Sidewalk Ballet of 4th Avenue

At four a.m. the revelers go home. The street settles down for its quiet hour, when the rats and the taxi drivers keep watch, when our own revelers stumble home from other parts of the city, having lost their excitement on the long, clattering subway ride. The city subsides between four and five, and Fourth Avenue quiets down with it.

Sometime between five and six the day begins. Garbage trucks clank and clatter through the streets, their lights careening crazily off the sides of still-dim dawn buildings. *AM New York* hawkers take their positions at subway entrances, and supplement the traffic noise with quiet greetings. "Morning. Paper?" The smell of sizzling bacon wafts up to my window from the bodega down below, where construction workers and policemen are picking up their breakfast sandwiches. The cars of commuters from lower Brooklyn and Staten Island elbow each other up the street, cramming their way toward the Manhattan Bridge and the elusive promise of a timely arrival at work. At points north and west, in the relative countryside, suburban men and women shiver in trench coats and clutch cups of coffee and fistfuls of newspaper, watching their breath stain the morning as they await the trains that will shuttle them into the smack-dab center of the great hustle-bustle the city will become by nine o'clock.

At seven a.m. their urban counterparts, the Park Slope Earners, come streaming down the hill to swarm the northbound subway stop. Men in business suits talking on cell phones, women tottering on high heels, clutching briefcases and newspapers over their heads in the rain, listening – one ear cocked to the sky – for the rumble of the train they'll almost miss, flying down the stairs into the subterranean passages, hurling themselves through partially closed train doors, and earning a short, sweet taste of VICTORY, of triumph over the ones left behind, who are left with

no choice but to peacefully peruse newspapers in the dry tunnel while waiting eight minutes for the next train.

The mass exodus of businesspeople is offset by the influx of nannies and schoolkids storming up the hill. The southbound subway on the west side of the street expels a smaller stream of less well-dressed men and women heading to work in our neighborhood. Construction and road workers start up their tools, and the morning cacophony of saws, drills, and jackhammers fills the air. Up at Atlantic Street the traffic cops attempt to disentangle the flow where four major arteries knot together, in an intersection soon to be complicated by Forest City's development scheme. On Seventh Avenue in the afternoon, kids hired to disseminate Forest City's propaganda paper will be berated by neighborhood mothers and grandmothers who consider it their job to make sure these kids learn to *think*.

At ten a.m. the flow of commuters trickles to a halt. Ron, the florist across President Street, opens for business. The restaurant on the corner, Delicas del Carribe, fills its window with steam trays cradling meat pies, chicken, black-eyed peas and rice, and other, less recognizable dishes. The owner of the pizza place fills his display with hot pies, while berating his nephew for not working harder. Delivery boys clad in white aprons speed across our crowded road on bikes. The men from Family Car Service stand on the sidewalk at the end of the block, chatting the day away while they wait for calls. The possibly illegal fruit van pulls up in front of the construction site three blocks down, and sets out its table of pineapples, cider, stalks of sugar cane. The car-wash floods its corner, two blocks down, with soapy runoff, under the shadow of their flailing, 10-foot high inflated clown and the noise of his generator. The tire repair place three blocks north (and their affiliate immediately across the road) drag out their most effective signs: stacks of tires, piled high along the sidewalk. The usual knot of ten homeless men and a pit bull in a

sweatshirt and studded collar collects outside the food bank across Sackett, while employees from the food bank hose down the sidewalk and cart deliveries in through the cellar doors, all an hour before the place opens for the day. The Muslim men up by Atlantic set out folding tables full of socks and knit hats in front of Halal restaurants, their radios blaring news, music, and calls to prayer from halfway across the world.

At eleven a.m. the dry-cleaner arrives: the memory, the beating heart of our strip of Fourth Avenue. His business opens late, but he'll be standing at the counter, watching out over the street until nine o'clock at night, offering a nod or a wave to passersby, sauntering out to the sidewalk for a chat with acquaintances. If anything happens in the neighborhood, the dry-cleaner will know all about it in a matter of minutes. He's the one who phones 911 when the tangle of traffic collapses in accidents, then stands watch over the cleanup effort on the street. On the morning of my wedding, he spots my soon-to-be husband and I walking past on our way to the ceremony and shouts his congratulations with a huge grin and two thumbs up.

How different is the dry-cleaner from the gallery owner. The gallery owner purchased a storefront that could have been occupied by a good use, and made it his own personal gallery – a vanity project if ever there was one. He drags his aluminum lawn chair out onto the sidewalk on heavy summer nights and alternately wheedles and berates passersby, trying to get them into his gallery. Where the dry-cleaner is the soul of simplicity in contact, requiring no more than a nod and a smile, the gallery owner asks questions, expects clever answers. He is full of expectation, and easily disappointed. He violates the rhythms of the street, pokes holes in the fabric of privacy we all hold close, and it is a relief when his gallery fails and folds.

The dry-cleaner, the gallery-owner, the car service men, the pizza-parlor owner and his lazy nephew, the proprietor of the Spoken Word café – these are the guardians of our street.

Occasionally joined by the twin brothers who run the bodega, they stand on this block Fourth Avenue, a street that stretches from Flatbush (10 blocks to the north) all the way to the Verazzanno Bridge to the south, and by themselves create an atmosphere safe to live in. Fourth Avenue is a nowhere place, a street of car repair joints and gas stations, of subway entrances and six lanes of cars that is a true part of no neighborhood, but this small stretch of it, between Union and Carroll, manages to have a quasi-identity, a feeling of safety that comes from these men.

So the day passes, stretches on into evening, when the tides of commuters reverse their flows: the businesspeople come rushing back home, shedding suit jackets and neckties as they walk. Nannies and kids too young for school come rolling down out of the park where they've spent the day, heading home for supper. The tea house on Union Street exchanges its day-crowd of young, stay-at-home, stroller-toting mothers for the night-crowd of young professionals coming to get a drink at the bar and unwind to live jazz bands. Restaurants populate themselves with chattering up-and-comers. On Fourth Avenue, the Spoken Word café starts bleeding hip-hop into the night, and the proprietor passes the early hours of the evening on the street, chatting with the dry-cleaner who abandons his counter to watch the orange glow of the setting sun fade against the stony façade of the Brooklyn Lyceum. The Lyceum lights up with out-of-season Christmas lights and gathers a crowd on the steps, waiting and talking, clinking glasses and laughing before going in to see a movie or catch a show. The Kitty Cat Club above the auto repair place across the avenue lights up its neon signs and starts emitting the thumps and strains of rock-n-roll. Smells change, from bacon to garlic. Commuters flood by for hours, from five until nine, on foot and in cars, with headphones and cellphones, all of them on their way somewhere else. The homeless guy at the Hess gas station across Union Street offers marriage proposals to pretty young women in suits, who smile and just keep on walking. "That's a real

pretty smile you've got!" he shouts. "Let me see that smile again, one more time!" If the light keeps them waiting, they'll oblige.

Evening turns to night, and the sirens pick up. Foot traffic on the street lessens as most of the commuters arrive home. Car radios spew thumping bass into the night, and around ten p.m. the dry-cleaner heads home. The bodega stays open until one a.m., supplying beer and snacks, toilet paper and alka-seltzer to all comers, and a small knot of teenagers hangs out in front of it, listening to music still playing at the Spoken Word next door. In the apartments upstairs, attention turns mostly inward: while the guys in the apartment below ours start their nightly ritual of yelling obscenities, we all keep an ear out for crashes from the street. One night a man with a vendetta against a woman on the fourth floor smashes in her car windows with his feet; we all watch from our windows, ready to jump in if the destruction moves past the personal to jeopardize the street. Revelers flock to the Kitty Cat Club, and spill out onto the sidewalk, laughing and yelling, looking for cabs they will never find at this hour in Brooklyn. We go about our business with an ear to the street, until we let the sounds of traffic and sirens, music and laughter, shouted arguments and thumping bass lull us to sleep in the bright white glow of the streetlights.

The night crashes on around us until, at four a.m., the revelers go home.