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Signs

A man sits on the sidewalk outside the McGraw-Hill building in Manhattan. His clothes are grimy and his face is so hairy and dirty that he is unrecognizable. He has been staring at his feet for a long time; his ankles are shiny and black. He wears mismatched shoes; one is wrapped in tattered grey tape. Several hundred people have stepped around him this afternoon on their way in and out of the skyscraper.

Fifty stories above, a man in a Brooks Brothers three-piece suit stares out the window across the city. His gaze darts from building to building, up the length of the island. The vast green swath of Central Park stretches into the haze.

The man in the sky glances down at the streets below his building. The people look like cockroach droppings on a narrow grey shelf. One of them is the grimy man sitting on the sidewalk. From this height he looks the same as any other dot in the steady flow of office workers moving around him.

A taxi pulls to a stop next to him and someone in a dark suit gets out and hurries past, into the building. The man on the curb looks up. The taxi pulls away, then stops abruptly and a new passenger jumps in. The car behind the taxi blows its horn. The man on the sidewalk stands. The taxi merges back into the flow of traffic.

The man looks around, puzzled, as if he doesn't recognize anything. It's true: he doesn't.

He starts walking, straight into the street. Another car blows its horn and swerves. Someone curses out of a car window, "Get the hell off the street!"

The man stops and stares this way and that, looking for clues in the traffic. The car just in front of him moves on, leaving a gap, and he continues walking unsteadily across the street into the gap. The traffic resumes behind him.

He makes his way west, along 49th Street toward Seventh Avenue. There is a crowd at the next corner, bunched up and waiting for the light. He stands at the back of the crowd, head down, waiting for another clue.

The light changes and the crowd moves forward into the street. The man is swept along, but he isn't paying attention. Half-way across the intersection, he hears a sound, or thinks he does. Looking up, he notices a city bus passing by in front of the crowd. On the side of the bus a billboard proclaims, "West Pharmaceuticals."

The man tugs somebody's sleeve. The other person pulls away, disgusted. "Hey," says the grimy man, "Which way is West?"

The other person shrinks back. "Straight ahead," he says, and hurries off. The man moves on westward with the crowd.

Crossing Broadway, the crowd thins out and the man begins to wander. He leans against a skyscraper and looks down at his feet for a while. He does not see the caked dirt and torn shoes.

A scrap of newspaper lies on the sidewalk showing part of a headline: "Accuses Oil Lobby..." The man turns and faces the building, and then begins stepping sideways, edging along against the granite siding. He comes to a large glass door with etched lettering that reads "Lobby."

He pushes on the door, but it doesn't move. He keeps pushing, in a series of small surges of his whole body against the glass. After a few minutes, someone inside the building appears and pushes the glass door open, which shoves the man aside. He grabs the edge of the door and pulls himself in.

In the sudden shade and quiet inside the building, the man again becomes immobile, standing a few feet from the door, looking down.

A security guard notices the man and walks toward him. At the same time, a woman hurries from the elevator with a cluster of shopping bags and bumps into him. One of the bags has a Bloomingdale logo on it. Another has an ad for sale prices in the home furnishings department, twelfth floor.

The security guard stares at the grimy man. "What are you doing here?" he asks.

The man squints at the guard. "Twelfth floor," he says.

The guard looks at him suspiciously, and then points to the elevators.

The man shuffles to the elevators and watches while the doors open and close and people come and go. One of the elevators empties out and its doors remain open, waiting for more passengers. A poster on the back wall of the elevator reads, "New Top Floor Luxury Apartments."

A group of people hurries past and the man is swept into the elevator. Someone says, "What floor?"

"Top," the grimy man says.

The elevator doors close and it rises. On the way up, it stops and people get in and out. Eventually the man is alone. The doors close and the elevator continues up. It stops and the doors open. The man looks out at painters and ladders and stacks of wallboard.

The doors begin to close but a worker runs up. "You getting out?" he says.

The grimy man walks into the maze of remodeling. He stands still and looks down at his shabby shoes. After a few minutes a worker in overalls comes up and asks what he's doing.

He looks up at the man in overalls. A patch on the worker's denim says, "Whitehead Roofing." The overall man looks impatient.

"Roofing," says the grimy man.

The overall man looks at the other's blackened shoes and ankles. "Over there," he says, pointing to an open door in the corner.

The grimy man goes through and slowly climbs a flight of concrete stairs. His footsteps echo forty stories down the stairwell. Eventually, he comes to another door, propped open onto the roof. Workers are swabbing a section with steaming black tar.

He walks to a low wall at one edge of the roof. The sun is behind him and the city far below is in shadow. On top of a building across the street, a large illuminated billboard reads, "MSNBC. Lean Forward."