



Illustration by Eliane Gerrits

In a New York Minute

I was sitting with my young children in Amsterdam on a hot day in July, when a florid-faced man holding a crumpled map sat down next to me. He wiped his brow and said his name was Howard. He was a tourist from Texas. He told me that I lived in a great city. You take your time here, he said. But Howard said he would only spend one day in Amsterdam. Tomorrow he would do Paris.

"What about doing America?" I asked.

Oh, yes, of course. He had seen the Grand Canyon and been to Disneyland, Yellowstone. But, he added, smiling, he planned to avoid New York City. "I wouldn't set my foot there for a New York minute!"

What he meant, of course, is that the New York minute is the briefest possible unit of time — a universal constant, shorter than a nanosecond, even shorter than the zillionth of an eye blink for a flash trade on Wall Street.

In Johnny Carson's definition, a New York minute is the amount of time between when a traffic light in Manhattan turns green and the guy in the car behind you blows his horn. (Of course, Johnny could afford to crack

wise about New York from the safety of his studio in Burbank.)

In Amsterdam, people think differently about time. Sidewalks and cafes are filled with people enjoying their breakfast, lingering over lunch, savoring dinner, taking slow walks in between. No one arrives on time for a party, since there is always time to stay later. Who cares?

Now that I live near New York, though, I can witness New York minutes on any street corner. Tourists like me walk slowly, gaze around, stop at the curb before crossing a street, look both ways first. Not New Yorkers. They do not waste time contemplating buildings or making eye contact with strangers. New Yorkers speed up when they cross a street, never hesitate, never stop, just veer around the tourists and keep going. They cross the street in a New York minute.

The expression appears to have originated in Texas as a warning of instant trouble. "If that gal gets mad at you, she'll dump you in a New York minute." In the eyes of Texas, a New York minute is nasty and brutish. In New York, though, it's a self-deprecating badge of honor. "I'll get back to you in a New York minute."

New Yorkers care a lot about making things happen in a New York minute. So roads have special traffic lines to make it easier to move faster — slow lanes, fast lanes, bus lanes, bike lanes, car-pool lanes, taxi lanes. None of these are in Amsterdam. The fast lane just gets you to the exit lane too soon.

I am often homesick for the pace of life in Holland. No one there is trying to cram three lifetimes into the minutes allotted for one. But, increasingly, I notice that the energy of New York feels right. I inhale it like air. I like not knowing exactly where I am going. I just follow the people wherever they are going — to the next deal in the morning, then in the afternoon towards their lunches, and in the evenings towards their plays, concerts, benefits, and parties. My shoes wear out twice as fast, but I don't get tired. I am uplifted by the noises, the honking cabs, the shouts of the bike couriers. I let myself be carried into the thrashing river of humanity. And I float away into a sea of New York minutes.

— Pia de Jong

NRC Handelsblad, April 29, 2014