in that setting. I like street lights and nearby neighbors, but it all depends on what you are accustomed to.

My neighbors in my Upper West Side apartment building were largely Jewish. They were very friendly. They kept track of my comings and goings. They knew when I was sick and brought homemade chicken soup. My Texas friends and neighbors have also been very helpful through the years.

Good people can be found in all kinds of places, crowded and uncrowded.

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