

The Rains of New York, Albert Camus

The Rains of New York

New York rain is a rain of exile. Abundant, viscous and dense, it pours down tirelessly between the high cubes of cement into avenues plunged suddenly into the darkness of a well: seeking shelter in a cab that stops at a red light and starts again on a green, you suddenly feel caught in a trap, behind monotonous, fast-moving windshield wipers sweeping aside water that is constantly renewed.

You are convinced you could drive like this for hours without escaping these square prisons or the cisterns through which you wade with no hope of a hill or a real tree. The whitened skyscrapers loom in the gray mist like gigantic tombstones for a city of the dead, and seem to sway slightly on their foundations.

At this hour they are deserted. Eight million men, the smell of steel and cement, the madness of builders, and yet the very height of solitude. "Even if I were to clasp all the people in the world against me, it would protect me from nothing."

The reason perhaps is that New York is nothing without its sky. Naked and immense, stretched to the four corners of the horizon, it gives the city its glorious mornings and the grandeur of its evenings, when a flaming sunset sweeps down Eighth Avenue over the immense crowds driving past the shop windows, whose lights are turned on well before nightfall.

There are also certain twilights along Riverside Drive, when you watch the parkway that leads uptown, with the Hudson below, its waters reddened by the setting sun; off and on, from the uninterrupted flow of gently, smoothly running cars, from time to time there suddenly rises a song that recalls the sound of breaking waves. Finally I think of other evenings, so gentle and so swift they break your heart, that cast a purple glow over the vast lawns of Central Park, seen from Harlem.

Clouds of Negro children are striking balls with wooden bats, shouting with joy; while elderly Americans, in checked shirts, sprawl on park benches, sucking molded ice creams on a stick with what energy remains to them; while squirrels burrow into the earth at their feet in search of unknown tidbits.

In the park's trees, a jazz band of birds heralds the appearance of the first star above the Empire State Building, while long legged creatures stride along the paths against a backdrop of tall buildings, offering to the temporarily gentle sky their splendid looks and their loveless glance. But when this sky grows dull, or the daylight fades, then once again New York becomes the big city, prison by day and funeral pyre by night.

A prodigious funeral pyre at midnight, as its millions of lighted windows amid immense stretches of blackened walls carry these swarming lights halfway up the sky, as if every evening a gigantic fire were burning over Manhattan, the island with three rivers, raising immense, smoldering carcasses still pierced with dots of flame.

I have my ideas about other cities but about New York only these powerful and fleeting emotions, a nostalgia that grows impatient, and moments of anguish. After so many months I still know nothing about New York, whether one moves about among madmen here or among the most reasonable people in the world; whether life is as easy as all America says, or whether it is as empty here as it sometimes seems; whether it is natural for ten people to be employed where one would be enough and where you are served no faster; whether New Yorkers are liberals or conformists, modest souls or dead ones; whether it is admirable or unimportant that the garbage men wear well fitting gloves to do their work;

whether it serves any purpose that the circus in Madison Square Garden puts on ten simultaneous performances in four different rings, so that you are interested in all of them and can watch none of them; whether it is significant that the thousands of young people in the skating rink where I spent one evening, a kind of vélodrome d'hiver bathed in reddish and dusty lights, as they turned endlessly on their roller skates in an infernal din of metal wheels and loud organ music, should look as serious and absorbed as if they were solving simultaneous equations; whether, finally, we should believe those who say that it is eccentric to want to be alone, or naïvely those who are surprised that no one ever asks for your identity card.

In short, I am out of my depth when I think of New York. I wrestle with the morning fruit juices, the national Scotch and soda and its relationship to romance, the girls in taxis and their secret, fleeting acts of love, the excessive luxury and bad taste reflected even in the stupefying neckties, the anti-Semitism and the love of animals—this last extending from the gorillas in the Bronx Zoo to the protozoa of the Museum of Natural History—the funeral parlors where death and the dead are made up at top speed ("Die, and leave the rest to us"), the barber shops where you can get a shave at three in the morning, the temperature that swings from hot to cold in two hours, the subway that reminds you of Sing Sing prison, ads filled with clouds of smiles proclaiming from every wall that life is not tragic, cemeteries in flower beneath the gasworks, the beauty of the girls and the ugliness of the old men; the tens of thousands of musical-comedy generals and admirals stationed at the apartment entrances, some to whistle for green, red, and yellow taxis that look like beetles, others to open the door for you, and finally the ones who go up and down all over town like multicolored Cartesian divers in elevators fifty stories high.

Yes, I am out of my depth. I am learning that there are cities, like certain women, who annoy you, overwhelm you, and lay bare your soul, and whose scorching contact, scandalous and delightful at the same time, clings to every pore of your body. This is how, for days on end, I walked around New York, my eyes filled with tears simply because the city air is filled with cinders, and half one's time outdoors is spent rubbing the eyes or removing the minute speck of metal that the thousand New Jersey factories send into them as a joyful greeting gift, from across the Hudson. In the end, this is how New York affects me, like a foreign body in the eye, delicious and unbearable, evoking tears of emotion and all-consuming fury.

Perhaps this is what people call passion. All I can say is that I know what contrasting images mine feeds on. In the middle of the night sometimes, above the skyscrapers, across hundreds of high walls, the cry of a tugboat would meet my insomnia, reminding me that this desert of iron and cement was also an island. I would think of the sea then, and imagine myself on the shore of my own land.

On other evenings, riding in the front of the Third Avenue El, as it greedily swallows the little red and blue lights it tears past at third story level, from time to time allowing itself to be slowly absorbed by half-dark stations, I watched the skyscrapers turning in our path. Leaving the abstract avenues of the center of town I would let myself ride on toward the gradually poorer neighborhoods, where there were fewer and fewer cars. I knew what awaited me, those nights on the Bowery.

A few paces from the half mile long stretch of splendid bridal shops (where not one of the waxen mannequins was smiling) the forgotten men live, those who have let themselves drift into poverty in this city of bankers. It is the gloomiest part of town, where you never see a woman, where one man in every three is drunk, and where in a strange bar, apparently straight out of a Western, fat old actresses sing about ruined lives and a mother's love, stamping their feet to the rhythm and spasmodically shaking, to the bellowing from the bar, the parcels of shapeless flesh that age has covered them with. The drummer is an old woman too, and looks like a screech owl, and some evenings you feel you'd like to know

her life—at one of those rare moments when geography disappears and loneliness becomes a slightly confused truth.

At other times ... but yes, of course, I loved the mornings and the evenings of New York. I loved New York, with that powerful love that sometimes leaves you full of uncertainties and hatred: sometimes one needs exile. And then the very smell of New York rain tracks you down in the heart of the most harmonious and familiar towns, to remind you there is at least one place of deliverance in the world, where you, together with a whole people and for as long as you want, can finally lose yourself forever.

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The end