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Blackout: Electronic Attentat

H.W. Morton

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Scanned from original Chicago Solidarity pamphlet
This text deals with the North American blackout of November 9,
1965.

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“The lights went out and people were left to interact with each other.”

Lights dimmed in New York City at twilight nine months ago at 5:27 p.m. and stayed off in some areas until 9 a.m. the next morning. At its height an estimated 30,000,000 people in eight states and one Canadian province were affected.

Publisher's note

This delightful pamphlet is but one of many that we publish, each a precise excursion beyond a familiar frontier into an uncharted territory:

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the whole god-damned Pentagon will come down as local fallout, my urge to destroy is not quite that creative. What with the hot line konked out and despite the blithe “assurance” from the First Regional Army Air Defense Commander that all of the Army’s missile sites on the Eastern Coast are operative,” it was obviously a case of genocide continued on as usual—bring on the Dark Ages.

All of which serves to illustrate a final object lesson of the Blackout—the predictable, virtually automatic, responses of various members of society when confronted by crisis: soldiers fall back on their weapons; clergymen fall back on their prayers; doctors fall back on their antibiotics, bureaucrats fall back on their desks; and politicians fall back on their asses. But people fall back on one another, and in that fact must remain all the hopes—however minimal—for the survival of the human race.

Sidebar: Blackout Baby Boom

N.Y. Births Soar On 9-Month Anniversary

NEW YORK (AP) *The New York Times* said Wednesday that several large metropolitan hospitals reported sharp increases in births during the last 36 hours, precisely nine months after the great New York blackout of Nov. 9, 1965.

(Jimmy Breslin, in a special dispatch to the *Chicago Sun-Times* last Friday, predicted just such a by-product of the power failure.)

Hospitals in areas where lights were restored in two to three hours reported normal birth rates, the newspaper said. But some hospitals in areas where lights remained off all night reported increases of more than 100 per cent, it added.

Sociologists and obstetricians were reluctant to tie the two events together, the *Times* said in reporting the results of its survey. It did quote sociologist Paul Siegel, who is conducting a study of the blackout’s impact, as saying:

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Hewetson pointed out (ibid.): "...far from requiring a coercive authority to compel them to act for the common good, men behave in a social way because it is their nature to do so, because sociableness is an instinct which they have inherited from their remotest evolutionary ancestors... without their inherent tendency to mutual aid they could never have survived at all in the evolutionary struggle for existence."

Such then might be the blackout's confirmation of Kropotkin, but what reinforcement does it offer Bakunin? Actually a good deal, but I'll cite only one case—a frequently distorted quotation which Max Nettlau once described as "a clarion call for revolution in the widest sense." Written in 1842, some 20 years before Bakunin became an anarchist, in fact before he could even be considered a conscious revolutionary, it appeared at the conclusion of an article entitled "Reaction in Germany," under the pseudonym Jules Elysard: "The urge to destroy is a creative urge." Bakunin's detractors, both in and out of the anarchist movement, invariably swoop down like vultures on that line. However, Bakuninists might suffer less dismay (and, let's face it embarrassment) if they viewed it in context with a heart-warming article which appeared in the Financial Section of the N.Y. *Post* the day after the blackout: "Without Power, Computers Died and Wall St. Stopped."

"Security—it's in your hands"

On the other hand, if the blackout provided all sorts of verification for decentralists, anarchists, Kropotniks, and Bakuninists, what comfort did it offer to pacifists? The answer is, damn little. As both James Wechsler (N.Y. *Post*) and Brad Lyttle (*Peace News*) pointed out, the same sort of unfathomable but infallible electronic technology which blacked out 30 million of us temporarily is exactly what we're relying on to prevent an accidental World War III blacking out 3 billion of us permanently! Small solace to me is the fact that

peated everywhere throughout the blacked-out area. It was solidarity, ingenuity, lack of hysteria, consideration, etc. etc. and little or no government. In Toronto, Ontario, businessmen directed traffic, and in the process unsnarled the city's all-time record traffic jam. Among other things all the streetcars and trolley buses had stopped dead. In Albany, New York, teenagers with transistor radios went from house to house advising residents to turn off electric appliances. In Burlington, Vermont, 200 people hurried with flashlights to the local hospital in answer to a radio plea which later turned out to be a prank. In Springfield, Vermont a barber finished trimming a customer's hair by the headlights a motorist aimed in his front window. All over the stricken territory civilians patrolled areas, directed traffic, and maintained order. Included among all these civilian volunteers would have to be the contingent of Boston gendarmes who rushed out of the Policeman's Ball dressed in tuxedos. Devoid of badge, uniform, and gun these were on identical footing with the students from nearby Boston University who also pitched in.

“The urge to destroy is a creative urge”

Incident after incident offered irrefutable proof that society can function without the implicit threats of force and violence which constitute the state. There was probably more freedom from law, however temporary, in that blacked-out 80,000 square-mile area than there has been at any time since it was originally stolen from murdered and/or defrauded Indians. And it yielded compelling evidence of anarchic theories. As Kropotkin once stated (quoted in *Anarchy* 55): “We are not afraid to say ‘Do what you will; not as you will;’ because we are persuaded that the great majority of mankind, in proportion to their degree of enlightenment, and the completeness with which they free themselves from the existing fetters, will behave and act always in a direction useful to society.” And, as John

On November 9, 1965, shortly after 5:00 P.M. e.s.t. at the Sir Adam Beck No. 2 Distribution Plant at Queenston Ontario, a little four-inch-square electric relay took it upon itself to illuminate a number of anarchist principles. Indeed, in doing so it selected a method which in and of itself is anarchistic: direct action. And far be it from anyone to accuse this nihilistic little relay of being a parliamentarian, although it was described in a good many other terms including the *New York Times*' brilliant understatement, “improperly functioning.” Certainly it was far and away the all-time world's champion blown fuse, in that it blacked out 80,000 square miles of the U.S. and Canada, leaving about 30,000,000 people in total darkness. This was sort of an electronic attentat—and on a scale one is hard put to overlook. Yet shining through the darkness like a beacon were such anarchist truisms as decentralism, mutual aid, direct action, and the like.

The first of these, decentralism, is so obvious but radical a solution that it was barely mentioned at all. On the day following the blackout, the *N.Y. Times* (“all the news that's fit to print backwards”) ran an article entitled: “A Nationwide Grid Termed a Solution.” Herein they averred, “There is no question that last night's power failure furthered the cause of connecting all the power systems in the country into one grid, or network.” (sic. sic. sic.) And later when the Federal Power Commission released its official report, the worthy gentlemen “stated flatly that more, rather than fewer, interconnectors between power systems in different areas were needed to provide reliable electrical service.” (*Times*, Dec. 7, 1965) There we have the quintessence of the bureaucratic mind: with an 80,000 square mile area at the mercy of a four-inch relay, and the best they can come up with is more centralization. One-sixth of the country plus thirty mega-victims aren't enough, they want to offer it More hostages year by year, until by 1984 it's clutching the whole continent by the scrotum.

In fairness, the *N.Y. Times* in its coverage of the FPC report did mention in passing that, “Since the blackout there have been some

assertions in Congress and elsewhere that the interconnector system itself is a bad idea, inasmuch as it permits the wide spreading of power failures. Proposals have been made for the reversal of the nationwide trend toward such intertying..." However so far as the FPC was concerned, "The prime lesson of the blackout is that the utility industry must strive not merely for good but for virtually perfect service." If nothing else this qualifies as the platitude of the year. Politicians are priceless.

As soon as their respective public relations departments could gather their wits together in the darkness, President Johnson, Governor Rockefeller, and Mayor Wagner all spoke out fearlessly against blackouts. The Father, the Son, and the Unwholesome Ghost each ordered an immediate investigation, although protocol required that they be in decreasing order of magnitude and melodrama. *Newsweek* (Nov. 22, 1965) described Johnson, presumably trying to achieve that lantern-jawed hero effect despite an unfortunately chinless physiognomy, as he "fired a memo to Federal Power Commission Chairman Joseph Swidler, ordering a full-scale inquiry into why the blackout had happened—and how another could be prevented." Notice they invariably "order," they never request. Personally I'm not quite certain what sort of weapons are used to "fire" memos, but I suppose as an anarcho-pacifist I'm obliged to oppose them. Be that as it may, Rockefeller and Wagner fired off orders for proportionately smaller investigations, but with palpably larger chins.

J. Adled Hoocher

Naturally J. Adled Hoocher leaped into the act forthwith. *Newsweek* had his relentless FBI agents fanning out "to prowling the grid for clues." They failed miserably in their search—not one volume of Das Kapital was unearthed.

even a hair shirt for warmth, and worst of all, no restrooms. Msgr. McGovern later confessed, "We've been sending people over to the New Western Hotel for 80 years," which tends to confirm something many of us have long suspected: God's up shit creek.

Of far more serious import was the situation in hospitals, but here too people improvised brilliantly in the emergency. At Bellevue a delicate cornea transplant was under way when the lights went out, but it was successfully completed by battery-operated flood-lights. At St. John's, under similar conditions, emergency surgery was performed on two people whose spleens had been ruptured in the previously mentioned bus accident. In another hospital a five-hour craniotomy was performed by makeshift light. Final reports indicated at least five dozen babies delivered by candle or otherwise. One man died tragically in the emergency room at Flushing Hospital. He had been in an automobile accident prior to the blackout and was already under surgery when the lights went out. Only two other deaths in New York City were attributed directly to the blackout: one man suffered a heart attack from climbing ten flights of stairs, and a second fell down a stairway and struck his head. Injuries, of course, were much more common: at the emergency ward of Bellevue alone, 145: patients were treated for blackout injuries—broken arms or legs from falls, car accident victims, and some heart cases. Police, firemen, and volunteers rushed dry ice to the city's hospitals to keep stored blood from spoiling, whereas a distress call from St. Vincent's brought forth thirty volunteers from a Greenwich Village coffee house to hand-pump iron lungs.

Revolution Spreads

Although New York offered perhaps the most spectacular, and in view of its well-deserved reputation for ruthless competition, the most unexpected examples of mutual aid, the same pattern was re-

road stations, airline terminals and churches sheltered countless thousands.

The garrison state

The 34th St. Armory alone accommodated 1,500 refugees, in offering wooden chairs and what illumination could be furnished from the headlights of a few jeeps parked in the middle of the drill floor. For some unexplained reason no cots were available. Naturally Rockefeller had immediately called out the National Guard, which is always a good safe ploy for masking gubernatorial inutility. According to the *NY Post* the Guardsmen were armed with rifles, “unloaded but impressive.” To complete the farce, they wore packs containing ponchos and gas masks, perhaps out of fear that someone would fart. The Guard’s major contribution seems to have been scouring the area around 34th St. and Park Ave. until 1:30 A.M.—a full eight hours after the attentat!—at which point they finally came up with coffee and French bread for the besieged. Compare this forlorn, dilatory effort on the part of the military to the ingenuity of the prostitutes in their quest for bread. *Life Magazine* pointed out that these ladies “were among the first to procure flashlights,” indicating that the yen is still mightier than the sword.

At the Central Commercial High School, a double-session school, the second session runs from 12:30 to 5:50 P.M. Thus there were 1,000 students being subjected to obfuscation when the blackout struck. Some 400 of these left during the evening as parents arrived to pick them up, but the school officials kept the other 600 in the classrooms all night. These joked, sang, and later put their heads on their desks and slept—readily taking the crisis in stride. Of course they were nowhere near as comfortable as the lucky ones who spent the night cradled in luxurious barber chairs, but they were infinitely better off than the hundreds who sought sanctuary in St. Patrick’s Cathedral. These were huddled in the pews without

Actually I don’t have anything against Hoover, it’s just that I wouldn’t want him to marry my brother.

At any rate the net result of all these investigations was the aforementioned FPC report which observed that this astronomical fiasco “would not have occurred if all the electric power systems involved had been following more careful operating practices.” The *N.Y. Times* reported this profundity with a straight face. I have a friend who insists that the entire paper is written tongue in cheek. Someday I expect a page of the *Times* to waft by the mushroom cloud, a few of whose particles is me. Said page will contain an august report that “World War III would not have occurred if all the political systems involved had been following more careful operating practices.”

Lest the impression be conveyed that federal commissions do nothing but hide in the safety of platitudes, generalities and kindred inanities, it must be conceded that this is only 95% true. The PC-report included a few specific suggestions, all along the lines of decentralization—thereby unwittingly contradicting their main thesis. Numbered among these were alternate power sources for airports, bridges and tunnels, and if no separate power system could be devised for the subways, then at least an evacuation scheme. Not to be outdone, the NY City investigators pointed out that they had been studying auxiliary power not only for subways but also for hospitals. My own particular favorite, however, was the recommendation that manual cranks be installed on elevators. As a diehard neo-Luddite I side with man against the machine “automatically.” Hence the concept of Damoclean hand levers in luxurious elevators as constant harbingers of forthcoming electronic attentats is delightful imagery. The only suggestion I’d care to add is the possibility of a mass homestead movement with Candles.

Mutha!

When one turns to the geographic achievements of our “improperly functioning” relay one is struck anew with the merits of decentralization. Consistently the less populated the area, the quicker electric Service was restored. Thus in the map the *Times* printed of What was euphemistically called “outage,” there were four gradations of severity: The least of these, anything from a momentary blackout to 15 minutes duration, embraced northern New York and most of New Hampshire. The next level, ranging from 15 Minutes to 3 hours, included Ontario, Long Island, and the southern tip of New York. In the third category, running from 3 to 8 hours, were most of the states of New York and Vermont, as well as the entire states of Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island. Finally, New York City itself was blacked out the longest of all: 8 to 13 hours. Thus the final score was all or parts of nine states, two Canadian provinces, plus the goddamned Moscow hotline, all “outaged” by a four-inch relay in some screwy place I never heard of in my life—Queenston, Ontario?? Maybe 150 years from now they’ll hold a Sesquicentennial there in honor of the improperest motherfunctioner that ever goofed.

Nevertheless, ignoring logic as only a reactionary can do, the *U.S. News and World Report* (Nov. 22, 1965) blithely presented the following question and answer:

“Q. If the US had a national power network, all interconnected as the Government has advocated, could a blackout spread to the whole country?”

A. Experts say no. In part, they rely on finding more effective safety devices.” Only a red rat could condemn centralization after that.

Eat

Unfortunately, utopian free access was much less prevalent in the category of food than it was in that of shelter. Nevertheless one meat market in Brooklyn donated a whole pig to a neighboring convent, thereby providing roast pork snacks to everybody for blocks around. Two numerically named restaurants, 21 and Four Seasons, adopted a policy dangerously akin to From Each according to His Ability; To each according to his need. 21 passed out steak sandwiches and free drinks without limit, while Four Seasons ladled out free soup. Fully to appreciate the enormity of this, reflect on the following: in 1960, when prices presumably were lower, an acquaintance of mine told me that two friends of his (notice I’m three stages removed) went to Four Seasons for luncheon. Including drinks and tip it cost them nearly \$60 while the band played “Nearer my Veblen to Thee.” My wife and I didn’t happen to go there that night so we missed out on the free soup, but we did enjoy knishes by candlelight at our own expense in a nearby delicatessen. Many other restaurants, although they didn’t give away food, stayed open all night to provide free shelter.

Most downtown offices close at 5:00 P.M. so they were empty when the blackout struck, but those still occupied did whatever they could. Revlon, for example, gave its girls couches in the executive offices and then told them to take the following day off. One of their secretaries, stuck on the 27th floor, ate crabmeat and graham cracker sandwiches, and described her experience with a wistful, “I had a great time.” Whether she was alluding to the crabmeat or the couches was not made clear.

All sorts of institutions opened their doors, or in some instances dropped their gangways, as a free public service during the emergency. Final estimates included well over 400 people who had been put up for the night in staterooms of ships in port when the lights went out. Armories were thrown open to all comers, while rail-

gourmet department and served to shoppers and employees; 500 stayed there overnight, evidently being unable to tear themselves away from all that caviar. Bloomingdales turned over its home furnishings department to strandeers—one woman slept on an \$800 sofa and then capped it off by having its staff serve breakfast to everyone the next morning. Fina Company had a combination sales meeting and dinner scheduled for that evening, but they catered it to customers instead. Bonwit Teller chartered two buses to get its employees home, and suggested that they hold hands leaving the store so that none would get lost. Indicative of the prevailing mood was the fact that the employees danced out of the store together because “someone thought it would be fun.” Meanwhile 40 people were bedded down for the night in the showroom of the Simmons Mattress Company.

Similarly the city’s hotels came through in grand style. The Commodore set up 150 cots in a banquet room. Both the Roosevelt and the Algonquin switched elderly guests and those with heart conditions to the lower floors. At the Stanhope the manager gave up his own room, and an assistant manager carried a crippled woman up to the 16th floor. On arrival she said, “Now I’d like a glass of water,” so he procured one. At the Statler Hilton two bellmen carried a crippled guest to the 7th floor, but it was not reported what his needs were on arrival. The Americana passed out blankets and pillows to the 200 occupants of its plush lobby—most of the other hotels merely provided free space. The Sheraton-Atlantic, whose lobby was occupied by some 2,000 people, considered the evening somewhat less than a total loss, because as one manager pointed out, “The bar is doing a land-office business.” That hotel’s report seemed typical: 99% of the people were “terrific” but a few guests tried to sublet their rooms at double the rate.

Mutual Aid

On the individual level, however (and what else should anarchists consider), we found people acting so beautifully that even Kropotkin might have been impressed. Naturally, there were instances of people acting like capitalists—selling candles at \$1.50 each, charging up to \$50 for a taxicab ride, gouging pounds of flesh for flashlights, etc. However, as *Newsweek* (November 11, 1965) pointed out, the “real keynote” was struck by a Negro cleaning woman who led a Manhattan career girl up ten flights of stairs to her apartment, gave her two candles, and then waved away a \$5 tip. “It’s OK, honey. Tonight everyone helps everyone.”

Somehow it seemed as if the whole crazy city had read *Mutual Aid* the night before the blackout. Remember, New York is notorious for being this planet’s biggest cut-throat rat-race. Furthermore it was not only the longest hit by the blackout, but also it was by far the most vulnerable. The blackout struck in the middle of the rush hour, hence there were probably 800,000 people stranded in subways and/or subway trains when the power failed. Another 100,000 were stranded waiting for commuter trains. Thousands more were trapped on the upper floors of skyscrapers. But indubitably the worst off were the hundreds upon hundreds who were trapped in elevators. Yet there was no panic! Everyone was calm and patient. Neither were there any crime waves or looting—of course for this we have to thank the fact that the police were kept too busy with rescue work and other emergency activities. It was estimated that \$100,000,000 was lost in revenue and certainly one of the hardest hit business interests was the New York Police Force. Therefore I have to give them credit for coming through in the pinch, although several cops of the 24th Precinct failed to appreciate my concern when I walked by in the darkness explaining to my companions in stentorian tones of commiseration that the poor guys were beating their brains out and “all on straight salary for a change.” (The 24th Precinct specializes in shooting 14-year-

old Puerto Ricans.) All in all some 5,000 off-duty policemen were called up to join the 7,000 already on duty. The Fire Department brought in their off-duty personnel also.

Yet although these men all performed beautifully at tasks of supererogation, the real stars of the show were the people. Piecing together various contemporary reports (cf. *Life*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *N.Y. Times* and *N.Y. Post*) many people actually enjoyed the situation. There was drinking, singing, and necking in the streets. Parties of Frenchmen and U.S. Southerners stuck on the 86th floor observation roof of the Empire State Building chorused each other alternately with La Marseillaise and Dixie, though how many hours they kept this up was not reported. A church sexton handed out free votive candles—even God lost money—while a blind woman led passengers out of a subway station. One 19-year-old girl said, “They should do this more often: everyone is much more friendly... It’s a big community again—people have time to stop and talk.”

Volunteers directed traffic with flashlights and handkerchiefs: Some transistor radio listeners pitched in to report on developments and incidents so that helpful information could be shared with everyone else. Drivers shared cars with pedestrians. People quietly queued up at pay telephones, restaurants, and saloons. They gathered on street corners to listen together to portable radios. One shoeshine boy completed his task by his customer’s matches.

“That old bitch”

There was incident upon incident: the whole situation was fantastic. *Time* later mentioned a “crisis-born spirit of camaraderie and exhilaration” and a very prevalent view was that “it brought out the best in people. Of course the fact is that our authoritarian social system cannot help but bring out the worst in people,

must be viewed in context with the fact that his was only one out of 3500 buses operating under these weird conditions.

Somewhere along the line a subway motorman found himself facing charges of rape for flashing a badge and leading a young lady to the ostensible safety of his room. Yet later in court he contended that on any number of previous occasions he had led the same young lady to a similar lair to similarly lay her, so who knows... But progressing from the debatably to the unquestionably false alarms, we find that the Fire Department reported a much higher incidence than usual: 227 rather than the typical 50. This is totally irreconcilable with anarchist theory, so I’ve decided not to mention it at all.

The great sleep-in

Easily offsetting those relatively few human beings who acted like capitalists were the many capitalists who acted like human beings. For example many department stores flirted with free access for the evening. Macy’s played host to an estimated 5,000 customers and employees for the night—inviting one and all to make themselves comfortable, and serving them all coffee, sandwiches, cookies and candy. Needless to say, the furniture department on the ninth floor was the optimum spot for comfort. Meanwhile, across the street Gimbels, whom Macy’s adamantly refuses to tell, was featuring a guitar-playing salesman for the entertainment of its customer/guests. One of the songs they reportedly joined in on was the old wartime favorite “When the Lights Go On again All Over the World.” Evidently no one was familiar with “We Shall Overcome.” Lord and Taylor’s turned over its entire second floor to customers for the duration of the blackout, while B. Altman’s turned over its first. Altman’s, incidentally, has its own power generator, so there was some light by which to enjoy the caviar and specially blended coffee which were among the imported delicacies provided by the

waited calmly in line at the bus stops, with no pushing or shoving. Nobody seemed to take advantage of the confusion to avoid paying fares, although some passengers couldn't have paid if they'd tried—they were riding on the rear bumpers. Bus drivers themselves were inordinately accommodating, calling out each stop as they approached. In New York this comes under the heading of *Mirabile Dictu*. At the same time, dozens of private automobiles were loading up at every intersection with absolute strangers.

Crime by candlelight

On the other hand, all was not sweetness and light during the darkness. Some people acted like capitalists, i.e. they capitalized on others' vulnerability. About 100 windows were smashed in, and about 41 looters were arrested (none in blue uniform). All told perhaps a dozen stores were looted, which is absolutely negligible in a city of over eight million. Even Police Commissioner Broderick conceded that both the crime and the casualty rates for the night were far below normal. (So who needs him??) One enterprising gunman held up a rare-coin dealer by the flickering light of the shop's only candle—a touching vignette to be sure. There were a total of 65 persons arrested for burglary, larceny, or felonious assault—as opposed to typical 380 for a comparable sixteen-hour stretch. The sum total of arrests for all crimes was only 25% of what it would have been during an ordinary night. There were very few shoplifters reported, which is nothing short of miraculous considering the open house policy of the department stores (cf. *infra*.) Moreover, there were only 33 vehicle accidents involving injuries, and 44 involving property damage—and this is the world's largest city, completely devoid of traffic lights!!! There was one bus that plowed into a crowd of people in Queens, knocking down 38 persons, some of whom were seriously injured. The driver—evidently in complete consternation—jumped out and fled. Yet his actions

hence its removal—and bear in mind that the state had well-nigh disappeared—merely allowed them to act as free human beings. After the blackout various politicians, officials and kindred parasites delivered encomia to the splendid behavior of their “fellow citizens,” never realizing how completely superfluous this splendid behavior proved their own functions to be. Somehow or other the ruling class is incredibly fortunate: people often see through individual leaders, but rarely through leadership *per se*. One woman said that she had received “so many singular courtesies” during the power failure that her “faith in mankind had been restored.” Tragically she didn't say she had received so many that her faith in force-propped authority had been lost. Yet that power failure was nearly a power vacuum—we were easily closer to a true anarchy for those few hours than anything most of us will ever be lucky enough to see again. Incidentally, the Statue of Liberty, because it draws its current from New Jersey, remained lighted throughout the blackout. For the first time in her life “that old bitch,” as one of her would-be bombers described her, was almost telling the truth.

To some extent there was a Dionysian quality reminding one observer of VE or VJ Day “when everybody loved everybody.” Another commented on “the same air of revelry that often accompanies a heavy snowstorm.” A lawyer in his 32nd floor office said, “first we just sat around having drinks. Now we're having a séance to communicate with the spirit that caused this bliss. We Could have walked down, but it's about 600 steps, so we're staying, and we're all getting to know each other.” Someone else confessed, “It's a big pain and all, but I sort of hate to see it over. Tomorrow will be just another working day.” But the following day, and several thereafter, there was continued élan as people exchanged anecdotes of courage, kindness and adventure. There was something to talk about and we were impressed by one another. Cab drivers, waitresses, secretaries, truck drivers, grandmothers, teenagers, lawyers, and bellhops interviewed by the *N.Y. Post* all remarked on the “calm, cheerful, considerate attitude the

majority of people maintained.” Yet by way of contrast, there were the inevitable exceptions: an elderly woman paused diffidently trying to cross Fifth Avenue and instantly acquired a four-man escort; meanwhile a panhandler continued to intercept passers-by, concentrating on his own version of mutual aid.

The underworld

Naturally the transportation hang-up, vertical as well as linear, posed the biggest problem. There were 600 stalled subway trains containing some 800,000 commuters, hundreds of whom were trapped for as long as 8 hours, and 60 of whom stayed on for over 14 hours. (Compare this situation to the one obtaining in Boston where subways continued full service as usual, including lighted stations. They operate on an independent, i.e. decentralized source of power.) Furthermore in New York City there were hundreds of elevators stalled between floors in apartment and office buildings, which meant several thousand additional victims requiring rescue.

Nonetheless even in these untoward circumstances the leitmotif was solidarity. As one housewife put it after a six-hour stay in a subway car, “I never thought New Yorkers could be that way. I mean everybody seemed to lose his anger.” In one car a passenger was leading people in Calypso songs and hand clapping. Couples were dancing when the conductor arrived to lead them out an emergency stairwell to the surface. The universal report was that there was no panic. As one woman said, “Our conductor would pop in every once in a while and ask, ‘How’s everybody?’ and everybody would say, ‘Fine.’ We really weren’t worried at all.” Some good samaritans left one train and walked along catwalks to find emergency exits, but then, instead of going safely home, they returned to lead their fellow passengers out. On other trains, talented victims entertained their fellows: in one car there was a tenor; in another a harmonica player; but the piece de resistance was a bag-

piper. Many cars featured communal singing. The most common thing, however, was light conversation interspersed with sardonic humor. Men gave up their seats to ladies who frequently offered them back. In one car a woman fainted but word was transmitted from person to person until someone was located with smelling salts. Thereupon these were passed back up hand to hand.

Those who had long waits on their hands exchanged whatever comestibles they had in pockets or pocketbooks; peanuts, wild cherry drops, assorted goodies, or even antacid tablets. One group shared a combination of doughnuts and salami which had been sliced with a nail file. At midnite the Transit Authority sent in food to those who hadn’t yet been extricated. The food bearers were greeted with a tableau of people sleeping with their arms draped about other people who had been complete strangers five hours previously, and nary a cop in sight!!!

Sex & the elevator

Meanwhile those unfortunates trapped in elevators—96 in the Empire State Building alone—were enduring their plight with the same sort of equanimity exhibited in the subways. Here too the people entertained one another with improvised games, such as the unlikeliest partners for stalled elevators. This was readily won with the combination of Defense Secretary Macnamara and a draft card burner. In an elevator in the RCA Building one gentleman gave a course in Yoga positions. When firemen chopped their way into one immobilized car, they asked: “Are there any pregnant women in here?” They were answered: “We’ve hardly even met.”

Surface transportation reflected the same sort of cooperation and solidarity that the crisis had brought out below and above group level. Even though the Transit Authority was running 3,500 of its 4,000 buses it could barely make a dent. Therefore countless thousands hiked home across the bridges or up the avenues. Others