

America The Surprising



The Iroquois hotel, New York, 2020 (Photo Jim.henderson)

On the coldest night I had ever known, I'd checked into the Iroquois hotel, just a block or two from Times Square. I was elated to be here, my dream since I was a small boy.

But when I told the receptionist I'd like dinner, he shook his head mournfully: "The restaurant's closed. It's Sunday." I know from Frank Sinatra that this is a city that never sleeps but it was news to me that it doesn't eat either.

The street in front of the hotel was black and deserted. I had to try, however, so putting on every layer of clothing that would fit, I stepped outside. Almost immediately I caught a glimpse of light in a window on the corner. "That's it," I said out loud. Deflatingly, it turned out to be an office that had left a light on. But now another light became visible and I went there (another office! didn't these people know you had to turn off lights you weren't using?) and, like a ship going from lighthouse to lighthouse, I went to yet another and (oh, joy) it was an International House of Pancakes, every table

empty. To this day every time I see an IHOP I feel again that thrill of discovery.

“Are you sure a halfstack will be enough?” I asked the waiter, “I’m very hungry.” “It’ll do you,” he replied reassuringly (another surprise: wasn’t this the land of the slick salesman?) and within moments he delivered what, to my just-off-the-banana-boat-eyes, looked like the tower of Pisa, the maple syrup available in unlimited amounts, the price less than it would have been in London and a waiter who sat with me and bantered good-naturedly.

“What a generous, warm-hearted and welcoming country,” I thought and after 52 years my gratitude is undiminished.

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