

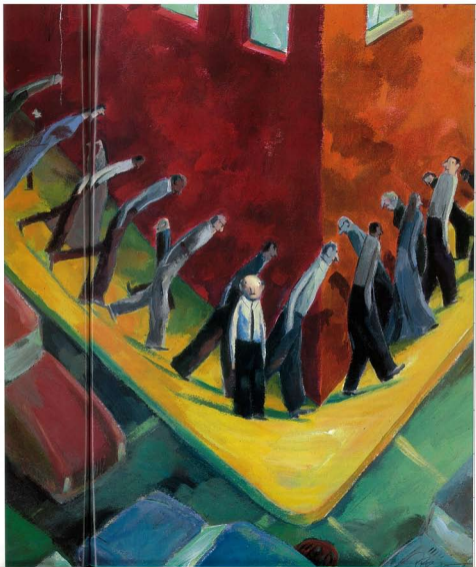
Answer Man

BY ROBERT KLARA

*Having a trustworthy
face in a metropolis
of scowls,
he has no choice
but to fulfill his duty.*

IT HAPPENS ON street corners usually, and it goes something like this: "Sir, sir? I'm lost. How do I get to Penn Station?" The first few times it happened, I didn't give it much thought. After all, I have this habit of making eye contact with people (New York City Rule #1, broken) and being friendly (New York City Rule #2, summarily broken). But lately it's been happening with curious regularity, sometimes twice in a day. On the Broadway local, a panicked father from another land with one large family in tow blinks helplessly at a subway map. Giving up, he darts his eyes around the crowd to fall on me. A subway car can hold perhaps 200 people, but it's always me. "Excuse, sir," he

ILLUSTRATION BY PIERRE PRATT



calls across. "We lost. How go Rockefeller Center?" Language will be a clear obstacle here, so I pull a notebook out from my bag and draw him a map. New York City Rule Book, broken in total.

Once it's broken, there's no going back. So I have learned my duties much like a police officer: Help can be needed at any hour, and forget about a tip. There's no shortage of places to go in this town, which for me has come to mean that there's also no shortage of lost people trying to get to them. Thus, my routine: I ensure all corners that the Staten Island Ferry will in fact bring them to Staten Island, that tickets for the Empire State Building's observatory are actually sold in the basement, and that the public restrooms in Central Park are by Bethesda Fountain, "just past that mostly naked man playing the banjo, and turn right by the carved owl statue."

"Hey, where's Eighth Avenue?" comes from behind a hastily rolled-down window.

"Hang a left on the next block," I yell.

"Thanks!"

This from a cab driver.

"Excuse me," says a smiling and slightly nervous woman on 42nd Street on a winter afternoon. "We're looking for the Empire State Building." Her children eye me expectantly, suspiciously, as though they've just hired a coyote to strangle them across the border.

"Well," I say, "walk down 42nd here until you hit Fifth Avenue. Make a left and walk down."

"Will we know it when we see it?" she asks.

"Um, ma'am, it's kinda hard to miss."

I am standing at the foot of the Flatiron building on Broadway and 23rd when I see two middle-aged lady tourists passing a crumpled map between them. I can hear their proper British accents marred by a confused tone. Then, I see their eyes graze the intersection.

"Pardon us, sir," one says, approaching me with a tentative smile, "but we are attempting to locate Sixth Avenue."

"It's down there," I say, motioning to the West Side. The angular cut of Broadway which seems to shift the island's avenues out of whack—Sixth, in this case—confounds many who visit. They've also crossed Madison and likely mistook it for Fifth. Should I try to explain this? Never mind.

It must be my face. I can't think of any other reason why I'm picked out of the horde pressing up the avenue, selected by the momentarily desperate on the train, shaken from my comfort in staring intently down at the sidewalk or reading a book. These two time-tested assurances of disinterest seem to work fine for other New York

ers. But people have crossed the street—actually dashed across traffic—so declare to me that they are lost. I have an honest face, maybe a sucker's face. It is, in any event, not a stereotypical New York face, cold as iron railings and mean as land-locks. I should introduce myself. Welcome to New York City. I am salvation of the moment.

"One moment, monsieur, my wife and I are looking for a certain restaurant around here. The elderly Frenchman with a pinstriped cap politely waited until I had finished a hot dog before asking me that. Does someone scarfing a street-cart winner seem likely to know the location of a fine French restaurant? It's probably my face—but not always. Once a blind couple stepped me on Sixth Avenue and, apologizing for bothering me, proceeded to ask where they could find a good pastrami sandwich.

At times the requests aren't even deferential. To some people, the sign of me denotes not a willingness, but some sort of caste-driven obligation, to drop what I am doing to direct them.

"I need to find Lincoln Center!" announces the portly matron at the corner of Madison and 43rd. Her words are clipped, impatient (as in "Stop her here, leaves"). Oh, but her temper is no match for my machine gun of charity.

"Would you like to walk or take mass transit?" I ask.

"Mass transit!" she barks.

"Bus or subway?"

"Bus."

"How long do you have?"

"20 minutes."

"Catch the M1, M2, or M3 here, ask for a transfer, and get off at 57th. Get the M37 to Broadway, then walk five blocks up on the left side."

She just blinks at me.

Why me? I'm only out for a walk. Is there something that I radiate? Is there something in my surface-stoned state, the way I pause at street corners to look smartly calculating (instead of merely angry) that says I know where to find everything? I might as well confess that I'm not originally from here. I'm from a small town upstate with cows and pickaback neighbors and that sort of thing.

I've contemplated what the sensibilities of an upbringing in such a place—a rearing largely free of suspicions—enables me to see here. I've learned to spot the looks of genuine helplessness in people, and am not too jaded to ignore them. I've learned the expressions and stances of those who are about to approach me and almost always I decide to trust them. I've also harbored the fear that one day the sweet-looking lady from Tallahassee will pull a

semi-automatic out from her fanny pack and prove me terribly wrong once and for all.

But most important, after years of talking to strangers and people I barely know, I've learned that the condition of being lost can often apply to much more than not knowing where to find Penn Station. That what many people want me to find them is much farther away than Eighth Avenue.

In short, I have learned that people are lonely, sometimes starving for the chance simply to talk to someone, and often full of questions that have no simple answers. Because when the day's first troublesome light dawns over all your moles, the bed you've slept in alone, the chipped dishes standing

in good enough hands. I really did consult the New York State Physicians Directory about the doctor. I asked my friends if they'd take in a cat. I told the Moroccan to get his degree and be careful. But I cannot find you everything, person of street or stoop or hall—though I really wish I could.

I think of J.D. Salinger, who inadvertently earned the reputation of mystic when he published *The Catcher in the Rye*. Exhausted from a 29th stalking by a newspaper reporter, he suspended his reluctance for 15 minutes at the end of his New Hampshire driveway to inform the world. "People with problems, people needing to communicate, people wanting help for their careers. They've col-

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in the sink, you go out with your head full of what you lack, what you want, what you can't find. At those moments, I seem to be there inadvertently, with a pouch big enough to hold entire lives.

The doddering woman downstairs is harboring 19 kittens orphaned by a fire, and wants me to tell her where she can find them all at home. The pizza guy from Morocco tells me he wants to quit in order to take a dangerous night job as a cab driver so he can attend "American college," and do I think that's what he should do? A woman in my last apartment building told me her older daughter's husband was in jail (and which jail), and then asked if I could find her younger daughter a job. Another, upon my mentioning that I once worked in a medical office, asked me to help her find a heart surgeon. Holding a screaming baby in the doorway, the superintendent's wife asks me if she should get back together with the cheating husband she's thrown out.

"Can I help you sir?"

"I'm looking for the 6 train," he says softly.

"Just go another block and turn right by the drugstore."

"On the corner of what?"

"Park Avenue."

"Don't worry," I add, thinking it necessary, "you'll find it."

I'd like to think that when these curtains are parted for me and in the moments I'm whisked into various poorly lit sanctuaries, my confessions are

lared me in elevators, on the street, even here... But there are no generalizations. I'm not a teacher or a seer... I don't pretend to know the answers."

I am no seer, and I'm certainly no Salinger. But if I can't find you a job or a surgeon or a better husband, if I can't find your house or house your cats, I can at least point the way to Lincoln Center. Heck, I might even recommend a good French restaurant. And if, in the process, we're better off only for a quick smile, if the civility of a handshake, a stolen moment of connection in a huge and uncaring city, we must be advancing ourselves closer, somehow, to finding all that other stuff we need. I have to believe this. In the meantime, I see an old man at the corner of Lexington and 24th Street asking passersby to help him find the nearest subway stop. They ignore him, and so here's where I step in.

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ROBERT KLARA is a writer and editor living—guess where—in Manhattan.