

Dirty Nostalgia

Alissa Quart

Just recalling New York before it was gilded, when it was still in its age of detritus, when antiambition was a popular pose, fills me with dirty nostalgia.

As a child, I rode around the city on subway cars encased by graffiti, filth and dust so thick you could write your name in it. This was thirty years ago when adults lived in slovenly rooms connected by thin hallways, apartments that were strung together like beaded necklaces encrusted in dirt. Manhattan parents, including mine, made the living room their bedroom, making do with little money, as dust accrued in every corner of their small homes.

Back then I liked our giant industrial vacuum cleaner but only as a toy: my whale. I was Jonah. I rode around on the vacuum, which was exciting and menacing—it could swallow my belongings and me in one gulp. Even then, I preferred my own dirt to cleaning: I threw my things on the floor in a semicircle around my bed. I felt that by surrounding my bed with refuse, it became the safest place in the house. My father sometimes picked up my mess or screamed

but he didn't care that much about it. He thought neatness was bourgeois. He saved his compulsions for the broken glass covering the sidewalks—he sometimes picked it up with his bare hands, which was civic but terrifying.

As a child I would visit the many filthy curiosity stores that abounded, where ancient women sold mid-century silk dresses and chipped mother of pearl lockets, piled so densely you couldn't see in or out of their windows. Back then, the city's blocks served as ad hoc bathrooms for thousands of the newly deinstitutionalized population: though unpleasant, it was fascinating to children. When I went home at night, there were rust stains on the tub where I took my bath.

A few years later, I was still attracted to the dirty. I went to see Lou Reed when I was thirteen at the old Ritz on 11th Street. I walked home singing "Street Hassle" with my Greek American friend from Astoria—he was fourteen, with a receding hairline. Even then I felt born too late, too long after Lou's *Transformer* phase—"You hit me with a flower, you do it every hour." It was after the late New York School poets had died or left the city in search of local arts funding.

Any style of hopelessness was more hopeful to me than a 12-Step Program.

Then, the term "urban blight" didn't only mean Detroit. It also meant New York, and a band whose T-shirts the kids of the city wore proudly. I pushed through fighting tenants to get into tenements and to visit friends. I slept in beds with girls I had just met—one of these young women put cigarettes out on her arm in front of me, like she did at clubs for attention. There were neighborhoods that were dangerous, that you had to walk through with your shoulders squared, Washington Heights but also much of Brooklyn. I walked through said districts with a macho swagger, at night. Sometimes I'd be smoking, in a red blouse with a zipper and gold sequins.

I found my first apartment in the East Village, not far from where I had grown up. I went to the same dinged-up dive bars my father had drank in before I was born. I subsisted on lightly defrosted

pierogis. I lived in an apartment where there was a hole in the center of the floor of my kitchen and smoke from the bar below filtered up through the break in the boards. I and people like me believed that there was moral superiority to chaos, to having cockroaches skimming across your floors and lianas of weeds poking through, of having your hair knotted, as mine was, as if a swarm of bees had lived in it. New York was not quite a careful place then: There was even independent publishing. There were many more used book stores and many more dusty older men in aged wool gloves who collected things and had dropped out of college and spent their days in the library even though they weren't even crazy. New Yorkers did not trust clean people, although some were corralled on the Upper East Side.

My aim then was to write prose poetry so encoded, so intellectually rarified and emotionally private, that no one would ever understand it. I went to incense-filled, dank apartments, where I tried not to fall in love. I usually succeeded. The only shiny places I had ever seen were the buildings of the fancy college I attended and the apartments of the art celebrities whom the young people I knew worked for: I illicitly slept in the bed of an eighties art star—with his assistant—and in the bed of a famed mid-century writer with his.

One never gets so close to the famous as when one is young enough to know all the assistants.

Then, I wore Salvation Army coats, especially when I was asking other people to save me. Antique books told me how to play parlor games in raised gold letters. Real books told me how to live and also that I should read all day instead of getting a job. Under the clutter, there was a telephone, for talking my friends through their crack-ups. This was a time in Manhattan when people not only admitted to having crackups but boasted about them.

Around my home, my first apartment, I had created an assemblage culled from the streets outside—streets where you could still find gold shoes in any garbage can in the snow. The cases of

hundreds of CDs scattered, some with the plastic broken. My giant teacups, inevitably missing handles.

It was cracked—all of it—and I loved it.

You could say that these feelings were merely a coefficient of youth. You could say we are cyclically averse to cities we live in, and that their luxury and our repugnance to their luxury operate like sine curves. Throughout the last century, people have commented on the awfulness of a New Slick New York City. Henry James, who was born on the same block I was, called it a “terrible town” in 1904. He denounced it for having turned into “a vast crude democracy of trade,” one that betrayed the New York City of his own childhood.

In 1969, the artist Donald Judd left New York City for the West, although not for good, calling the city “glib” and “narrow.”

But I am sure that it is more than my nostalgia for my own youth that makes New York of that time seem happily shine-free and low-gloss when compared to today. A street would boast a succession of fire-eaters, male dancers on tiny bicycles—I rode a miniature purple bicycle, too—literary pornographers who lived off people they met at Narcotics Anonymous, people whose medical bills were being paid for by all of their friends.

If I was emotionally honest, which I wasn't then, I would say I was avoiding both the past and the future. I was in a state of panic rapture, the flight side of fight-or-flight. My flight was an escape from conventional structures but those structures that had never held, protected, or sustained me and meant less than nothing to me. In my twenties, I was in a constant state of “Just say no” to illusions about social status and propriety. I replaced them with my own new fantasias of purity and freedom that were only possible through the truth of mess. I saw women—all people, really—as dragged down by repetition and minutiae. Drudgery of any kind was bad for you. It was part of being put-together. I hated that.

I did try, briefly, to romanticize the feminine arts. I talked about the power of cleaning with my in-recovery yogi roommate—she

wore velvet body suits and scrubbed the floors with mint natural cleaner, both at the East Village yoga center and at our shared home. Cleaning was *ahimsa*, or nonviolent practice, she told me, yogically, long before the yoga center became a palace of sorts, with a large cleaning staff. I read Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping*, where chores were the glue of solidarity between destitute, dedicated women and girls: they started smoldering fires to boil water for tea and soup and whacked the woodpiles with brooms, always together. I tried emulating their domestic skills. I even tried to start knitting like all the girls that year did, those who were dropping stitches in quasi-homey circles. But the idea of women finding their strength through housekeeping just didn't work for me. I took no joy in picking up a stitch. I had never shared a jolly chore with my mother or cousin when I was growing up. By the time I was an adult, it was too late.

Keeping clean in New York on the edge of a new millennium meant something else. It was all there for the perceiving in the later 1990s, the dot-com heyday. Cleaning up was no longer the woof and warp linking woman to woman. It was neither ablution nor meditation. The city was expanding into a giant, globalized, technocratic prom queen. Suddenly, there were people calculating their lives as if they were characters on *Sex and the City*. They stripped the gold paint on their walls, repainting them sage and eggshell. Hair was double processed.

I remained a creature of the old untidy New York.

I am not alone in my dirty nostalgia for a city and a way of being that has gone. I was reminded of this a few years ago by a Luc Sante essay on New York City of the 1980s. He wrote of its "potsherds and tumuli" and being entranced by decay and eager for more of it.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, I should have seen the end of dirty New York on the horizon. Once bars were still full of American

Spirit smoke, killing us: in the days before the New Gilded Age, dive bars were honorable. No longer. The new, omnipresent lounge bars arrived into a flush city. They were a dark, overpriced harbinger of the New York to come.

In these venues, I met men who were fastidious and elegant with very well-cut hair. I was attracted to this type—my opposite. They all wore more scent than I did and tended to themselves and their homes like the oligarchs of ancient Rome. I resented and envied them for this.

Through them, I saw there were new expectations of self in the tidy, carefully appointed New York—of “stepping it up,” of “turning up the wattage,” of “taking control of your life.” By then, the term “selling out” had been retired, its paradoxes collapsing. With this useful reproach gone, the new New York inflated: Luminous ATMs proliferated as did their music, a steady buzz of receipts being printed out in thousands of franchises and boutiques. The city was slouching toward perfection.

Now, the women who best survived New York performed their femininity without glitches. They were part of couples that once went to suburbs when they had children. In the new New York, they stayed here, expanding—anodyne, luxurious—through the dining tables with the extra leaves, the designer shoe closets, the kitchen islands, and the extra bedrooms for the nannies. I watched this all, on the edges of the cleanup.

I missed the vanished analog city. I held on to it so hard I became belated. I was now in my thirties and I was told that it was time to grow up. I would talk about the time I was a teenager or a young person with friends and they would be aghast by how fresh and present these memories seemed. “That was a long time ago,” these childhood friends would say, with some relief. “I was so different, then. We are old, now.”

Perhaps I was getting old but I wasn’t growing up, no matter how many times I told myself to. I had enough maturity to survive,

though, and I survived, ironically, by publishing. Because I had published one book and then another, people wrote things about me and in one newspaper, I was described as slim, wearing gold sandals, and having ink stains on my handbag. I had thought a pen-dirtied handbag was cool, of course, like self-deprecation and androgyny. I realized then that these things no longer functioned as smoke signals of authenticity.

I bought a new handbag. It was of a piece with the new Manhattan, a place where strangers' smiles were suddenly freakishly bright, like bone china.

In the last few years, I have forced myself to neaten a little, not out of desire, but adaptation. I buy the ecological-esque Seventh Generation dish liquid but mostly for the brand name's happy sociology.

When I met my husband, he was a Mr. Clean. He had immaculate files and ordered reporting notebooks, going back to the early 1980s. He also had a large, spare apartment, the sort of home where everything has its place and its folder, as ordered as a terrarium. True, it was a little short on color and life, but I reasoned that this was all for the good—it meant my presence would be necessary.

My husband-to-be was surprised at first that I did not like to clean. When we first got together, he was disturbed that I left a fort around my bed of yesterday's clothes. To me, it was like a diorama of when New York's streets and buildings looked Martian and charred.

He still nags me daily to pick up my boots, to comb my hair, and to send thank-you emails. And under his tutelage, I have learned to save my receipts, throw away my junk mail, cook complicated dinners, and brush my hair until it shines. Today, I like to think that he accepts me as I am.

In my middle thirties, I have outlived my unclean New York, and yet I am still here, like a self-appointed living ghost. It's a little

like being a very old person who has outlived her friends. I still create a nest of cast-off things in our apartment, my protection from the rest of New York and also the world, which I know to be equally disordered. And in my mind's eye, I recall a bohemian ruddy palace of spilled shiraz; of manuscripts accidentally crisped in an oven; of butch tree houses; of emotional dachas; of squats; of a palladium of the thwarted yet thoughtful.

Maybe one day I—and far more of us—will live like that again.