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**My Lost City**

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The idea of writing a book about New York City[1](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2003/nov/06/my-lost-city/?pagination=false&printpage=true#fn1-439310323) first entered my head around 1980, when I was a writer more wishfully than in actual fact, spending my nights in clubs and bars and my days rather casually employed in the mailroom of this magazine. It was there that Rem Koolhaas’s epochal *Delirious New York* fell into my hands. “New York is a city that will be replaced by another city” is the phrase that sticks in my mind. Koolhaas’s book, published in 1978 as a paean to the unfinished project of New York the Wonder City, seemed like an archaeological reverie, an evocation of the hubris and ambition of a dead city.[2](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2003/nov/06/my-lost-city/?pagination=false&printpage=true#fn2-439310323) I gazed wonderingly at its illustrations, which showed sights as dazzling and remote as Nineveh and Tyre. The irony is that many of their subjects stood within walking distance: the Chrysler Building, the McGraw-Hill Building, Rockefeller Center. But they didn’t convey the feeling they had when they were new. In Koolhaas’s pages New York City was manifestly the location of the utopian and dystopian fantasies of the silent-film era. It was *Metropolis*, with elevated roadways, giant searchlights probing the heavens, flying machines navigating the skyscraper canyons. It was permanently set in the future.

The New York I lived in, on the other hand, was rapidly regressing. It was a ruin in the making, and my friends and I were camped out amid its potsherds and tumuli. This did not distress me—quite the contrary. I was enthralled by decay and eager for more: ailanthus trees growing through cracks in the asphalt, ponds and streams forming in leveled blocks and slowly making their way to the shoreline, wild animals returning from centuries of exile. Such a scenario did not seem so far-fetched then. Already in the mid-1970s, when I was a student at Columbia, my windows gave out onto the plaza of the School of International Affairs, where on winter nights troops of feral dogs would arrive to bed down on the heating grates. Since then the city had lapsed even further. On Canal Street stood a five-story building empty of human tenants that had been taken over from top to bottom by pigeons. If you walked east on Houston Street from the Bowery on a summer night, the jungle growth of vacant blocks gave a foretaste of the impending wilderness, when lianas would engird the skyscrapers and mushrooms would cover Times Square.

At that time much of Manhattan felt depopulated even in daylight. Aside from the high-intensity blocks of Midtown and the financial district, the place seemed to be inhabited principally by slouchers and loungers, loose-joints vendors and teenage hustlers, panhandlers and site-specific drunks, persons whose fleabags put them out on the street at eight and only permitted reentry at six. Many businesses seemed to remain open solely to give their owners shelter from the elements. How often did a dollar cross the counter of the plastic-lettering concern, or the prosthetic-limb showroom, or the place that ostensibly traded in office furniture but displayed in its window a Chinese typewriter and a stuffed two-headed calf? Outside under an awning on a hot afternoon would be a card table, textured like an old suitcase with four metal corners, and around it four guys playing dominoes. Maybe they’d have a little TV set, up on a milk crate, plugged into the base of a streetlight, issuing baseball. On every corner was a storefront that advertised Optimo or Te-Amo or Romeo y Julieta, and besides cigars they sold smut and soda pop and rubbers and candy and glassine envelopes and sometimes police equipment. And there were Donuts Muffins Snack Bar and Chinas Comidas and Hand Laundry and Cold Beer Grocery and Barber College, all old friends. Those places weren’t like commercial establishments, exactly, more like rooms in your house. They tended to advertise just their descriptions; their names, like those of deities, were kept hidden, could be discovered only by reading the license tacked up somewhere behind the cash register. At the bodega you could buy plantains and coffee and *malta* and lard, or a single cigarette—a loosie—or a sheet of paper, an envelope, and a stamp.

I drifted down from the Upper West Side to the Lower East Side in 1978. Most of my friends made the transition around the same time. You could have an apartment all to yourself for less than $150 a month. In addition, the place was happening. It was happening, that is, in two or at most three dingy bars that doubled as clubs, a bookstore or record store or two, and a bunch of individual apartments and individual imaginations. All of us were in that stage of youth when your star may not yet have risen, but your moment is the only one on the clock. We had the temerity to laugh at the hippies, shamefully backdated by half a decade. In our arrogance we were barely conscious of the much deeper past that lay all around. We didn’t ask ourselves why the name carved above the door of the public library on Second Avenue was in German, or why busts of nineteenth-century composers could be seen on a second-story lintel on Fourth Street. Our neighborhood was so chockablock with ruins we didn’t question the existence of vast bulks of shuttered theaters, or wonder when they had been new. Our apartments were furnished exclusively through scavenging, but we didn’t find it notable that nearly all our living rooms featured sewing-machine tables with cast-iron bases.

When old people died without wills or heirs, the landlord would set the belongings of the deceased out on the sidewalk, since that was cheaper than hiring a removal van. We would go through the boxes and help ourselves, and come upon photographs and books and curiosities, evidence of lives and passions spent in the turmoil of 1910 and 1920, of the Mexican Border War and Emma Goldman’s *Mother Earth* and vaudeville and labor unions and the shipping trade, and we might be briefly diverted, but we were much more interested in the boxes on the next stoop containing someone’s considerably more recent record collection. One day something fell out of an old book, the business card of a beauty parlor that had stood on Avenue C near Third Street, probably in the 1920s. I marveled at it, unable to picture something as sedate as a beauty parlor anywhere near that corner, by then a heroin souk.

The neighborhood was desolate, so underpopulated that landlords would give you a month’s free rent just for signing a lease, many buildings being less than half-full, but it was far from tranquil. We might feel smug about being robbed on the street, since none of us had any money, and we looked it, and junkies—as distinct from the crackheads of a decade later—would generally not stab you for chump change. Nevertheless, if you did not have the wherewithal to install gates on your windows you would be burglarized repeatedly, and where would you be without your stereo? In the blocks east of Avenue A the situation was dramatically worse. In 1978 I got used to seeing large fires in that direction every night, usually set by arsonists hired by landlords of empty buildings who found it an easy choice to make, between paying property taxes and collecting insurance. By 1980 Avenue C was a lunar landscape of vacant blocks and hollow tenement shells. Over there, commerce—in food or clothing, say—was often conducted out of car trunks, but the most thriving industry was junk, and it alone made use of marginally viable specimens of the building stock. The charred stairwells, the gaping floorboards, the lack of lighting, the entryways consisting of holes torn in ground-floor walls—all served the psychological imperatives of the heroin trade.

Dealers knew that white middle-class junkies thrived on squalor, that it was a component of their masochism, and that their masochism, with an admixture of bourgeois guilt, was what had drawn them to the neighborhood. The dealers proved this thesis daily, at least to themselves, by requiring their customers to stand for an hour in pouring rain before allowing them inside, for example, and then shifting them up five flights with interstitial waits on the landings, and then possibly, whimsically, refusing to sell to them once they finally arrived in front of the slotted door. Of course, a junkie becomes a masochist by virtue of his habit, and any of those people would have done much worse to obtain a fix, but the dealers were correct to a degree. Some did indeed come to the neighborhood to revel in squalor, and junkiedom was part of the package, as surfing would be if they had moved to Hawaii instead. They were down with the romance of it, had read the books and gazed upon the pop stars. Junkiehood could happen to anyone, for a complex of reasons that included availability, boredom, anxiety, depression, and self-loathing, but many were tourists of scag, and if they wiped out as a consequence it was the inevitable effect of a natural law, like gravity. They had been culled.

For those of us who had been in the city for a while, squalor was not an issue. Most of the city was squalid. If this troubled you, you left, and if you were taken by the romance of it, a long regimen of squalor in everyday life would eventually scrub your illusions gray. At this remove I’m sometimes retrospectively amazed by what I took for granted. Large fires a few blocks away every night for a couple of years would seem conducive to a perpetually troubled state of mind, but they just became weather. I spent the summer of 1975 in a top-floor apartment on 107th Street, where at night the windows were lit by the glow of fires along Amsterdam Avenue. A sanitation strike was in progress, and mounds of refuse, reeking in the heat, decorated the curbs of every neighborhood, not excepting those whose houses were manned by doormen. Here, though, instead of being double-bagged in plastic, they were simply set on fire every night. The spectacle achieved the transition from apocalyptic to dully normal in a matter of days.

Two summers later I was living with two roommates in a tall building on Broadway at 101st Street. It had both a doorman and an elevator operator; most of the other tenants were elderly European Jews; our rent for five large rooms was $400 a month. I note these facts because the other buildings lining Broadway in that area were mainly “single-room-occupancy” hotels, tenanted by the luckless, the bereft, the unemployable, dipsomaniacs, junkies, released mental patients—exactly that portion of the population that would be turned out and left to conduct its existence in shelters or doorways or drainpipes or jails in the following decade. What those people had in common was that they could not blend into mainstream society; otherwise there was no stereotyping them. For example, a rather eerie daily entertainment in the warmer months was provided by a group of middle-aged transvestites who would lean against parked cars in their minidresses and bouffantes and issue forth perfect four-part doo-wop harmonies. You had to wonder in which volume of the Relic label’s “Golden Groups” series they might figure, perhaps pictured on the sleeve in younger, thinner, pencil-mustached, tuxedo-clad incarnations. For them, as for most people on the street—including, we liked to think, us—New York City was the only imaginable home, the only place that posted no outer limit on appearance or behavior.

When the blackout happened, on the evening of July 13, 1977, it briefly seemed as though the hour of reckoning had arrived, when all those outsiders would seize control. Naturally, no such thing occurred. The outsiders seized televisions and toaster ovens and three-piece suits and standing rib roasts and quarts of Old Mr. Boston and cartons of Newports and perhaps sectional sofas, but few would have known what to do with the levers of society had they been presented in a velvet-lined box. But then, my friends and I wouldn’t have known, either. For all the obvious differences between the SRO-dwellers and ourselves, we were alike in our disconnection from any but the most parochial idea of community. In the end the mob dissolved like a fist when you open your hand, and the benches on the Broadway traffic islands were repopulated by loungers occasionally pulling down a bottle hanging by a string from a leaf-enshrouded tree branch overhead.

The looters were exemplary Americans, whose immediate impulse in a crisis was to see to the acquisition of consumable goods. They had no interest in power. Neither did anyone I knew. We just wanted power to go away. Sometimes it seemed as though it already had. In those days the police, when not altogether invisible, were nearly benign, or at least showed no interest in the likes of us, being occupied with actual violent crime. Almost everybody had a story about walking down the street smoking a joint and suddenly realizing they had just passed a uniformed patrolman, who could not possibly have failed to detect the odor but resolutely looked the other way. Casual illegality was unremarkable and quotidian, a matter of drug use and theft of goods and services, petty things. We slid by in weasel jobs, in part because we were preoccupied with our avocations and in part because a certain lassitude had come over us, a brand of the era.

The revolution was deferred indefinitely, then, because we were too comfortable. Not, mind you, that we didn’t live in dumps where the floors slanted and the walls were held together with duct tape and the window frames had last been caulked in 1912 and the heat regularly went off for a week at a time in the depths of winter. The landlords were the primary villains and the most visible manifestations of authority. Very few still went from door to door collecting rents, but most could be physically located, sitting at a secondhand metal desk on the telephone in some decrepit two-room office, and that included the ones who went home to mansions in Great Neck. Real estate was a buyer’s market, and owners needed to hustle for every dollar, and were correspondingly reluctant to make expenditures that would be any greater than the anticipated legal costs of not making them. At the same time, you could let the rent go for a while and not face eviction, because the eviction process itself would cost the landlord some kale, besides which it might be hard to find anyone else to take up the lease, so that a tenant who only paid every other month was better than nothing. We were comfortable because we could live on very little, satisfying most requirements in a fiercely minimal style for which we had developed a defining and mitigating aesthetic. It was lucky if not entirely coincidental that the threadbare overcoat you could obtain for a reasonable three dollars just happened to be the height of fashion.

Suspicion in the hinterlands of New York City’s moral fiber and quality of life, rampant since the early nineteenth century, reached new heights during the 1970s. Hadn’t the President himself urged the city to drop dead? If you told people almost anywhere in the country then that you lived in New York, they tended to look at you as if you had boasted of dining on wormwood and gall. Images of the city on big or small screens, fictional or ostensibly journalistic, were a blur of violence, drugs, and squalor. A sort of apotheosis appeared in John Carpenter’s *Escape from New York* (1981), in which the city has become a maximum-security prison by default. The last honest folk having abandoned the place, the authorities have merely locked it up, permitting the scum within to rule themselves, with the understanding that they will before long kill one another off. The story may have been a futuristic action-adventure, but for most Americans the premise was strict naturalism, with the sole exception of the locks, which ought by rights to have been in place. Aside from the matter of actual violence, drugs, and squalor, there was the fact that in the 1970s New York City was not a part of the United States at all. It was an offshore interzone with no shopping malls, few major chains, very few born-again Christians who had not been sent there on a mission, no golf courses, no subdivisions.

Downtown we were proud of this, naturally. We thought of the place as a free city, like one of those pre-war nests of intrigue and licentiousness where exiles and lamsters and refugees found shelter in a tangle of improbable juxtapositions. I had never gotten around to changing my nationality from the one assigned me at birth, but I would have declared myself a citizen of New York City had such a stateless state existed, its flag a solid black. But what happened instead is that Reagan was elected and the musk of profit once again scented the air. It took all of us a while to realize that this might affect us in intimate ways—we were fixated on nuclear war. So while we were dozing money crept in, making its presence felt slowly, in oddly assorted and apparently peripheral ways. The first sign was the new phenomenon of street vendors. Before the early 1980s you never saw people selling old books or miscellaneous refuse from flattened boxes on the sidewalk. If you truly wanted to sell things you could rent a storefront for next to nothing, assuming you weren’t choosy about location. But now, very quickly, Astor Place became a vast flea market, with vendors ranging from collectors of old comic books to optimists attempting to unload whatever they had skimmed from garbage cans the night before. Those effects of the deceased that had once been set out for the pickings of all were now the stock of whoever happened upon them first. The daily spectacle was delirious, uncanny, the range of goods boundless and utterly random. You had the feeling you would one day find there evidence of your missing twin, your grandfather’s secret diary, a photograph of the first girl whose image kept you awake at night, and all the childhood toys you had loved and lost.

What it meant, though, was that people who had previously gotten by on charm and serendipity now needed ready cash. It also meant that there now existed consumers who would pay folding money for stuff that had once been available for nothing to anyone who read the sidewalks. Part of the reason the *Luftmenschen* had to have dollars was the vast increase in heroin traffic, caused by a steep plunge in prices. All of a sudden people who had been strictly holiday users were getting themselves strung out. While this was happening the neighborhood was filling up, rapidly. Every day the streets were visibly more congested than the day before. The vacancy rate fell to near zero. Speculators were buying up even gutted shells, even tenements so unsound they would require a fortune to fix. Was the fall in the price index of junk connected to the rise in that of real estate? Street-corner theorists were certain we were all marked for death. It was obvious, no? If you OD’d or went to jail your apartment would become vacant, and legally subject to a substantial rent increase. A folklore emerged, with tales of people paying rent to sleep on examination tables in medical offices, of landlords murdering rent-controlled tenants or simply locking them out and disposing of their chattel. Whether those tales were true or not, everyone spent increasing amounts of time in housing court, battling the fourth or fifth landlord in as many months, who all but treated the property as vacant. The neighborhood was subjected to lifestyle pieces in the glossies; a crowd of galleries sprang up. You could spot millionaires making the rounds in old sweaters.

The more I felt I was losing my city the more preoccupied I became with it. I gradually became interested in its past, an interest that grew into an obsession. It was triggered by what seemed like chance—by things I spotted on the flattened cardboard boxes on the sidewalk. On Astor Place I acquired for a dollar a disintegrating copy of Junius Henry Browne’s *The Great Metropolis* (1868) and, a week later, Joseph Mitchell’s incomparable *McSorley’s Wonderful Saloon*, a 1940s paperback with a ridiculous cover that almost dissuaded me from picking it up—I had never heard of it or him. In a heap of miscellanea on Seventh Street I found a pristine copy of Chuck Connors’s very rare *Bowery Life*, and took it home for fifty cents. In a parking lot on Canal Street I bought a stereoscope card of the Second Avenue El; a table outside a junkshop on 30th Street yielded lithographs pulled from nineteenth-century copies of *Valentine’s Manual*. These things were mysterious, slices of a complex past of which I had little sense. I was already fascinated by the strange process whereby the glamorous city of the 1920s had become the entropic slum that was my home; now I was discovering that the slum had far deeper roots.

One day, probably early in 1980, a film crew commandeered Eleventh Street between Avenues A and B and, with minimal adjustments, returned the block to the way it had looked in 1910. All they did was to pull the plywood coverings off storefront windows, paint names in gold letters on those windows, and pile goods up behind them. They spread straw in the gutters and hung washlines across the street. They fitted selected residents with period clothes and called forth a parade of horse-drawn conveyances. They were shooting a few scenes of *Ragtime* (Milos Forman, 1981). After the production packed up a week later, the Dominican evangelical church on Avenue A held a sort of exorcism ceremony in the middle of the intersection. I hadn’t paid much attention to the goings-on, but I had been struck by how little effort was needed to conjure up a seemingly unimaginable past. When I walked down that street at night, with all the trappings up but the crew absent, I felt like a ghost. The tenements were aspects of the natural landscape, like caves or rock ledges, across which all of us—inhabitants, landlords, dope dealers, beat cops, tourists—flitted for a few seasons, like the pigeons and the cockroaches and the rats, barely registering as individuals in the ceaseless churning of generations.

And now everything was up for grabs. The tenements were old and unstable; the speculators were undoubtedly buying them up for the value of their lots. One day in the near future they would be razed and housing units at least superficially more upscale would be built. Maybe the whole neighborhood would be reconfigured, the way Washington Market and the far Lower East Side were swept, to the point where whole streets had disappeared. Within a decade, all of us who had lived there in the last days of the tenement era might seem as distant and insubstantial as the first people to move in when the buildings were new. I told myself it was inevitable. I remembered Baudelaire’s warning that the city changes faster than the human heart. I thought of my grandfather saying that progress was a zero-sum game in which every improvement carried with it an equivalent loss, and decided that the reverse was also true. I considered that at the very least nobody in the future would have to contend with a stiff wind sucking out an entire loose windowpane, as had once happened to me. Then I pictured the high-rises themselves falling inch by inch into ruin. I bore an old-timer’s resentment toward the children of privilege who were moving into tastefully done-up flats and about to start calling themselves New Yorkers, even Lower East Siders, and go spend decades without once having spent a winter sitting in front of an open oven wearing an overcoat and hat, or having to move pots and pans and furniture by subway in the middle of the night, or having bottles thrown at them by crack dealers, or having to walk home from Brooklyn in the rain for want of carfare. But it was for more than personal reasons that I wanted to prevent amnesia from setting in.

Now, more than a decade after I finally finished my book*Low Life*, the city has changed in ways I could not have pictured. The tenements are mostly still standing, but I could not afford to live in any of my former apartments, including the ones I found desperately shabby when I was much more inured to shabbiness. Downtown, even the places that used to seem permanently beyond the pale have been colonized by prosperity. Instead of disappearing, local history has been preserved as a seasoning, most visibly in names of bars. The economy has gone bad, but money shows no signs of loosening its grip. New York is neither the Wonder City nor a half-populated ruin but a vulnerable, overcrowded, anxious, half-deluded, all-too-human town, shaken by a cataclysm nobody could have foreseen. I don’t live there anymore, and I have trouble going there and walking around because the streets are too haunted by the ghosts of my own history. I wasn’t born in New York, and I may never live there again, and just thinking about it makes me melancholy, but I was changed forever by it, and my imagination is manacled to it, and I wear its mark the way you wear a scar. Whatever happens, whether I like it or not, New York City is fated always to remain my home.

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1. 1

*Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991). The following essay will serve as the afterword to the new edition, to be published later this month.[↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2003/nov/06/my-lost-city/?pagination=false&printpage=true#fnr1-439310323)

1. 2

*Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (Oxford University Press, 1978; Monacelli, 1997).[↩](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2003/nov/06/my-lost-city/?pagination=false&printpage=true#fnr2-439310323)