New York City
Maffi, Mario

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Couple of days ago I went to see Before Central Park: The Life and Death of Seneca Village at the New-York Historical Society, an exhibition that—albeit synthetically—took as its theme a little-known story and dealt with it masterfully. Between 1820 and 1850 the area currently occupied by the western section of the park, to the side of the “Great Lawn,” was home to a settlement of African Americans and immigrants (mostly from Ireland). It was a real village (even if later it was described disparagingly as “a shantytown”) made up of wooden houses, schools, churches, and cemeteries, and toward the middle of the nineteenth century it was savagely razed to the ground to make way for the famous park. Despite a wave of objections and protests, the village inhabitants were scattered to the four winds, and their whereabouts became something of a mystery: they had become invisible—that kind of invisibility (of people outside mainstream society) that is quite a common occurrence in American history. As Ralph Ellison wrote in his 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*, “I am invisible . . . simply because people refuse to see me.”

While strolling about the exhibition rooms, looking at the documents, maps, objects, captions, reproductions of bills of sale, and the petitions sent by the inhabitants of Seneca Village, I thought of the “city underneath,” which events of this kind bring so vividly to light. Above all, in the foyer, I was struck by the reproduction of an article from the New York Herald dated 11 August 1871. It read:

Yesterday afternoon, while laborers were engaged in uprooting trees at the new entrance to the Central Park, corner of Eighty-fifth street and Eighth avenue, they discovered, fourteen inches beneath the surface, a black rosewood coffin, richly mounted and in a state of good preservation. On the lid was a plate with the engraving, “Margaret McIntay, died February, 1852, aged sixteen years, three months and fourteen days.” Within the coffin was the body of a woman, decayed almost to a skeleton. At a short distance from the spot another coffin was found, enclos-
I was taken aback by the article not only because of the implications it had as to what lies “beneath” the city (those sociogeological layers brought so laboriously to the surface), but also because of its disturbing conclusion: those coffins that vanish only to reappear, that invisibility (almost as if it were a threatening memento) that suddenly becomes visible. And it was as if the objects on display at the New-York Historical Society had become more eloquent.

The obsession with what lies underneath the surface is peculiarly American, on a par with the obsession with what lies outside. Yet while the outside represents everything that is extraneous to the American way of life (the “alien,” the “foreigner,” and the “menace from outer space,” to use the terminology of mass cultural products, often so effective in unveiling the hidden dynamics of a society), the underneath is a far more disturbing dimension. This is because it acknowledges and openly declares that the threat (or, putting it more mildly, the sense of unease) comes from within—from something that is inside, buried in the labyrinthine tunnels of the past or the compressed layers of the present. In particular, I remember an early-twentieth-century drawing by William Balfour Ker called The Hand of Fate: an exclusive high-society party disrupted by a hand that, from the underground depths of society, bursts through the floor and reaches upward. And I also remember a 1960s cartoon by a famous cartoonist (his name escapes me—could it be Richard Cobb!?), which outlines a profile of American civilization in the form of factories, skyscrapers, highways, televisions, and computers—and, buried beneath the surface, the remains of native civilization, skulls, skeletons, arrows . . .

The underneath of New York, the American metropolis par excellence, is the most disconcerting of all. Much the same has already been said of London and Paris, as the works of Dickens and Gissing, and Sue, Hugo, and Zola testify—and Walter Benjamin considered the Parisian passages and Métro stations as places providing access to the collective unconscious. But Europe, steeped in its past as it is, really holds no surprises, what with its archaeological remains, its ruins, crypts, and vaults, its underground canals and sewers, the whole repertoire of gothic and romantic, realist and surrealist. What does surprise is the singular and often unappreciated fact that the underneath of a city like New York is overwhelmingly present, too.
Perhaps the most famous image of this underneath (both on the screen and in real life) is that of the puffs of steam emanating from New York streets—candid will-o’-the-wisps wafting from the manhole covers, or solid columns emerging from the high, orange and white mobile tubes scattered here and there about the asphalt. The city as a living organism, an enormous dragon curled up inside the guts of the metropolis, a mysterious and powerful energy to be released in small doses, smoke signals of a people hidden away beneath the sidewalk: fantastic images come to mind . . .

It has nothing to do with any of this, of course. The fact is that New York, as Harry Granick explains in his classic little work of 1947 (Underneath New York), is a “city without chimneys.” A steam-based heating system—with steam produced and distributed on a centralized basis—has replaced autonomous combustion or electric energy systems, and this means that vents have to be opened up around the city: hence those little puffs that are especially evocative in the surreal, nocturnal metropolis, among the yellow streetlights, the bouncing cars, the torment of piercing sirens.

However, as we noted earlier, the underneath is present in just about all of New York: in the huge block of shale (which alone allows for the building of skyscrapers) surfacing here and there in Central Park or Inwood Hill Park; in the web of downtown streets that retraces the tangle of Native American and Dutch trails and traditional cattle paths; in the valleys, hills, and waterways belonging to a none too distant past; and in the African American cemeteries, the immigrant villages, and the multifarious shantytowns that the city has covered up and removed—a whole world “underneath” to which Anne-Marie Cantwell and Diana diZerega Wall have devoted a fascinating book, Unearthing Gotham: The Archaeology of New York City (2001). Up until a few score years ago, one particularly desperate settlement extended as far as the site where the monstrous United Nations skyscraper now looms large (a metaphor not without its implications). Just south of it, sophisticated houses for well-heeled New Yorkers were built in the wealthy complex of Sutton Place, and immediately the dictates of invisibility made themselves heard: no windows facing north were to be allowed.

Both geographically and historically speaking, almost everywhere in the city an acute sense of continual overlapping—of an after driving underground a before—can be felt. For example, if you pop over to Lexington Avenue between East 25th and East 26th Streets, you will find yourself staring at the massive armory of the 69th New York Regiment. (Such armories can be found all over the city, and indeed, in all American cities. The decision to build them goes back to the 1870s when the out-
break of the first widespread working-class uprisings convinced even the most doubting of Thomases that social classes did, after all, exist in the United States, too. Leaving aside its overall ugliness—the castlelike facade and the infelicitous choice of a rounded shape—it must be said that this, too, is a historical landmark, possessed of a dense past and an underneath. Indeed, in 1913 the barrack halls and armory housed an exhibition that entered the history books under the name of the “Armory Show.” For the first time in the United States, European avant-garde masterpieces, from Cézanne to Duchamp, were exhibited alongside the works of aggressive American realists, with sensational and far-reaching consequences for the world of American art.

Yet—and here the underneath emerges to the surface in all its ramifications—this topographic place within Manhattan is significant for other reasons, too. In order to build the Armory, several blocks of brownstones (those distinctive reddish-brown sandstone buildings that are one of the defining aspects of “old New York”) had to be demolished. And in two of these houses, back to back, at 104 East 26th and 111 East 25th, respectively, had lived Herman Melville and Henry James, the first for many years up until his death, the second just for six months in 1865. Neither knew anything of the presence of the other. Melville had already been forgotten by the public and publishers alike, as invisible to the one as to the others; James, never a great lover of his homeland, returned to America reluctantly, and his visits became increasingly rarer.

And it is to this “New York which is no longer,” a city whose buildings carry few commemorative plaques (and when they do, they are often inaccurate!), that Nathan Silver has dedicated an absorbing book, a text of modern urban archaeology evocatively titled Lost New York. In contrast to all the stereotypes concerning American “youth” and “superficiality,” the sense of loss is extremely acute and recurrent in American culture. Silver’s whole book is held together by this nostalgia for a past (precisely how long ago is immaterial) made up of solemn buildings or, more simply, of edifices that impress with their indulgent nod in the direction of imagination, of places that have encapsulated (in an almost condensed and therefore more intense manner) the energy of the city at any given moment: the great theaters and public places of the nineteenth century, from Niblo’s Garden and the German Winter Garden to the Thalia Theater and the Atlantic Garden; the old Pennsylvania Station with its solid and fascinating tangle of iron structures; the refined hotels of Coney Island, the Oriental and the Manhattan Beach.

But there is more than one underneath to Manhattan. Let’s take two examples, one metaphorical, the other real, both rather unnerving. For the first, we have to go back to the photographer and sociologist Jacob Riis,
one of late-nineteenth-century Manhattan's most famous witnesses and chroniclers. In an 1894 photograph Riis immortalized one of the most renowned delinquent gangs of the era, the “Short Tail Gang,” a mixed bag of ten insolent-looking characters crouching beneath a landing stage at Corlears Hook, on the East River—a slice of authentic metropolitan underworld. Of course, like it or not, this underworld has always been a central element in the sociocultural geography of New York. The story of the city’s delinquent gangs is a source of undeniable—albeit ambiguous—interest, and Herbert Asbury’s classic 1927 account, The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld, narrates this story with great perspicacity (and it is not by chance that Martin Scorsese used it as a basis for his movie of the same name).

Naturally, it is too long a story to be dealt with here. Suffice it to say that its origins go back to the need on the part of newly arrived immigrants to defend themselves against the maelstrom of urban life, exposed as they were to racist and chauvinist attacks, and crushed by the machinery of competition and profits. In the German, Irish, Jewish, Chinese, and Italian streets of New York, unofficial groups bent on defending themselves grew out of what were really little more than small handfuls of youngsters used to getting by as best they could on a day-to-day basis. It was simply a question of defending one’s territory, the most rudimentary form of mutual assistance in the growing face of community disruption and the ever-present threat of violence. These picturesquely named gangs—Dock Rats, Swamp Angels, Dead Rabbits, The Gophers, Red Peppers, The Carpenters, Plug Uglies, Daybreak Boys, Bridge Twisters—did, however, maintain close ties with their communities of origin, their popular and working-class cultural backgrounds, the very fabric of the city itself, and, often evolving in an openly multiethnic direction, they made an important contribution to the wealth of myths and rites, legends and heroes.

One of the most popular nineteenth-century Lower East Side theaters, the Grand Duke’s in Baxter Street, was also rooted in this history: featuring furnishings of somewhat dubious origin, and boasting an enviable program of adventurous melodramas, the theater was opened by one of the youth gangs most active in the neighborhood at the time, the Baxter Street Dudes. And then, of course, there was the Bowery, a complex and intriguing hotchpotch of popular shows and widespread illegality. The paths and the territories, the trespasses and the exploits of these latter-day gangs brand the physical body of New York like a tattoo, and even today you can catch a glimpse of all this in what remains of the city’s past (the popular architecture, the tortuousness of certain downtown streets, the intensity of the street life, and the overwhelming poverty of certain
neighborhoods) and appreciate anew the sense and reasons behind these experiences.

For a period, this “underworld” was a rich source of American culture, and could easily be drawn upon to supply types, situations, events, and linguistic and literary inventions. Then, at a time and in a city increasingly dominated by business, all this became a business, too: Prohibition. Formally introduced in the 1920s to regulate the morality of private and public lives, Prohibition soon became a crucial factor in the businesslike transformation of the underworld into a powerful parallel economic force. Yet the “mythical” sheen surrounding the origins of the underworld has proved difficult to remove and resurfaces continually: in certain films directed by Francis Ford Coppola and Scorsese, of course, not to mention that harrowing “narration of origins,” Sergio Leone’s Once Upon a Time in America.

Today, this “underworld” is a well-concealed cyst inside the financial and money-grubbing body of the city. But traces of it are still to be seen. In the heart of Chinatown, at 16 Pell Street, a small plaque openly confesses that this building once housed the headquarters of Hip Sang Tong, one of the two illegal associations (the other being On Leong Tong) whose main concern, at the turn of the last century, evolved from territorial and community defense to the management of most criminal activities within the area. Close by, among what (ambiguously) remains of Little Italy, Umberto’s restaurant is also renowned as the place where the Italian American underworld boss, Joey Gallo, was killed in 1972. In his interesting book of sociocultural history, Infamous Manhattan, Andrew Roth has organized, neighborhood by neighborhood (more maps!), the various crime trails in New York over the last two hundred years. And, if I am not mistaken, the Museum of the City of New York includes among its guided tours a trip to local “scenes of the crime.”

And yet this “underworld” comes in many guises and cannot be linked solely to the world of Murder Inc. It is also the world of youth gangs, a desperate and inescapable reality in any ghetto, complex in terms of its evolutions and involutions. At once a necessary instrument of social cohesion and a safety valve for social tensions, the youth gang is also a vulnerable structure and easy prey for organized crime adept at transforming it into an instrument of drug trafficking, and exploiting it as a means of penetrating the ghetto for its own ends. But situations can differ, and the differences may be very slight. So, for instance, a notorious 1950s gang like the Puerto Rican Assassins later developed into one of the most important social realities, not only on the Lower East Side but probably in the whole of Manhattan; and till a few years ago, before the huge building at 605 East 9th Street was forcefully and disgracefully vacated, you could
visit the multipurpose Charas community center (with cinema, music, theater, all manner of social services, and an active role in fighting drugs and gentrification in the area), headed by Chino Garcia, one of the former leaders of the Assassins. At that time, Charas was actively campaigning to “politicize” the biggest youth gang in New York, the Latin Kings: and thus, it could well happen that while Chino was telling you about the history of the Assassins in one of the large rooms of the former school occupied some twenty years ago, younger members of the Latin Kings (hardened ghetto youths with all the gang gestures and rituals) came a few at a time in front of the steps for a meeting with the center’s social workers. The story goes on . . .

This “underworld” also comprises the universe of social marginality, a nocturnal universe admirably documented by Damon Runyon and Weegee, in fiction and photographs, respectively, during the 1940s and 1950s. It is a universe that used to revolve around the admittedly ambiguous and disreputable area of Times Square before Disney anesthetized it and turned it into some kind of icon to glamour—a massive, tacky, cartoonish affair (New York really is a city of extreme opposites)—a universe whose inhabitants had elaborated languages, forms of behavior, stories, and mythologies, out of sheer desperation.

Up to now we’ve been dealing in metaphors: the “world below” stands for everything that, because it is not ascribable to the dominant moral and social canons of the present, is driven underneath. However, there is a more literal form of “underneath” that is painfully real. I’m not talking of films like Ghostbusters, effective comical reworkings of the perennial sense of unease that blends with a kind of unutterable sense of collective guilt: evil energy that periodically threatens to come to the surface. And I’m not talking about urban legends like that of the white alligators that are supposed to haunt New York sewers, mutant heirs to a fad that ended up being flushed down the toilet (an anxiety, this, bound up with genetic mutations in the bowels of the city, which crops up again and again, as in the movie Mimic). And neither am I speaking of the strange retrievals that occur from time to time: not only cemeteries and villages but also ancient ships. (Such has always been the lust for land in this long narrow island that two centuries ago they used to sink ships along the banks and cover them up with earth and gravel in order to gain an extra yard or two.) Nor am I alluding to the tunnel of the first experimental pneumatic subway, on which work was immediately halted at the end of the nineteenth century in the midst of political and economic string pulling, only to be forgotten until 1912 when, following its chance discovery, the huge waiting room complete with crystal chandelier and grand piano caused sensation and amazement.
Ah yes, the subway. A contradictory and dramatic compendium of urban experience—that is what I am talking about. "In the flying underbelly of the city. Steaming hot, and summer on top, outside. Underground. The subway heaped in modern myth," wrote the African American poet and dramatist LeRoi Jones (now Amiri Baraka) in his influential mid-1960s play set in the subway, Dutchman. And it is true: the New York subway has never ceased to be the stuff of myth and metaphor, at times in an obvious manner (the descent into the netherworld, the resurfacing to "see the stars"), at others in ways more disquieting and complex. Poets like Hart Crane, Allen Tate, and Muriel Rukeyser have written about it; it has been the subject of films like Larry Peerce's The Incident and Walter Hill's The Warriors; it repeatedly takes center stage in the works of Erik Drooker (undoubtedly the world's most important contemporary graphic artist), who transforms it into a mythical place of the subconscious and prehistory, the curved walls of stations covered with rock paintings that not everyone manages to see; in George Tucker's picture, The Subway, it is the choice place of supreme urban alienation; it is an endless source of urban folklore (on a stand at the Grand Central Terminal, I picked up an amusing booklet titled I've Been Working on the Subway: The Folklore and Oral History of Transit, written by Sally Charnow and Steven Zeitlin); it has formed the backdrop to notorious acts of violence whose social and emotional impact was considerable (those of Bernard Goetz, the white man who took the law into his own hands against a group of rowdy blacks). And precisely the idea of the subway as a metaphor for the city of New York is explored by Michael W. Brooks in his Subway City: Riding the Trains, Reading New York, a fascinating and densely packed book intermingling literature, art, architecture, costume, and urban, economic, and technological history.

The subway is the very underneath of New York, then, but also that underneath that each of us experiences on a more personal basis: the feverish sense of fatigue on emerging from subway steps and along chaotic streets after the frantic dash from the airport, the sense of disorientation when confronted with scenes so different from those we have left, the diabolical and at times unbearable noise, the sense of turmoil as trains approach, the unpleasant vibrating of the long platforms, the muggy heat and the chill of air-conditioning, the headlong rush along certain stretches of track, the rainbow variety of faces and behavior, the idiosyncrasies of individual passengers, the all-enshrouding graffiti, the Chinaman playing Bach and the a cappella choir singing Carmina Burana, the broken-bottled quarrel in a rapidly emptying carriage, the interminable hanging around and the never-ending journey to Coney Island or the northernmost tip of Manhattan...
It is, however, the people living underneath the city that I’d rather speak of—a tale that must be told with patience. Imagine you are walking along Riverside Park on the West Side: it is a beautiful day, with clear sunny skies, seagulls, boats sailing on the Hudson, a sense of peace and well-being, a benevolent metropolis that cradles you lovingly in its arms, brimming over with promises . . . Underneath you, beneath the pavement, sits the Tunnel: and the nightmare begins.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Riverside Park was an anonymous muddy riverbank. When the tracks of the Hudson River Railroad made their appearance, around them multiplied the shanties of a homeless community that by the early twentieth century already numbered more than a hundred. The Great Depression did the rest. Then, in the mid-1930s, it was decided that the area should be redeveloped to make way for a long promenade to be used by wealthy West Side residents. The homeless were evicted and two and a half miles of railroad tracks (from West 72nd Street to West 123rd Street) were embedded in a reinforced concrete structure covered in earth. The Tunnel was large enough to allow for the long diesel trains to be put together and to contain all kinds of objects and machines, and it remained in use until the mid-1970s when the transportation of goods by rail slumped. First it was abandoned, then closed. But in 1991, when a team of maintenance workers began work on the building of a new railway junction in the area, they came across a community of about fifty people who had been living there for several years—a mere handful out of the five-thousand-odd wretches who are thought to be living in the bowels of the city. They had actually been living there, in the sense that they had transformed those subterranean spaces into proper rooms and living areas, furnished with whatever could be picked up off the streets early in the metropolitan morning.

Margaret Morton, a photographer friend of mine who has passionately charted the existence of these invisible people over recent years (I got all this information from her The Tunnel: The Underground Homeless of New York, a book of photographs and oral statements), explained to me that the inhabitants of the Tunnel had chosen this particular place because it is located in a rich area of the city. Geographically and socially mobile yuppies are always on the move, and this means there are plenty of objects being thrown away or abandoned—stoves, fridges, ovens, sofas, and mattresses; and when they are not employing crooked methods to discourage “recycling” (who knows why?), the neighborhood’s restaurants and food stores supply the Tunnel’s inhabitants with pretty tasty tidbits. Not that that makes things any better.

It is a situation repeated elsewhere underneath Manhattan. For instance, in the subway tunnel of Second Avenue, which was built,
opened, and then abandoned a few years ago; or in one of the disused sta-
tions, of which there are about ten in Manhattan alone; or even in fully
operative stations like the one at Lafayette and Bleeker that, with its five
levels descending into the entrails of the city and the haphazard mix of
people living there, is considered one of the most dangerous; or in the tun-
nels beneath the railroads of Grand Central Terminal or Penn Station; or
in those underlying Central Park, which have acquired urban legend sta-
tus with some, and the disbelieving scorn of others; or, lastly, in any of
those subterranean spaces that desperation manages to get its hands on
(I’ve been told there is a grating on the Bowery that people enter at night
and leave first thing in the morning; and the crime-thriller writer Patricia
Cornwell has set one of her novels, *From Potter’s Field*, among these
inhabited tunnels)—“Life Below,” as was titled a celebrated series of car-
toons by Will Eisner during the 1940s.

The New York subway stretches out for 731 miles. It has twenty-three
lines, 466 stations, and a hundred toilets (nothing compared to the nine
hundred it once boasted). The network of tunnels underlying the Grand
Central Terminal is staggering: with a full thirty-four miles of track com-
pressed into a space totaling a square three-quarters of a mile, it is the
biggest station in the world. So, there is a veritable wealth of spaces, intri-
cate passages, and openings at the disposal of whoever is repulsed or mar-
ginalized from the city—for the most part, drug addicts and the mentally
insane, but also people who, for whatever reason, have simply dropped out
of society and are unable to adapt to the idea or reality of reintegration.

Jennifer Toth has dedicated a book to this invisible and elusive popu-
lation (the figures are necessarily approximate: realistically speaking, they
number between five and six thousand, but some insist on a figure closer
to twenty-five thousand). It is not a wholly convincing work, marred as it
is by the odd lapse into sensationalistic journalism, but the overall picture
of a sprawling metropolis that spurns its swelling broods of undesirables
and drives them underground is positively spine-chilling. *The Mole
People: Life in the Tunnels Beneath New York* tells tales of extraordinary
marginalization: of people who are no longer capable of living “on the sur-
face,” flimsy little saplings growing spontaneously where light filters down
from above, lovingly looked-after cats and dogs, movingly furnished
rooms, tunnel-born children who reach adulthood already at the age of
five or six, groups that have organized themselves for survival and resis-
tance to attacks, individuals who spend the whole day anxiously looking
for and preparing food, a mysterious population living in the darkest
depths of these labyrinthine tunnels that now communicates solely in
cries and grunts, and a voluntary network of information and mutual
assistance. This universe is also extremely violent, and a highly sensitive
public matter: Toth’s book has, for instance, been bitterly attacked as being vague and unreliable by Joseph Brennan, another scholar writing on the subject.

Up until a few years ago, the roads and parks of Manhattan provided shelter for the growing numbers of homeless. Tent towns and shantytowns sprang up like mushrooms here and there on the island, some of them genuine makeshift small towns, others just a few yards away from the wealth and bright lights of traditional tourist spots. I remember one in Tompkins Square Park, and another called “Bushville” between East 4th Street, East Houston Street, and Avenues C and D; and I also recall Morton’s high-impact yet deeply humane photographs of the phenomenon—a world fighting tooth and claw for survival and dignity against terrible human odds. Later, this world of tent towns and shantytowns—utterly incompatible with New York’s glossy image—was wiped out by the drastic and violent actions of the police and accompanying bulldozers. Descending beneath the city, their inhabitants probably joined the swelling ranks of invisible New Yorkers.

Someone told me that if I went to the 9th Precinct, the police station located on East 5th Street, I could request that someone accompany me “underground” to visit one or two of the mole people communities. I decided not to. To be honest, I find it impossible to equate all this misery and desperation with the idea of a show. Instead, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* came back to my mind—and its main character who, after wading through the infernal wasteland of post–Second World War America, and all too aware of his own unavoidable invisibility, hides away in a building inhabited by whites only, in a basement walled in and then forgotten during the nineteenth century, where he recreates a precarious and temporary identity as the new Dostoyevskian man from *Notes from the Underground*.

Ellison certainly wasn’t alone in providing a literary expression for the American obsession with what lies “underneath”: Edgar Allan Poe and H. P. Lovecraft both employed the crypt as a metaphor for the deep (yes!) sense of unease associated with the “underneath” of society. But Ellison’s “invisible man” is perhaps the nearest one can get to those hordes of invisible men and women who live (now you know it) under your feet, under the very pavements of Manhattan.

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Some days after my visit to the New-York Historical Society exhibition, a strange thing happened while I was heading downtown. I was fairly close to the Flatiron Building (the splendid skyscraper that to me is a precious New York
symbol) when, on a side street, I spotted a confusion of police cars, with orange lights flashing and sirens blaring. As curious as a monkey, I went to see what was happening.

Policemen and firemen had already cordoned off a small area on the sidewalk with yards of yellow tape, and inside this area were four or five people. In the middle, one of those typical gratings dotted here and there about the New York sidewalks had been lifted, and a fireman kneeling on the edge of the rectangular trapdoor was gazing downward and poking about with an iron hook. I sidled up to one of the more trustworthy-looking bystanders and asked him what had happened, and he told me that someone had apparently fallen through the grating and down the trapdoor. I didn't bother asking how such a thing could have happened, and instead stood watching the movements of the four or five policemen and firemen standing in the cordoned-off area.

There really didn't seem to be much commotion. Probably, the unfortunate pedestrian had already been pulled out and taken away. But the gestures and to-ing and fro-ing of the firemen and policemen, their insistent poking about and looking down into the trapdoor, and the fact that they kept going back to the edge of the hole to peer down attentively, almost made me think that the victim was still down the trapdoor, and that the trapdoor was much larger and deeper than it looked.

Then a shiver ran down my spine. A policeman and fireman muttered something to one another. One shook his head and the other grabbed hold of the grating and with his iron hook placed it over the trapdoor, then stood on top of the grating to make sure it fitted flush with the edges. The show was over, everyone went home. But I almost had the impression that the pedestrian had disappeared, and that the policemen and firemen were resigned to the impossibility of ever getting him or her back.

In short, that someone else had become invisible, underneath New York.