

What's Up America?

When my sister and I landed at JFK Airport in New York one mid November morning we were filled with excitement. We couldn't wait to experience the fastness and exhilaration of one of the best known cities in the world, and one that never sleeps.

As we were on a tight budget we decided to catch a bus to Central Station and from there we would walk to our hotel, which wasn't far from the bus station.

After collecting our luggage and securing it to our trolleys we headed to the lift to go to ground level. We noticed an athletic looking African American male following us to the lift. Once the lift doors closed he asked us where we were staying. His forward and almost aggressive manner made us uneasy.

I answered by saying we were staying in a hotel nearby but didn't mention the name. He demanded to know where we were staying which made us even more uncomfortable.

As soon as the lift doors opened he grabbed my trolley and started walking away with it. I looked at my sister who was as stunned as I was and then I rushed after the man who was absconding with my luggage.

I grabbed hold of the trolley and forced him to stop. He told me we would not make it to our hotel unaccompanied and that he would take us there, ensuring our safety.

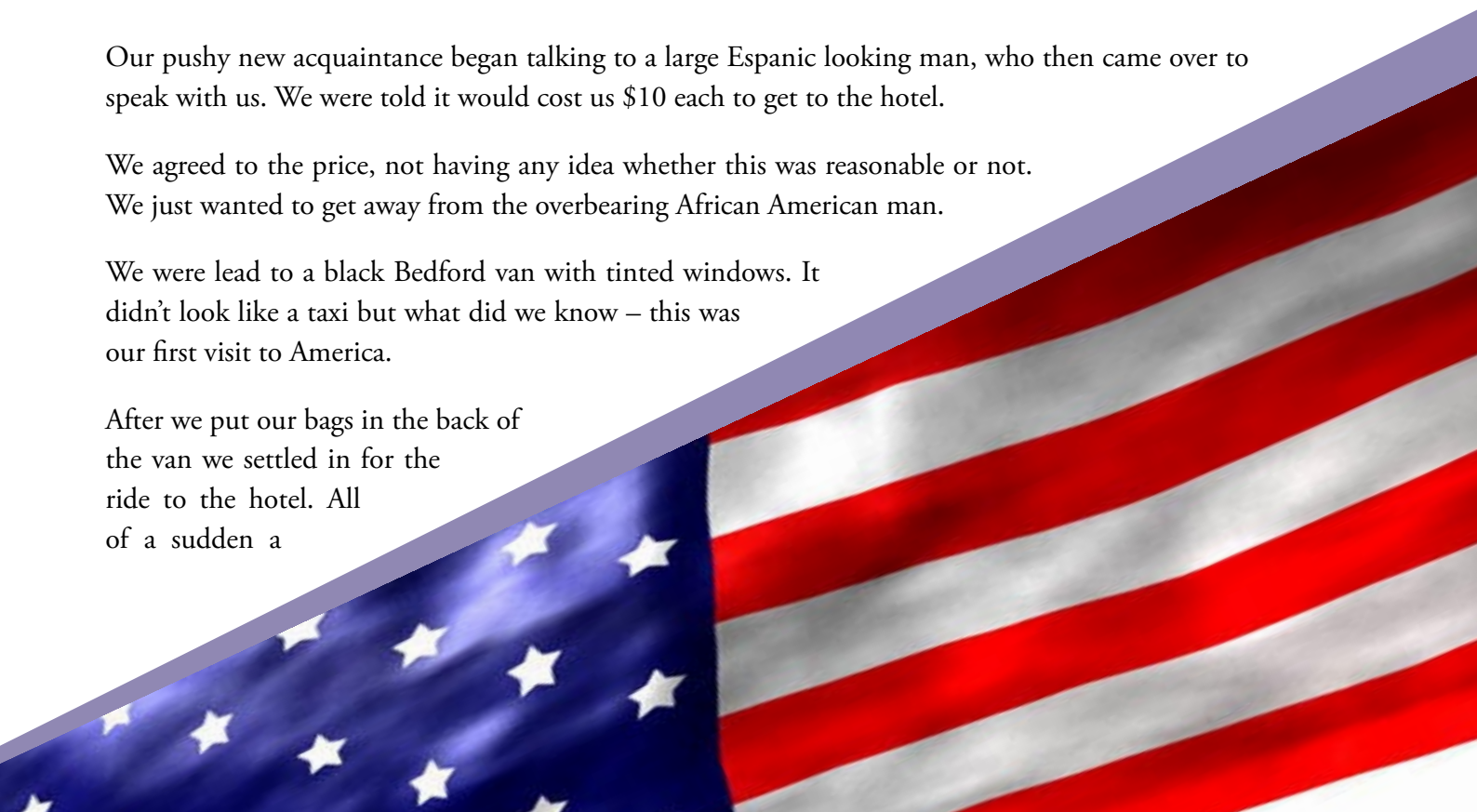
I told him we were not going to go with him. I said we had decided to catch a taxi. He told us he would find us a cab and directed us outside where the taxi rank was.

Our pushy new acquaintance began talking to a large Espanic looking man, who then came over to speak with us. We were told it would cost us \$10 each to get to the hotel.

We agreed to the price, not having any idea whether this was reasonable or not. We just wanted to get away from the overbearing African American man.

We were lead to a black Bedford van with tinted windows. It didn't look like a taxi but what did we know – this was our first visit to America.

After we put our bags in the back of the van we settled in for the ride to the hotel. All of a sudden a



policeman with a baton came over to the driver's side of the vehicle and demanded to know what the van was doing in a taxi rank – he then hit the car with the baton and bellowed at the driver to move the vehicle.

It was at that moment we realized we were not in a taxi.

Sitting next to the driver was a smaller man who didn't speak to us. The African American tried to get into the front seat but the guy in the passenger's seat wouldn't let him in. The African American kept insisting he be allowed to accompany us to the hotel so he could collect his tip.

The van started to drive off with the African American holding on to the open door still trying to muscle his way in. As the vehicle started to accelerate the African American began running beside the van. Eventually he wasn't able to hold on any longer and he fell to the ground and rolled away.

My sister and I were too disturbed to speak – we just looked at each other wondering what our fate would be.

Thankfully we made it to the hotel in one piece and when we told the hotel's security guard what had happened he said we were lucky the men in the Bedford van with tinted windows did not harm or rob us.

We told him we were interested in getting something to eat after we freshened up and could he recommend a cheap restaurant. He warned us not to walk around at night, saying we could be raped or killed. We decided to stay in that night.

During our time in New York we were constantly on guard and we only traveled on the subway in daylight hours. We were also upset to see so many beggars and homeless people.

During an organized city tour we went on we stopped off at a public toilet where there lived a disheveled elderly bag lady with a trolley.

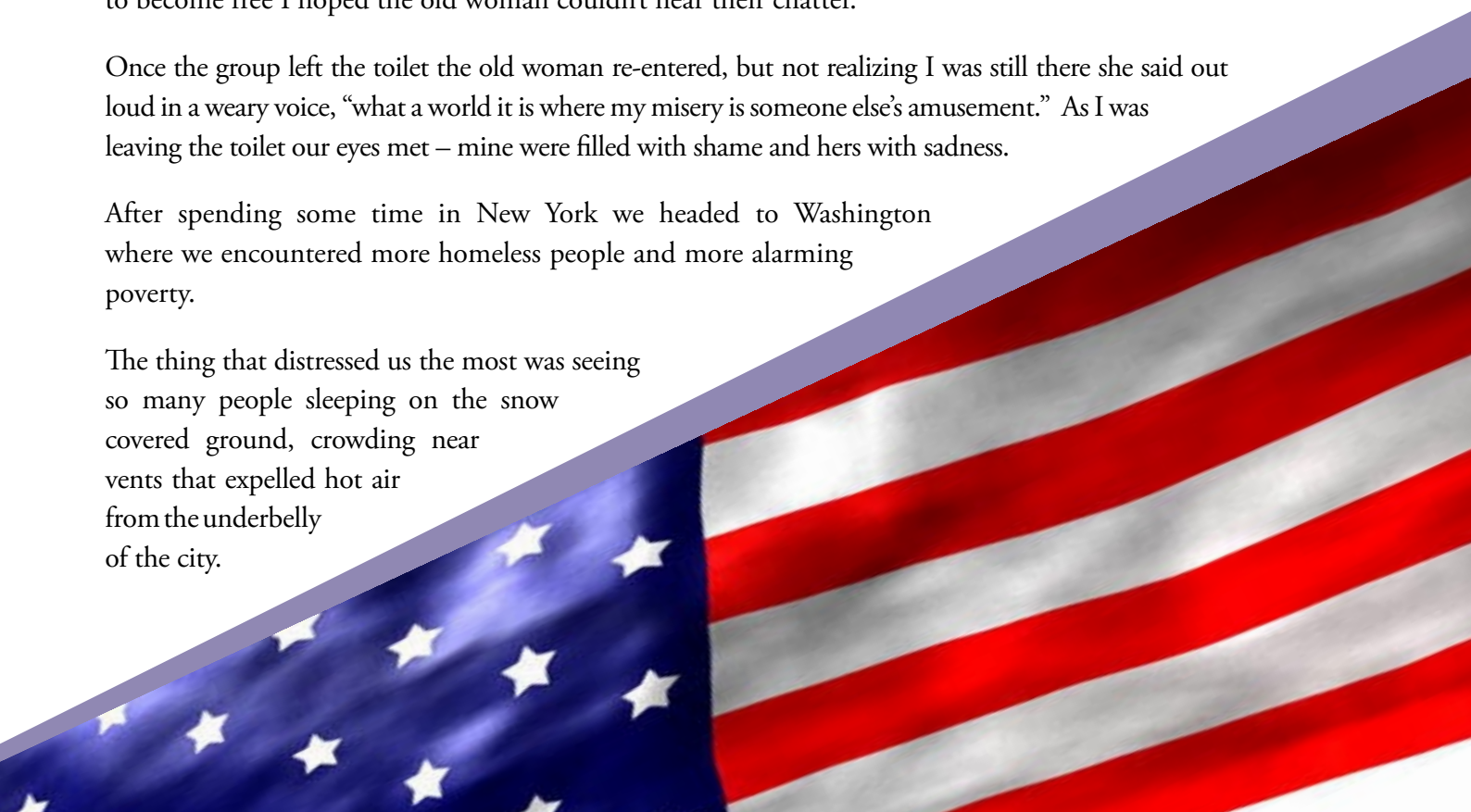
Once our group entered the toilet the homeless woman took her things outside where she was surrounded by birds – they obviously knew her well.

The ladies in our group thought it was humorous to see someone living in a toilet, and as I waited for a cubicle to become free I hoped the old woman couldn't hear their chatter.

Once the group left the toilet the old woman re-entered, but not realizing I was still there she said out loud in a weary voice, "what a world it is where my misery is someone else's amusement." As I was leaving the toilet our eyes met – mine were filled with shame and hers with sadness.

After spending some time in New York we headed to Washington where we encountered more homeless people and more alarming poverty.

The thing that distressed us the most was seeing so many people sleeping on the snow covered ground, crowding near vents that expelled hot air from the underbelly of the city.



We visited some amazing monuments honouring America's great past leaders, but the most memorable experience was visiting the FBI Headquarters.

To gain access to the FBI building we had to go through a metal detector and in 1989 this was a new experience for two young women from Australia who had never encountered this level of security before.

Once inside, we joined a small group of other visitors and were escorted around the facility by a friendly FBI agent.

We were taken to the espionage room where we saw some amazing surveillance items, such as miniature cameras camouflaged in all sorts of unsuspecting objects, and listening devices concealed in various items, including coins.

It was amazing to think such things were in existence and used to spy on criminals and foreign agents. It felt like I was in a James Bond movie but it was real life.

The agent proudly showed us the FBI's gun collection. He told us it was the biggest gun collection in the world, with around 5,000 weapons. The collection's prized possession was a 1920's walking stick that doubled as a gun.

The display was behind thick glass and the weapons were positioned on a revolving conveyor belt which just kept going round and round.

We were also taken to a display that housed items confiscated from people convicted of crimes. The items were commandeered because the justice system believed they were obtained through criminal activity. Some of the items were very expensive jewellery, and there were even deeds to some luxurious homes of organized crime members.

Before heading to the forensic laboratory we were taken to a room which contained a very large electronic display board. Down one side were the names of crimes and beside these were periods of time that changed frequently.

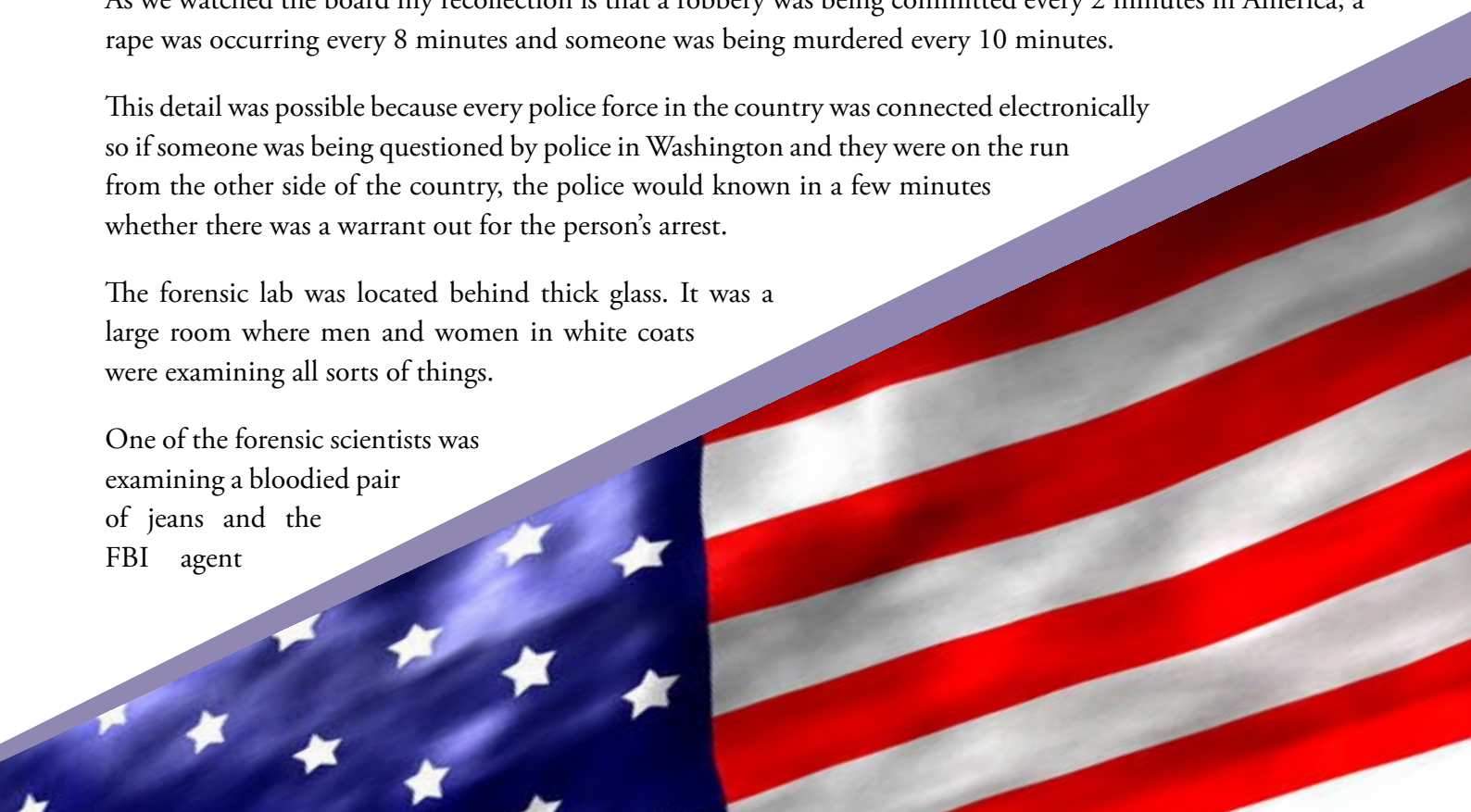
The list of crimes ranged from robbery to murder and everything in between. What the board showed was how often a crime was being committed and every 90 seconds the details were being updated.

As we watched the board my recollection is that a robbery was being committed every 2 minutes in America, a rape was occurring every 8 minutes and someone was being murdered every 10 minutes.

This detail was possible because every police force in the country was connected electronically so if someone was being questioned by police in Washington and they were on the run from the other side of the country, the police would know in a few minutes whether there was a warrant out for the person's arrest.

The forensic lab was located behind thick glass. It was a large room where men and women in white coats were examining all sorts of things.

One of the forensic scientists was examining a bloodied pair of jeans and the FBI agent



made contact with him via a telephone to get details of the crime. We were told the jeans belonged to a 17 year old African American boy who had been killed by gunfire. The scientist held up the bloodied jeans riddled with bullet holes for all to see. I was deeply disturbed by what I saw and I wondered who the young man was who lost his life in such a terrible manner.

The last part of the tour was the gun range. The FBI agent told us he would be showcasing an FBI issue gun which fired 13 rounds per second (13 bullets per second).

We were seated behind thick bullet proof glass to watch the weapon in action and the agent fired at a target in the shape of a person (just like you see in the movies). The muffled sound of the gun firing did not detract from its fierceness. The FBI agent was a good shot – the torso of the target was severely damaged by the time he finished with it.

After the tour we were taken to a room filled with lounges, where most visitors began discussing their impressions of the FBI Headquarters.

I felt rather strange by the experience and as I sat there listening to people around me I was surprised to hear how others were impressed by the visit.

I asked one woman why she was so amazed with the experience. She said she was proud to be an American because the FBI was such a mighty force, able to fix all America's problems.

I told her that it was not a gun that fired 13 rounds per second that would solve America's problems, rather they needed to tackle racial discrimination in their culture and improve their policies on education, housing, health and welfare. She looked at me with bewilderment, but smiled sweetly because she didn't know what to say.

All these years later I still see America struggling to truly understand and deal with the core of its problems, and some of those in power still think that by using force they will overcome their enemies.

When will they learn?

