



Perspective

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

It's a special breed that rides the New York commuter trains. Track One at Newark is crowded with people at 6:55 a.m., waiting to catch the electric train into the city. It's standing room only for the 55-cent ride into the heart of Manhattan where the fast, sleek train will glide into the three-level station built under the new Madison Square Garden.

The train jerks to a start and in moments is rocketing down the welded tracks. The gray light of dawn reveals the huge piles of dirty snow stacked alongside the tracks. The smokestacks belch black pollution into the murky sky. But no one is looking out the windows at the frozen green slime in the ditches or the filthy rivers. Thank God for the heavy early morning fog. At least you can't see the slums where humans crowd together like animals in caves, the ugly factories with their rancid smells, and the countless junk heaps that litter the once beautiful Jersey coast.

Suddenly the windows are black. We've entered the tunnel under the river. Midway through we stop. A garbled announcement from the overhead speaker explains the delay. Traffic is backed up in the city. No one blinks. It's an every-morning occurrence.

We're moving again. Rocking gently back and forth. Then New York. Pennsylvania Central. I'll barely have time to buy my ticket on the Long Island RR out to Jamaica where I'll change to the Oyster Bay train and on out to the north shore.

The station is a madhouse. A million faces, it seems. Some waiting in line. Some running frantically. Some elbowing and cursing those in their way. All heavily bundled against the freezing weather and all with two things in common: no one knows anyone else and no one smiles.

I buy a newspaper at a newsstand from a timeless old woman with a wrinkled face. I hand her a half dollar and, unable to stand the dismal oppression any longer, smile cheerfully and say, "Keep the change and God bless you."

Her face is blank. Indifferent. She looks past me at the man who is elbowing me out of the way to give her a dime for his paper.

I run for my train and squeeze in before the car jerks forward. Riding out to the north shore, I remember how it used to be back home, sitting at the counter in McClure's Drug Store and hearing home folks talk about each other by name and inquire about children, relatives and pets. I remember Pete's barber shop where no one was in a hurry and there was always time to talk.

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends," Jesus said. A cold chill runs down my back as I realize how easy it would be for me to become like that mob on the train, impersonal, indifferent, totally self-centered. I shake my head and wonder if it's even possible to have a friend anymore . . . except in a small town.