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JILL FREEDMAN'S BEST PHOTOGRAPH: THE EASTER
BUNNY RIDEING A PENNY FARTHING THROUGH
MANHATTAN

By Hannah Gal, May 19, 2017



This was taken in the 1970s, when I was in love with New York. The place was full of soul back then: there was life on the streets, eccentric characters on every corner, millions of people with colourful stories to tell. I mean it's not every day you go out and see an Easter bunny on a penny farthing, is it?

People came to New York to be New Yorkers, not just because they got a job in the city. It was so alive. I would hang my camera around my neck and hit the streets, knowing that some quirky character would soon come my way. And there I was walking through Greenwich Village when this charming elderly lady rode past, full of smiles.

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She was happy that I noticed her. I remember thinking what lovely spirit she had. There is an innocence about her that I still adore – an older woman with a sense of fun, enjoying her life and making everyone around her happy. I also like the McDonald's sign at the back with two golden arches that look like two more rabbit ears.

It was a classic Greenwich Village image and I was lucky to get it. You have to be quick to catch such a sliver of a moment, but that's the challenge of photography. You're like a hunter, alert and ready to pull the trigger at the exact right split second. Miss it and it's gone for ever.

Nowadays, when I look at this photo, I just see a New York that has lost its heart and soul. The city has become all about real estate and money. It used to be about neighbourhoods, each one like a small town, with its own flavour and personality. Greenwich Village was the bohemian area, with bars open late and jazz. I'm heartbroken to think it's gone.

I put this image in my book Madhattan, a love poem to the city and all the lovely things that have disappeared from it – panhandlers, the dollar-and-a-quarter haircut, gumball machines and characters with stories to tell. The shots were taken between 1966 and 1990, when I started noticing a lack of civility in the air and it became a place I no longer wanted to live. It's not just this city, though. I see it everywhere, with people glued to their phones, sitting together in restaurants but not talking to each other. I see this terrible selfie culture, which is so cheap and narcissistic.

I studied sociology and anthropology and now realise that what I've been doing with my camera all these years is documenting human behaviour. But I was taking pictures in my head long before I became a photographer. It was the Vietnam war that changed everything for me. I was angry and wanted to photograph anti-war demonstrations, so got my first camera. I went on to record some milestone events, but this shot reminds me that you don't always have to make political statements. Sometimes you can be lighthearted.