



### **Six First-Places Here** (2007)

I head up to New York City numerous times, justifying the trips as necessary visits with my sister. I wander book shops and cafes, I chat with strangers. On each trip, I interact with someone who I declare is the reason I was meant to go. I spent a week there around the holidays. Surprisingly, this has developed into somewhat of a ritual for me, wandering the city alone around the holidays. I retreat more into my own head, and observe everyone rushing. I decide to take my sister out to a Broadway play.

I'm the first to arrive at the Broadway tickets line. Perfect, I'll be able to get the best seats for my sister's Christmas present. I wander a bit near the ticket window area, trying to locate the starting point of the long lines that have yet to begin. I have time to kill, so I see no reason to not be the first in line. The December afternoon is chilly, but I'm cozy in my layers of down. It's not clear where I should stand, so I approach the tall, heavy-set man in his bulky winter coat.

"Where do I stand to get in line?" I ask.

He looks at me, directly into my face for a touch longer than is the norm, and pauses.

"Honey, you're too early. Go relax somewhere and come back."

I like the deep drawl to his voice. It has a fatherly note to it, although my father does not call me honey. But I see no reason to go elsewhere. I'm in NYC and I am now stuck in the Times Square area until I have our tickets, so I see no reason to not be first in line.

"I'm OK. I'd like to wait." I tell him. "Where do I stand?" I ask again.

He puts his hands on his hips, arches back somewhat and pauses before he replies.

"I know people like you. You're the continual overachiever – ain't ya? You always want to be first, you always want to be best, you are willing to do anything to be at the front. Aren't you? Well, honey. Here we have six windows for tickets. So regardless of



The fastest way  
to still the mind

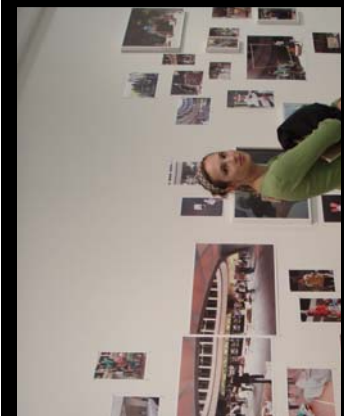
how early you arrive, and how determined you are, you'll never be the only first. You'll be one of six firsts. And you know, there are also six seconds at the same time and six thirds. And you know what, they all get tickets. And those who stand in line in the sixtieth position, they also get tickets. So honey, relax. Go take a deep breath inside the hotel lobby across the street. Go stay warm. And if you come back in half an hour, you'll still get your ticket. Baby, it's OK to not be first. You may be happier if you're not."

I stand there staring at this tall man. He's in his mid-fifties, working a job where he has to tell tourists the same answer over and over and over. He is standing outside in the freezing cold in front of a hotel lobby, assisting with the sale of extra Broadway tickets. Am I so transparent? Is he perhaps happier than I? Perhaps he enjoys the crispness of the cold and his random comments to tourists. I don't know. But it still seems wrong to me to sit inside a warm hotel lobby when I could be first in line.

Yet I'm not ready to defy this tall man who calls me "honey." I go into the lobby and write a bit in my journal. A nervous man sits on the sofa near me, eating chocolates although there is a clear sign prohibiting eating in the lobby area. The wildchild in me likes that he's ignoring the sign. Enough time passes that I think I can sneak back and get into line. Perhaps I'll even still be one of the first six in line. I go across the street and see that a line has already formed. I walk quickly and start counting. I'm eighth in line. Damn. I'm one of the second six. I smile to myself. I didn't really think of myself as competitive. I get into line, standing at first in silence. A young couple in their twenties walks up behind me, we smile at one another. Their eyes are clearly bloodshot. It's like they read my thoughts and want to defend themselves.

"We took an overnight bus to get here, can't afford to stay overnight." He tells me. He's short with dark curls and a quick smile. He begins telling me how they love coming





up to see Broadway plays. His girlfriend remains quiet. Her long hair is pulled back to reveal a young plain face, the type that becomes beautiful only due to her personality. He continues to chat. He asks what play I'm planning to see.

"I don't know yet." I catch myself. I wanted to be first in line but I haven't even decided what tickets I am so desperate to purchase. He pulls out a guide to what's playing. I pull out a tiny piece of paper where my sister had scribbled her top choices.

"They don't have tickets for all of them," he tells me. "But that man should know which ones they'll have," and he points at the tall man who called me honey.

Do I want to continue our earlier conversation? Would he even remember me and make fun of the fact that I came back earlier than he had suggested? I need to know if I should come up with a back-up play, so I step out of line and walk up to him. He smiles at me and tells me that there will be plenty of tickets for my play.

"Did you warm up across the street honey?"

"Yea, thanks," and I walk back to my place in line. I continue to chat with the couple a bit more, find out that she plans to be an elementary school teacher. They plan to marry and raise their kids in the neighborhood where they grew up.

"It's so safe there" they tell me. I wonder where it is dangerous.

The line starts to move, with hundreds of people behind us. I am part of the team of second in line. The windows open and everyone rushes in. I quickly purchase my two tickets. The crowd of ticket-buyers is almost in a frenzy now around me. I feel that desperate energy. I saunter away with what I wanted, as I hear,

"Hey honey. So what did I tell you? You got exactly what you wanted and you waited in a warm lobby. See, it's OK to not be first. You remember that." And he smiles at me the smile of an old friend. I'm just not sure I agree with his message.