

Welcome, Democrats

N.Y. HOME COMPANION

By GARRISON KEILLOR



Keillor

The arrival of the Democrats this week hasn't made large ripples in my neighborhood, maybe because there are so many Democrats here already.

Democrats are just about all we have.

Where I live, on the Upper West Side, you couldn't find a Republican if your life depended on it.

(Thank goodness, the need for one has never arisen.)

New York absorbs big events, even national conventions, and doesn't get feverish, just as it swallows up all of us. This can be disheartening to a visitor from the part of the country I'm from, the area between the Hudson and Hollywood, and I worry about visitors, even Democrats, who goodness knows are as hardy as rhubarb.

I don't want people to be disappointed by my city.

I live on a street of brownstones, handsome enough to shoot Gene Kelly's rain dance in, though some of the brownstones are public housing.

At one end of the block are coops with uniformed doormen and at the other are a couple of big Housing Authority high rises.

The street is lined with valiant trees, and it is quiet, in the New York sense of the term, but when you come out the door in the morning you hear the distant hum and rattle, and it lifts your heart.

On my street you hear almost as much Spanish as English and you see women so beautiful and mysterious a man has to hold onto a parking meter and recover his breath.

The variety of street life is thrilling to the senses.

It didn't thrill Thoreau, but it's hard to trust Thoreau's judgment in these matters. He was a liberal, and we liberals tend to be standoffish and very righteous about moral issues in distant places. Street life doesn't encourage that; street life is all foreground.

Political correctness seems irrelevant here, with its preaching about multiculturalism — you walk out on the street and multiculturalism is there, walking toward you — and bigotry is highly impractical.

A motorist can afford to be rude and crude, but walking is a great civilizer. It stimulates tolerance.

You head downtown along Broadway, thronged like the Minnesota State Fair, hundreds of faces on every block, a nation of faces, conversations drifting past, phrases of love and irritation, pizza and hot pretzels in the air, boom box music, the soft whine of beggars, the subway rumble below, distant sirens, horns, car alarms, big headlines ("MADMAN BITES DOG").

Even I get excited by this, and I am a Midwesterner, bred for caution, trained not to talk to strangers.

And yet, New York inspires in me the romantic populism found in William Saroyan stories and the post-office murals by Thomas Hart Benton of sinewy men with sleeves rolled up.

I stroll along, smelling the burgers and the Szechuan coming across a knot of Haitians on the corner, very black people speaking French, which stuns me somehow, and then a woman whose empress profile I'll remember all day walks past; I turn, and she makes a face: Grow up.

You descend into the subway, a great institution that, like the Democratic Party, is often grieved over but still runs and is packed with people. The ads aren't for BMWs or ski resorts, they're for hemorrhoids and sore feet, bunions, bad skin, bad teeth, drug problems.

One for Tide detergent, with the phrase *blanquier tan blanco* ("whiter than white") — not such a useful phrase in New York but interesting to us of the Anglo minority.

It is crowded, of course, but don't be afraid. You are safer on the subway than in any country club in America, especially when it comes to the danger of corruption.

There is a powerful centrifugal force that wants to hurl us out into the countryside, into the Republican dream of a hobby farm with a giant satellite dish and a tiny wife named Trixie.

Don't go. Enjoy New York. Here, you get the vision of humanity that inspired Whitman and Dickens.

Republicans imagine us as a nation of Nelsons and Smiths, but we're all of humanity, a gorgeous crush, and there's no other city where you can see so much of America at once as right here.

Garrison Keillor is host of "The American Radio Company" and author, most recently, of "WLT: A Radio Romance." From *The New York Times*.