The Other Side of Me

I had never been inside a bus depot before my trip to New York in 1936. The Greyhound bus station has an air of excitement, with people going to and coming from cities all over the country. My bus seemed huge, with a washroom and comfortable seats. It was a four-and-a-half-day trip to New York. The long ride would have been tedious, but I was too busy dreaming about my fantastic future to mind.

When we pulled into the bus station in New York, I had thirty dollars in my pocket-money that I was sure Natalie and Otto could not spare.

I had telephoned ahead to the YMCA to reserve a room. It turned out to be small and drab, but it was only four dollars a week. Even so, I knew that the thirty dollars was not going to last very long.

I asked to see the manager of the YMCA.

I need a job, I told him, and I need it right away. Do you know anyone who?

We have an employment service for our guests, he informed me.

Great Is there anything available now?

He reached for a sheet of paper behind the desk and scanned it. There's an opening for an usher at the RKO Jefferson Theatre on Fourteenth Street. Are you interested?

Interested? At that moment my sole ambition in life was to be an usher at the RKO Jefferson on Fourteenth Street. That's just what I was looking for! I told him.

The manager wrote something on a piece of paper and handed it to me. Take this to the theater in the morning.
I had been in New York for less than one day and I already had a job. I phoned Natalie and Otto to tell them the news.

"That's a good omen," Natalie said. "You're going to be a big success."

I spent the first afternoon and evening exploring New York. It was a magical place, a bustling city that made Chicago seem provincial and drab. Everything was larger—the buildings, the marquees, the streets, the signs, the traffic, the crowds. My career.

The RKO Jefferson Theater on Fourteenth Street, once a vaudeville house, was an old, two-story structure. RKO theaters. Double features were common—patrons could see two movies back-to-back for the price of one.

I walked thirty-nine blocks from the YMCA to the theater and handed the note I had been given to the theater manager.

He locked me over and said, "Have you ever ushered before?"

"No, sir."

He shrugged. "Doesn't matter, Can you walk?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you know how to turn on a flashlight?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you can usher. Your salary is fourteen-forty a week. You'll work six days. Your hours are from four twenty to midnight."

"That's fine. It meant that I was free to have the whole morning and part of the afternoon to spend at the Brill Building, where the headquarters of the music business was.

"Go into the staff changing room, and see if you can find a uniform that fits you."
I tried on an usher's uniform and the manager looked at me and said, "That's fine. Be sure to keep an eye on the balcony."

"The balcony?"

"You'll see. You'll start tomorrow."

"Yes, sir. And tomorrow I will begin my career as a songwriter."