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A Week in New York

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Day 1

A great start to New York—the plane has to circle Kennedy Airport for 50 minutes because no runway is available for us after the snowstorm. I look out the window and would like to be deeply moved by the thought: So that below—that’s New York.

It is evening and cloudy. I am sure I have never seen so many lights burning all at the same time. As I see one particularly bright streak, I think the word *Broadway*. But after twenty minutes of circling, light is just light. Not even the children are looking out the window.

My visa reveals that I have no right to immigrate. The passport official studies it for a long time. Then he asks me if I’m not really planning to stay. The tone in his voice makes clear he is saying: Come on, you can tell me—it’s just between us. It makes me happy that I can understand the meaning of his words immediately. I smile and shake my head: he has no cause for worry. In the very next moment I think: How can I claim to know that already? The customs official asks what written material I have brought with me. I repress the answer that it’s none of his business. I can tell by looking at him that he will

search my suitcase no matter what I say. I take the initiative to show him my manuscripts and a paperback edition of the Talmud that I intend to read in America. He looks at me benevolently, as if he would hardly have thought that of someone like me. Perhaps he is Jewish.

## Day 7

You come to a new city; you have heard many things about it beforehand; your head is filled with the judgments you have brought with you. You determine that each of your prejudices has validity. It's not really very hard—there's something to each one. You collect observations as if they were proofs. You want to show yourself how well you already know the city before you have even been there. You bring it off. The result is a lost week that otherwise might have been something.

On the last bus you ask yourself, how you got the idea you should drag yourself through the streets with a checklist, pencil in hand. Poverty, check. Racial problems, check. Crime, check. An irreproachably pointless row of headings. But why, you ask yourself, have you worked so steadfastly and incredibly hard on what has long since been demonstrated? Who assigned you this deathly boring job? Your conscience? Ridiculous. If you come here determined to see only the surface, the result is that you see hardly anything.

Now you are angry with yourself that you have not immersed yourself in this exciting city for even one second. That you never let yourself go where you had so much opportunity. It's not that you didn't see the opportunities. Every time you

saw one, you picked up the pace—you walked away. Without thinking it over, you thought: Where would that lead? And now you ask yourself: what would that have led to? In the most boring moments you kept your eyes wide open. The whole time you only wanted to see what everyone already knows—not what no one knows yet.

Suddenly you doubt your capacity for strong feeling. You imagine yourself as someone who steadfastly defends himself against surprise. Someone who calculates everything in advance and then tries to live so this advance calculation proves true.

Maybe I will come back to New York someday. That would be good. For now I take the bus to La Guardia Airport. I have a window seat and close my eyes as soon as there are black people to be seen, run-down streets, policemen, white people, advertising signs, traffic jams.

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