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An Innocent in New York

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Abstract

I can still remember the first words spoken to me in New York, the "Big Apple" as it has become to be known: "Hey Mac, you pullin' a fast one?"

I had made the error of following one of my friends through the check-in point at John F. Kennedy Airport. My error was that I had, in my innocence, written down the truth — that I was going to work in New York Hospital for six weeks without pay. Possibly it wasn't so unusual, but since my friend had also written that down under the heading "Purpose of Visit" the security guard decided something odd was going on. Nevertheless we got through, despite the fact that the third member of the intrepid Edinburgh trio had written down the same as his colleagues.

It was probably the sudden flurry of activity of the security guard as he searched through the "Undesirable Aliens" file that made me feel guilty and therefore jump when the second New Yorker in my life spoke to me: "Come over here! Don't dawdle already" barked the Customs and Excise Officer, his use of the unnecessary word "already" indicating that he came from Brooklyn and confirmed that we were actually in New York.

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AN INNOCENT IN NEW YORK

MICHAEL FERGUSON, B.Sc.

I can still remember the first words spoken to me in New York, the "Big Apple" as it has become to be known: "Hey Mac, you pullin' a fast one?"

I had made the error of following one of my friends through the check-in point at John F. Kennedy Airport. My error was that I had, in my innocence, written down the truth — that I was going to work in New York Hospital for six weeks without pay. Possibly it wasn't so unusual, but since my friend had also written that down under the heading "Purpose of Visit" the security guard decided something odd was going on. Nevertheless we got through, despite the fact that the third member of the intrepid Edinburgh trio had written down the same as his colleagues.

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I clambered through customs, convinced I was going to die of heat exhaustion or from a bullet in the back. It was early July, and the start of what turned out to be the New York heatwave of the century. I suddenly felt very small — here I was in a foreign land with a missionary-type idea of doing medicine, and didn't have a clue where to start. Everyone around me was eying me with curiosity, snarling at each other when they collided because they were looking at me instead of where they were going. I had always thought of Americans as being pretty aggressive — my first few minutes of New York seemed to confirm it.

That was at the bus terminal on 38th Street: the hospital was up town on 68th Street, so a cab driver ushered my into a cab and headed off up town. The cab, somewhat dented, had few springs and a wire mesh separating me from the driver who permanently had one hand dangling out of the window. His other hand was a bit more active

and he pointed out all the sights on the way, lit his many cigarettes, waved to his colleagues, waved to his non-colleagues with one or two digits, and occasionally it touched the steering-wheel. Thank God that New York roads run in a straight north-south direction.

We arrived at New York Hospital, whereupon the driver stopped and held out his hand, demanding five dollars. I gave him the money and turned away despite the fact that his still lingered before me. A few mutterings were aimed at me and I gathered that his philosophy on British tourists was basic to say the least. Amazed to be still alive, I looked towards my place of work for the next six weeks. It was a grey building that stretched in every direction, especially up.

New York Hospital is 23 storeys high and measures two blocks by one block. It also contains about the same number of beds as Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. The reason it looks so big is because the "wards" are divided into rooms of four, two or one beds. The patients in the private wards, for America does not have the National Health Service, occupied single rooms on the upper floors named after someone called Baker. I worked in Baker 12A and 14, and on those floors a single room cost the patient, or his insurance company, nearly three hundred dollars per day. If the patient wanted anything done (like some medicine, or to say "Good morning" to a doctor), he had to pay extra.

Mr first day in New York Hospital changed my whole outlook on Americans. I found them courteous, kind and considerate. Maybe it was being in a special environment or because I was foreign, but I think not, for I travelled around after my six weeks in New York and found that most people were very kindly and I was welcomed wherever I went.

When I look back at my stay in New York I can only remember the good points, really. I suppose that if I concentrated I would remember my feelings about being expected to work seventeen hours out of twenty-four every third day

and twelve hours most other days. It was all good experience. The medical staff worked hard and had an enthusiasm which appears lacking in Britain. It was inspiring to hear juniors doctors quote recent journals rather than ageing textbooks. When I was there I looked forward to reading the latest information on the disease which my patients had. The whole New York drive and aggression had some good effects on one. As was said by one of the hospital doctors: "When I'm sick I want the technology to get me better, when I'm getting better *then* I want a sympathetic doctor".

Though I don't entirely agree with such a

doctrine, it might be useful to have a drive such as that within the New York Hospital to get the patient better — while still retaining the compassion to realise that a patient is not just the container of a disease.

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So I have turned from being the Edinburgh medic set out to impress New York into a medic who wants to shake up the apathy I find in Edinburgh. I can't help but feel that Edinburgh is resting too much on its laurels. It still has a lot to offer even to bustling (and hustling) New York, but I think that more enthusiasm and less apathy would better the high standard of Edinburgh.

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