

The Ballet of 24th Street

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The ballet of 24th Street does not start and end. At least not on my 24th Street, starting at Sixth Avenue, crossing Madison Square Park, and making its way across to Park Avenue. The dance for me begins at six in the morning, when I am rudely awoken by the sound of a jackhammer helping one of the surrounding construction projects to reach its way to the sky. If the sun is not too bright, I can fall back asleep, but only to be re-awoken by the sound of the building's maintenance staff lugging the thirty floors worth of garbage out onto the curb to be picked up before the day is over. From the 17th floor the noise is faint, just barely loud enough to be heard over the din of the traffic on 6th Avenue.

I leave my tiny cocoon to face the day, locking the door behind me and waiting for the elevator to take me to the street. I rarely see the residents I share the 17th floor with. Jon the Harvard Grad is an investment banker who leaves before the jackhammers start. I often hear the couple next door, known to me only as the people with the obnoxious dog, but see them only occasionally in the hall. The crazy artist down the hall gives me fliers for his shows, but soon there is yellow police tape across his door, and he is never heard from again. Of the other eight apartments, I only know that two have mezuzahs, three get the Wall Street Journal, and four get the New York Times. In the elevator I almost always nod hello to a woman in heels checking her Blackberry, but it is a different woman every day. The same goes for the generic man in a suit.

On the way out the door, I bid good day to Eric at the front desk and spiral through the rotating doors out onto the street. If I leave at 9:00, I almost always see the Japanese man walking his girlfriend's two Sheba Inus. If it is 9:15, then it is instead the old bull dog with his suited owner rushing him to do his business before the owner must leave for work. Walking east down the sidewalk towards work, I pass the owner of New York's "best" deli and convenience store, who stares blankly at the brick wall across the street and rarely acknowledges the passers-by. From there I pass the orange-vested construction workers, who wish me good morning in Spanish and then watch me from behind as I walk away. Only once or twice have I seen a woman brave enough to challenge their bold stares. If my timing is right, I catch the walk signal across Broadway and Fifth, which come together at my corner. There is inevitably a tourist blocking the intersection for both cars and pedestrians, his tri-pod set up trying to take the perfect picture of the Flatiron building. I hold my tongue, tempted to point him towards the souvenir shop across the street, where he can buy an already framed version of that perfect picture for only \$9.99.

Once across the street, I get a brief respite from the busy sidewalk as I cross into Madison Square Park. For several months last year there was an aural art exhibition, and I could hear the sounds of birds singing in the middle of winter and the tolling of a bell years silent. If I am lucky, and I read this as a good omen for the day, I see the man walking his cat on a leash. The cat slinks along, ashamed it would seem, to be treated so similarly to a canine. Taking a deep breath of fresh air before emerging on the other side of the park, I step back out of the green and cross Madison to my favorite coffee vendor. Every day the man sets up his cart on the corner to serve the caffeine-starved Manhattanites on their way to work. Here I either cut through the line, like a scab breaking through the picket line, and continue on to work, or I move to the back and wait my turn for a steaming or iced cup, depending on the weather. I encounter another vendor at the other end of the block, but he is not as friendly and often runs out of iced coffee on hot days. By the time I reach Park and 24th, I start to see familiar faces again, as my office is just up the street at Park and 25th. Sliding into conversation with a co-worker, I cross the street and leave 24th to continue its dance without me until I emerge again at days' end.

On nice days I will return to the park for lunch, joining the picnickers on the lawn or the patient diners waiting in the hour-long shake shack line, temporarily playing a role in the street ballet of Madison Square. After the work day—at 6 on good days, 10 on bad days, or anywhere in between—I cross back through the park. I find the chairs empty and the benches occupied by the homeless men and women, who are setting up camp for the night. On the northwest side of the park, a group of Jamaican men sit, laughing and talking to each other and whoever passes by. The woman closest to the 5th Avenue gate just stares at me with empty eyes as I walk by and never returns my smile. Back on my block of

24th street, I see the old homeless couple who huddle under blankets every night in the back doorway of Cipriani's, and if I have leftovers, I offer them the box. The man reaches out to take it and grunts in gratitude. Further up the street the outside patio of Sapa is filling up with posh thirtysomethings, drinking \$15 dollar martinis and eating miniscule appetizers off creatively shaped plates.

I duck into my building and stop to ask Rosa, who has taken over the desk from Eric, how her one-year-old daughter is doing and if there are any packages for me. I check the mail and ride the now empty elevator back to my haven on the 17th floor. On the nights that I go back out, I always feel safe on 24th because the bouncers from the three nightclubs keep everything under control like a private police force. Every night of the week a different group of people line up outside of the clubs, waiting far too long behind the red rope for their chance to see and be seen. Even in winter the girls wear clothing that barely cover well, anything, in hopes that the bouncers will notice and escort them around the long line into the special red VIP door. Most of the time these girls end up shivering in line as I walk past feeling smug in my long pants and warm winter jacket. The noise from the clubs goes on until two or three in the morning, when the bouncers finally round up all the squealing girls into cabs and send them on to their next destination, leaving the street to the hot dog and pretzel vendors.

I've only heard, and never seen, the battle of the street vendors. Very early in the morning, before the rest of us should be awake, the vendors meet to load up their carts for the day ahead. I'm not sure of the cause, but often there is screaming and yelling and once the sound of a gunshot. The police tell me that 24th and 6th is actually a very dangerous place to live, if you plan to be on the street at four in the morning. I do not, and thus I lay back on my pillow, leaving the street to the ruffians until I wake again several hours later to the sound of the jackhammers.