

New York, 1940

A city street on a hot day in summer. The photo is in black and white, taller than it is wide, at 50.5 by 40.5 cm. The image focuses on a circle of boys on the kerbside close to us, absorbed in a mysterious activity. Two of the boys hold up an empty mirror frame, separating the group from the adults and girls in the background.

The photographer stands in the road, with the kerb running in a diagonal from the bottom right-hand corner up to just below the middle of the left hand side of the frame. Near us, a group of nine boys form a loose circle, seven on, and two off the pavement. They are aged between about four and nine years old and mostly wear shorts with bare chests, ankle socks and lace up shoes. The smaller boys wear shorts with bibs or braces. The boy closest to us is bent double, his back to us, his hands in the gutter. He seems to be the oldest of the group, wearing long trousers and a white shirt, with a bandana tied round his forehead. To the right, a younger boy sits on his haunches, watching him closely; to the left is a boy with a threadbare striped t-shirt, his shoulder coming through a tear in the fabric. Others stand around, also looking down into the gutter. Two of the boys support either side of an empty wooden frame that rests on the pavement. It's taller than they are, with a rounded top and decorative carved shapes – a long mirror that has lost its glass, the back towards us.

Recognising the frame as a mirror helps piece together the mysterious activity – the boy nearest to us is picking up shards of the broken glass; the two boys holding the frame might have just picked it up from where the mirror fell across the kerb and

broke. The boy holding the frame on the righthand side has his head turned off to the right, with an urgent expression, as if about to call another friend to come and look.

A younger child on a tricycle has ridden right up to the empty mirror to see what's going on – his look of rapt attention perfectly framed by it. He's in the very centre of the photo and has become part of the circle of boys, but the frame is a physical barrier that stops him from joining them completely. Perhaps he is being minded by the woman in print dress and apron who also appears in the area framed by the mirror, just behind him, sitting on a chair set against a shopfront, gripping the handle of a baby carriage. She's only partly visible, her head obscured.

No one else on the street seems involved in the drama on the kerbside. Behind and just to the right of the mirror frame, a woman walks down the street, heading to the right. She's the only person in movement in the photo, and is almost ghostlike, with a gaunt face and white hair closely waved to her head in a style of a previous decade, and wearing a long, shapeless pale print frock.

In the background, a sign above a shop doorway gives the address as 225 West 34th Street. Three girls with dark hair, who could be sisters, are in front of a shopwindow with lettering that announces, 'Walter Quay Hand Laundry'. The oldest girl, in her early teens, is smiling, hand to her mouth as if thinking, mid-story. The two younger girls are turned to listen. Further up the street to the left, a placard advertises 'Kerosene, Ice and Coal'. Standing in front of the shop, a man in formal summer wear - white shirt, dark tie and jacket and straw hat - talks to a muscular man in a white t-shirt. Above them, a hanging sign with a picture of a shoe offers 'REPAIRING

for Ladies and Gents'. The next shop along has metal advertising signs for Coca Cola and 7Up; a woman in a summer dress and sandals turns towards a man in a sleeveless white vest. But all this is in the background, separated from us by the wooden frame that defines the real centre of the action.

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