

I CAME TO THE CITY and it changed my life.

I was exalted by it, exulted in it. I was a young man at a great personal threshold in a place and a moment throbbing with possibility, observing America from here in its extravagant peaks and turmoils, giving myself to the town and it to me: a most American covenant. I had arrived in 1963 from the provinces eventually to become editor-in-chief of *Harper's*, America's oldest magazine, at the age of thirty-two. Is it surprising that in time I grew to deem myself more a New Yorker than a Mississippian? New York was my patron city, crux and apogee of our national experience, matrix and pinnacle for me then of all the human artifacts.

The New York days! They seem faraway now, back again in the hinterland as I have been for more than ten years, and yet oddly near, surely only a fortnight ago, and they lifted me far out of myself: the stunning cosmos of the city at a time in which everyone seemed to know everyone else and where everything of importance seemed to happen first, its magic and majesty as epicenter of the nation and the world, its interlocking literary and cultural and political and social milieux, its glamorous parties and beautiful women and dialogue sparkling with adroit repartee, its clever *bon mots* and full-blooded lunacies, its teeming adventure and perilous fun, its monumental ambition, its aura then of idealism and titillation and tempestuous feasibility, the hard work and the gratification. I was part of all that. We were going to re-make literary America.

Not for me Mencken's "third-rate Babylon." The unbenighted metropolis comprehended the outlander who had immemorially come here in quest and odyssey; there was world enough and time for the Dixie exile. Life pullulated for me. I was young, from the South, wanted to know everyone and live everything. Roaming the city in the random hours, my psyche working so with ideas and feelings, I thought sometimes I would die of my own heat and curiosity and cunning. Tinder-dry I was then for the great town, and therefore inflammable. "I'll introduce you to every wit, halfwit, and nitwit in New York," the drunken poet told Frank Capra's Mr. Deeds, and that too was the city's voice whispering sedulously in my ear.

There were eight million telephone numbers in the Manhattan directory, and every one of them would have returned my calls. I knew the writers, the poets, the intellectuals, the editors, the actresses, the tycoons, the homicide detectives, the athletes, the *belle figure*, and not a few *fakirs* and reprobates and charlatans. I wined with Sinatra and eavesdropped in the *trattorias* on the Mob. I sat next to DiMaggio in the Garden ringside seats and addressed literary matrons in hats in the Waldorf-Astoria. I danced with Scarlett O'Hara's younger sister and Scott Fitzgerald's only daughter. I grew familiar with the palatial townhouses and high-rise penthouses on the Upper East Side with marble staircases, wide and steep and long, and Steinway grands which Gershwin had played on right in these rooms, and Cole Porter of Peru, Indiana, and Johnny Mercer of Savannah, Georgia, and I talked with the people who had known them all: George would play for us at the drop of a hat. As if he needed an excuse! Johnny drank too much, you know, but he was an amusing fellow. Cole was crippled by that frightful accident, but what a dear he was! And on any such evening if it were an entertainment or theatrical crowd ("How are you, dahling?" punctuated with moist profuse kisses) Comden and Green might be trying one of their new tunes around a piano in a parlor, or Lena Home singing "Stormy Weather," or Bobby Short up from a night off at the Carlyle, or the Texas boys of the Fantasticks

playing all those years on Sullivan Street in the Village, diverting such a bedazzled gathering. One could in these moments stand on the outside balconies and absorb the music from the distance and tinkle the ice in your glass and watch the great lights of Manhattan come on. Or think nothing at all of sighting Leonard Bernstein briefly alone in some sumptuous alcove there and engaging him in dexterous city chatter, then withdrawing from one's pocket a ballpoint pen some politician from home had sent you with its inscription "*I'm a Yellow Dog Democrat*" and presenting it to Leonard Bernstein, as I most certainly did one evening or another. "What in heaven is a Yellow Dog Democrat?" he asked. "A Southern Democrat who will vote for a yellow dog over a Republican," I replied. "How very clever! Eminently logical!" he responded, accepting the gift with deft metropolitan alacrity, then wandering the salon in the dappling glitter showing it to the others.

I liked Manhattan in the rain, when you could sit near the window of a bar in midtown and watch how contained it seemed under the elements, the raindrops bouncing on the tops of the vehicles and dissolving surrealistically in the night, the people scurrying by, or seeking shelter, the mighty facades enveloped in a dim soft mist: who are these souls hastening away under the rain, and where might they be going? I even grew to like it in the snow, the light, dervishing snowfalls like veils against the dimming lamps, the way the snowflakes swirled along the cross streets as in snowy tunnels and caught in the branches of the lonely little trees. I liked its seasons. Except for its blazing heat waves, when little phantasmic mists shimmered on the asphalt and concrete and steel, I liked the brassy blue-gray of New York summer dawns, liked too the summer afternoons when everyone was away, its supple and seductive whispers.

"I shall never forget the weekend Laura died," one of my favorite movies of New York begins. "A silver sun beamed through the sky like a huge magnifying glass. It was the hottest Sunday in my recollection. I felt as if I were the only human being left in New York City." Those big movie houses around Fiftieth Street were cool. There was something sensuous about the summer there—"overripe," Fitzgerald found it, "as if all sorts of funny fruits were going to fall into your hands." The city in summer was hot, hot as one's boyhood when you left your own cool moviehouse and its honeyed conjurings and were out again in the lush baking cauldron of reality that had been waiting there all along for you while you sat in the darkness with dreams, living the moments of life yet to be lived. "Far down the street a hydrant burst into a fountain of silver water," William Styron had observed in *Lie Down in Darkness*, "and three boys in shorts scampered in and out and darted and retreated like slick brown bees toward a silver blossom." On some nights the city, Saul Bellow knew, was hot as Bangkok, the whole continent seeming "to have moved from its place and slid nearer the equator, the bitter gray Atlantic to have become green and tropical, and the people, thronging on streets, barbaric fellaheen among the stupendous monuments of their mystery, the lights of which, in dazzling profusion, climb upward endlessly into the heat of the sky."

I liked the early springtime when the small scraggly trees in the heart of the city were trying so hard to burst into life, their modest limbs reaching beseechingly upward, the drafty wind along streets like breezeways, the trembling clouds in new shafts of sun. I liked the high shifting cloudbanks way beyond the Hudson River at the farthest western horizon, as if the whole nimbus of the American continent were somehow waiting expectantly out there under those very cloudbanks.

I liked Christmas in the city before the coming of the January murk, the twinkling of lights in avenue windows in the wintry nights, a gossamer touch of virgin snow, roasting chestnuts and the carols from Rockefeller Plaza and St. Patrick's, kind Tiffany's and F.A.O.

Schwartz and B. Altman's and Bloomingdale's, and Luchow's for the ceiling-high tree and the brass band playing "O, Tannenbaum," and the streetcorner Santa Clauses, some of them more than a little drunk.

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