

Alien

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On Sunday evening, I find myself at a party. “Whose party is this?” I ask the man who hands me a gray flute of champagne.

“Why, it’s your party. This party is for you!” he tells me, then turns and whispers a joke or a story into his lady’s ear.

I discover that the party marks the seven-year anniversary of my residence in New York, which would have easily passed unnoted had no one reminded me. I do not keep calendars in the apartment because they make me anxious in the same way it makes me anxious to look out my window and see treetops moving in a wind I cannot feel. I had no sense of when the first year ended, the second, fifth, and now, it appears, seventh. My progression in life has been measured by far less discrete understandings of time. It is mostly a question of how many months pass before I notice the gravity of shifting eras tugging at my skin and hair.

I do not know who threw this party, which person owns enough calendars to keep track of someone else’s banal milestones in conjunction with theirs (or perhaps they camouflage their own existential panic in the erosion of other lives). It seems ridiculous to question other guests for the identity of the orchestrator. I look around and see many people with elusive names and the most abstract of involvements in my story. I can only place solid identities with ten or so of the voices and hands reaching out to congratulate me. An old professor in casual dress, a miniature legion of classmates from graduate school who laugh and refill each other’s glasses, a single co-worker getting drunk, a friend wearing lipstick and looking regretful, and someone I’ve slept with.

They circle me, bizarrely reverent, and toast many times. “To health!” “To life!” “To the Big Apple!” “To you, our dear friend!” I take small sips in between toasts and so does everyone except my co-worker, who seizes glass after glass, and disappears to the bathroom to vomit, and emerges thirsty.

“Hey, tell us how you came to this great city!” someone prompts. They try not to embarrass me by pointing out what a quiet affair this is, how disjointedly the characters in attendance fit into conversation, with no memories or futures in common. “Tell us why you moved,” the room echoes.

What a strange question to ask, and stranger to answer. What kind of response does it demand? I have no idea. Where should I start? How can I tell them any truth, knowing it to be a question inspired not by interest but by desperation? Caught between a rock and a hard place, the palms of impropriety. One will strike me for refusing to answer the question; the other will strike me for boring a room with a story that no one really wants to hear.

Well, I eventually have to begin; you all know that I came here from the Midwest. The state, much less the town, does not beg further specification. To these people of the city, that faraway, flat, and unassuming region is the same boring landscape repeated

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manifold; they could no sooner distinguish between two different species of potato as distinguish between the state of Illinois or the state of Indiana. The “Midwest” is all it takes to conjure up as detailed an image as they will ever need, one of the few American stereotypes that touches on truth. Everyone follows my introduction with waxy nods; in their eyes stretch sun baked fields of corn, slow forests of windmills, stocky men in overalls chewing wheat and boasting prize pigs.

The more naturally I feel classified under the label of “New Yorker” (a privilege earned by accruing these oft-unmarked anniversaries of residence; in short, enduring time and nothing more or less) the more acutely I feel shamed by my neighbors’ attitude toward the land that raised me. The stubborn plateaus, dense with crops and ankle-deep circles of murky water, versus the cityscape of New York, so alive every minute with music and friction: the contrast is hysterical. To me, the casual superiority radiant in my peers, nursing their urban callouses with their entitlement to the world, is justified. So I will not venerate the things I knew before I traveled East, but I will not let them know that I am compromising the story.

I stayed in the same public school system through elementary, middle, high school, I continue. Silently, I remember watching, every year, the same people shedding their youth. Each day our skins of optimism and innocence flaked away, exposing underneath shells of inhibition and apathy. It was a disease – and eventually I convinced myself that it was fostered in the flatland around me, allowed to spread and germinate ruthlessly because it was so unimpeded by its habitat. No hills, no mountains, only a smooth runway into the horizon in every direction, a flat topography peopled by a flat culture that could not bother to build immunity. I felt sick, and I *was* sick of the engulfing sameness. I was not a revolutionary, so I told no one – I only left.

I’ve paused, and pick the story up again: through elementary, middle, high school...but I decided to come to New York for college, because I wanted to see the city, and I wanted a change. Really, I sought a cure, a pulse, something to reverse the process I believed was turning my limbs, mind, and spirit necrotic.

I see they want to laugh: it’s a party. I have no jokes to tell; all I have are thoughts that have amused me just before sleep or while turning street corners alone, nothing I have tested on an audience, nothing that has proven itself capable of retaining its humor when published. I will invent.

Let me tell you: I hear myself. Let me tell you! The moment I knew I had to come to New York – the moment I thought, I have to get out of here – I was underneath the bleachers, because you know, all those public high schools, they always have bleachers. I was kissing somebody and clothes started to come off. It was after a game – a football game, these public high schools are so invested in their football games, and teams. So it was getting dark and everyone had left. We were taking our clothes off – I was undoing a button, or a zipper, and my hands were shaking. And where I put my hand next – I didn’t feel skin, and I pulled back, and it was a cornhusk! A cornhusk had fallen into my hands. That’s when I told myself, I have to leave, or I will be swallowed.

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It's a good story, and I'm happy to see everyone smiling, some laughing with their mouths open and teeth showing. I recall the presence of my sometimes-lover, and we come inches within looking at one another. But now they're asking, How about when you came? How was your first year in the big city? And I have to think of more answers.

The first year was scary, I tell them. What a weak adjective – and nothing like how I remember it. The first year was running and running and never breathing, the weak feeling after surpassingly strenuous exercise as if your bones are hollow, walking against a wind so strong it pulls skin from skeleton. I was too overwhelmed by the city, too hypersensitive to its novelty, and I hated it. I wanted to feel organic, to move through its spaces and secrets as though I possessed them. I wanted my feet to meet the pavement with the surety of seed returning to soil. Now, engraved seven years deep into the paths of New York I have since walked, it seems ridiculous to talk about this.

So instead I say: it was scary, but it was a lot of fun.

They've exhausted the foremost layer of inanity, but they're still scared to look at one another, because we are all strangers in this room, fragmented islands, and the space around and between us might as well be flooded with miles of ocean for the absence of tensions and histories separating us.

The graduate school classmates are remembering things about me now. Hey, weren't you quite the party maker back in the day? Didn't you plan Sheila's You Got Hired! party and Tim, who couldn't make it – his You Got Fired! party? Didn't you used to hit up three different liquor stores in town because they set limits on how much booze you could buy? Didn't you used to get on the table and dance, dance, dance? Didn't you go to class with a hangover all those times? Didn't you once fit so many blunts in your mouth that you got lockjaw?

Their memories of me go on and on and on. I try to look embarrassed, as if the person they describe who so lawlessly pursued thrills still belongs to me. I would forget to hold these spectacular moral failings as elements of my past, either treasured or suppressed, if I were not hearing of them secondhand. They are scenes from a movie I saw as a teenager, something someone told me to be at an impressionable moment, not real to me.

As time regurgitates itself upon the ears of every guest, I look up and find my old professor's stare. *Why did you come here?* I want to know. To hear these tales, delighted, sordid, roiling? Are they of interest? How perverse! Are you ashamed of me? How patronizing! He has maybe helped himself to too much champagne, and it spills onto his vest, and I feel disgust, and remember holding my undergraduate diploma and being seized with a vicious wish to burn it to ash. Four years of these seven passed. And I will work on an eighth and it will be two sets of pointless fours. The math of it gives me a headache. What a wasteful education.

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A hand grabs at mine, lips lie at my ear: I am so sorry to leave. My co-worker reaches the door before I can reply. I smell in the trail left between us desperation purged and imagine that when I look into my bathroom next, I will find a configuration of bottles holding bits of soul. *Who thought to invite you? They don't even know you.*

My friend reaches over and folds me into her scent. She is not glad she came, and will not say so, but she stays nonetheless. "Congratulations, darling, congratulations – seven years in New York! That is something, that is *really something*. Remember when we met in this city? It must have been your second, third, year... someone spilled coffee on someone else in Lower Manhattan and someone bought someone a coffee to make up for it. Who was whom, which was which? Is that really even how we met? Does it matter anymore?" She confuses one story with another, me with another friend, because we were never close, and she is here to drink as much as she is to congratulate me. We graduated next to one another, but the last time I saw her was nearly a year ago, when we walked down Barrow eating pastries together, and ended up in a store wallpapered with fetish garters and vibrators, and like children incapable of understanding we had a swordfight with dildos until the greasy cashier asked us to buy or leave, buy or leave, so we left and ran out underneath a green neon sign that read *The Pink Pussycat*. Maybe she's recalling the same thing as her fingers close around my wrist and hold tight – if she lets go she will lose me, in the way of New York.

I begin to wonder if anyone has invited one of my neighbors, if any of them are here. Neighbors are the quintessential strangers of the city, but haven't I lived here long enough that one or two might show up? That's seven years I've listened to your morning routine in the bathroom, slamming the medicine cabinet and the toilet seat and the shower curtain, with my pillow pressing frustrated sleep to my ear. That's seven years your ethnic cooking experiments have forged a malodorous path into my living room. Oh, the conversations I could have with my neighbors, back and forth, about the cubist way we've come to know one another. Perhaps if I step onto the balcony I will find one standing on the next ledge, so I shake my friend away and move through the door, look around to see if I might be so lucky. I am not.

From this suspended concrete the view of the street is distorted and the party has faded. I am delighted by the cold air rushing into me and its reminder that when they all leave, I will be once again alone. How has it been seven years? Of coffee lines and food carts and ambulance sirens, of sewage puddles and steaming grates, of subway nymphs turning tricks, of my own reflection rippling between windows, of passing terrifyingly gorgeous people and young homeless artists and always avoiding eye contact, of dreams tasting like traffic and graffiti...

The moment I decided to come to New York I was standing at the edge of a cornfield, where stalks tall enough to blind me moved open and closed in the wind. When they opened I could see a foot-wide path carved by delinquent pioneers: carpeted in cigarettes, bottles, used condoms, unused condoms (the stories those could tell!), empty husks, cores of fruits, the glint of lost jewelry and virginities catching the sun like broken glass resolutely buried. *This is the story of this place*. I could not stand it. I imagined

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that if I stepped through the swaying curtain the magnitude of adventures and aspirations deferred would generate an enormous earthquake that would rip the field and this world in half down the seam of its littered avenue, and all the detritus would fall into the chasm and I would follow and so would everything else I knew of it. The institutional schools where no one ever learned anything – the interstate museums filled with unhistorical items – tractors and barns and livestock and whole orchards – swallowed, and me with it. *Fight or flight, fight or flight* – I could be consumed or I could run as far as I could imagine, so I flew.

My lover's shoulder touches mine and I am no longer alone. We breathe together awhile. "I'm remembering seven years," I say. "Do you have a cigarette?" Before long we have filled the air around us with clouds, swirly and thick with sentiment.

"I can't believe they threw a party for me," I say, but even as the words leave they are lies. We both know. This party is not for me. If I return, they will not know me – they are not here for me. I am no longer welcome in the room I have left, a room filled with seven years, and friends who are strangers, and I turn around and my lover is gone and all that remains is the smoky silhouette of the apathy we reveled in together. Behind me they continue to laugh and toast. I cannot go back. It is not my party.

Seven years, seven years. Fight or flight. I finish the cigarette and watch it tumble to the street, carried on its ash and ember like a dying rocket into the screeching ocean beneath. There is no other choice – I mount the balcony and dive after it.