

Eula Biss Goodbye to All That.txt

Goodbye to All That

Eula Biss

For me, New York ended as soon as it began. The day I moved into my first apartment, I discovered that the reason the kitchen had looked so big was that there was no refrigerator. I also discovered that water didn't flow out of any of the taps. Sal, the plumber who scolded me for letting him in before I asked if he was the plumber, stood in the doorway to my bedroom after he fixed the sinks. I was staring at a wall, holding a paintbrush and a can of paint. He asked, "Did they teach you to paint like that in college?"

So Sal painted my room while I listened to the story of his life and the story of my neighborhood. It had been Finnish when Sal moved there from Sicily as a young boy, and then it was Italian, and then Jewish, and now it was Puerto Rican. After he finished painting my room, Sal drove around looking for used refrigerators, found one, fixed it, put it on my front stoop, rang the bell, and drove away. By the time I got downstairs, the refrigerator had already been stolen.

But that is not the way it really happened. That is how I learned to tell the story of my life in New York. I learned to make my experience of being young and new to the city sound effortless and zany. It was not.

I didn't mention that I couldn't go down to get the refrigerator Sal found because it was impossible for me to carry it up four flights of stairs alone. It was taken only after I left it on the stoop for an entire day while I tried to think of someone I could ask for help. I didn't mention the animal-piss stink of my room or the extreme aching sense of helplessness that overcame me when I realized that I would have to buy a refrigerator. I didn't mention that I couldn't hear out of my right ear because it became clogged from crying. I didn't mention all the time I wasted in bed, staring at the ceiling, debilitated with dread. Or the time I wasted trying to find out if landlords were required to provide refrigerators in units over a certain size. Or the call to my landlord, when he laughed at me, saying, "Look, either you take the place as it is, or you find somewhere else to live." I didn't mention hurting my hand when I punched the door frame in frustration. Or my sickening realization that Sal was helping me because I was white. He made me aware of this fact with a barrage of racial slurs that I failed to respond to with anything but silence. Silence because I needed his help and I suddenly understood the contract.

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“You gotta get a better lock on that door,” Sal advised. I pointed out that I didn’t own anything except a bed. “Yeah, well these Puerto Ricans will steal that bed right out from under you,” he said. Silence.

I ran into Sal once more before I left the city. He was getting into a car in Brooklyn’s Chinatown with his daughter, who was not white at all. Sal, like everyone else in New York, was not exactly who the story might lead you to believe he was.

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I hardly even knew the story back then—I had only a vague sense that the heroine was young and that the moral had something to do with being in the right place at the right time. I was ready for anything. I moved to the city during a record heat wave and calmly braced myself for an entire summer of filling the bathtub with ice cubes to cool my body at night. But it was never again that hot in New York. And I learned every detail of the story just as fast as I discovered its falsehood.

I remember a moment from my first days in the city when I was lost in Brooklyn somewhere around Avenue J. Sweat was trickling over my breastbone and the sun was burning my scalp. I couldn’t identify the exact nature of any of the businesses I was walking past, but they seemed to deal in car parts. Dozens of taillights in all different sizes and shades of red hung, sparkling, from chain-link fences. Suddenly, I felt a desperate need to call my mother. I tried three pay phones and lost five quarters before I found one that worked. When I got her on the line, all I could do was lean against the searing metal phone booth and sob.

Not that I wasn’t dazzled by the city. Every nerve in my body was electrified by New York. I was on an endless sidewalk surrounded by bare bulbs and whistles and sudden flocks of pigeons and huge fading stretches of concrete. I believe that I will never feel like that again—so raw and so moved.

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I was always lost in New York, even after I stopped walking east when I intended to walk west. There were just ways in which I fundamentally did not know where I was. I grew up north of the city, in the Hudson River Valley. But the water that flowed through upstate New York might as well have been a different substance from the water that flowed into

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New York Harbor. Where I came from, the river smelled distinctly of crayfish and grew a leafy skin in the summer. In the winter the ice groaned and cracked under the weight of all the surrounding silence. I would not have had any trouble believing, when I arrived in New York, that the water in the harbor had all been brought in on barges. Everything about the city seemed at least that absurd.

I was naive enough then to imagine that living a few blocks from the harbor would be pleasant. And I was innocent enough not to know that I should not walk down the street carrying two melons in my arms at about the level of my chest—even if melons were two for a dollar. From the roof of my building in Brooklyn I could see giant barges silhouetted against the hazy pink horizon at dusk. I tried to walk down to the water and promptly dead-ended at a huge, windowless building labeled Terminal Warehouse. On my way back, a bus driver at a red light yelled to me that I shouldn't be walking around down there. I got on the bus just to humor him and rode past train yards bordered with barbed wire.

Then I took a train to Coney Island.

The station at Coney Island was half-charred from a fire decades ago and packed with giant inflatable pink seals for sale. An abandoned wooden box read, "The world's tiniest horse!" Caramel apples were seventy-five cents and the din of the fair games was intolerable. One freak-show announcer screamed, "If you love your family, you will take them to see the two-headed baby!" It was gross and crazy and base—it was everything I would ever love about the city. The beach was packed with naked flesh and smelled like beer and mango. And the Wonder Wheel inspired real wonder as I rose up over Brooklyn in a swinging metal cage.

Did I know it would all cost something sooner or later? All the bewilderment and disorientation? I'm not sure. But I remember the moment when I realized exactly what it had already cost me. A friend and I thought it would be fun to go ice-skating in Prospect Park, but, like most things in New York that are supposed to be fun, it was miserable. The rented skates were as dull as spoons, the ice was slush, and it was so crowded that all we could do was keep ourselves standing and try to avoid being burned by cigarettes while we were pushed and shoved in a slow circle. We had both been very good ice-skaters as children.

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I arrived in New York at twenty-one, with a poor sense of direction and a worse sense of time. I set my watch first five minutes fast, then ten, then fifteen. I was only going to stay six months. I stayed three years, and I never stopped thinking about leaving. But when I left, I left my entire life behind. I have to explain to you why I no longer live in New York, but first I have to explain to myself why I stayed so long. Because what I want to say about living there is that it is not, as the mythology goes, more real than anyplace else. In some ways, it is less.

I noticed during my time in New York that many of the people I met there had a habit of describing how miserable they were, then arguing that they couldn't leave the city because it was so wonderful. When someone who spends the better part of every day in a cubicle and only occasionally makes it out to sit in a loud, dull bar tells me that she is living in the city for "the pace, the excitement, the culture, the—you know—stimulation," I have trouble fully believing her.

The myth of New York seems to be sustained by the fact that so many people who live there are from somewhere else. They come to the city and immediately dedicate themselves to making it the city of their imagination. The—you know—glittering city of endless opportunity that oozes riches and delights for the young and talented. I also came from somewhere else. Somewhere not far away but so clearly foreign that people often asked what country I was from. I always felt like an expatriate in the city, and I came knowing just a few of the stories that everyone has been told.

By now I consider almost everything that is often said about New York to be false. To begin with, the city is not that big or that worldly. An astonishing number of people who live there rarely leave their borough, let alone the country. And if you are part of the elite, as Joan Didion found, New York is like a small town. A tiny population of New York is rich or famous, and much of the rest of the city is in service to that population.

For most people, even the elite, it is a city of drudgery. You sweat in the hot station, then you shiver in the crowded train, then you walk for ten blocks without an umbrella through a pounding summer thunderstorm ... and you do this with desperation, because you have no other obvious choice. You do it every day.

There is a series of statements on the supporting beams of one of the

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tunnels under Forty-second Street that reads:

Overslept,
so tired.
If late,
get fired.
Why bother?
Why the pain?
Just go home
do it again.

Those words always affected me, although I never worked long enough at any one job to fully understand that particular brand of drudgery. I read them as words of caution. My work in New York was, like the work of everyone else I knew, whatever I could find. I watered plants in the offices of TV Guide at one point, I cleaned a bookstore twice a week for a while, I was a waitress for a few days, I did inspections of community gardens under the parks department for quite some time, I proofread just long enough to learn proofreaders' marks, I did transcriptions now and then, I opened mail, I taught writing for a couple of years, I temped, and I was briefly an editorial assistant at a major publishing house. My job as an editorial assistant was by far the most menial work I ever did in the city.

I remember it mostly as a series of pointless trips in elevators. And I remember the way my friend described a similar job: "I professionally destroy paper clips." But I still believed in the mystical power of the city to transform me into a writer—a real writer. I wasn't sure exactly how this alchemy would happen, which is one reason I kept changing jobs, but I was convinced that just living in the city could make my writing more legitimate.

By the time I left New York, I had learned that the distinction between a writer and a real writer is superficial. And I suddenly understood the advice that more established writers had been giving me all along. "Move somewhere else—anywhere else," one journalist had recommended soon after I moved to New York. "Pick any other city."

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There is a popular legend of New York as the gritty city of hard knocks and rough neighborhoods and real danger and police chases and wild

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nights. I suppose that watching a bum with no legs being dragged out of his stinking pile of blankets by four policemen is gritty, but it lacks any of the dirty romance implied by the word. Standing for an entire day in a clinic crowded with sick babies and pregnant women because you don't have health insurance and you've been ill for several months also lacks romance. So does spending hours on the telephone, waiting for the chance to explain that you were billed twice for the month of June. One of my most vivid memories from that first year in New York is the smell of the oil soap I always used to clean my floors. While I was on hold with the telephone company or the gas company or the credit-card company, I would sit on the floor, examining the splinters in the wood and inhaling the strange scent of oil soap.

Not even the dangers of New York are what the story dictates. I was harassed by children nearly as often as I was harassed by men in the city. I remember smiling at an eight-year-old boy on the train who stared at me stonily before he half closed his eyes and slowly ran his tongue across his upper lip as he fingered his crotch. While I was working for the parks department, I spent most of my time in neighborhoods imagined as "rough," where one or two people might ask me if I was lost. Often I was lost, and I got directions that were usually wrong from people who were always nice. The worst thing I was ever threatened with in New York was a lighter. And it was terrifying. But the man standing in the middle of the sidewalk in front of me, flicking his lighter, didn't hurt me. He stared at me and said softly, "How ya doing, princess?" I told him that I had been working all day and that I was very tired, and he said he knew how I felt and walked away.

I often woke before dawn and could not fall back to sleep. I lay there listening to the car alarms cycle through all their different sounds while my heart raced for no reason. It is hard for me to separate my experience of living in New York from the sensation of reaching the limits of my own independence. I was excruciatingly lonely, and everything was unfamiliar and difficult. But, in a way, I was living my dream. Long after I discarded every illusion I ever had about New York, I still treasured the empty fantasy of complete autonomy.

If I had entertained more illusions, I might have been able to stay in New York longer. I might have even considered myself happier. But I was not tickled by the daily opportunity to change trains in Rockefeller Center. I did not feel lucky to be surrounded by merchandise I couldn't afford, and I had absolutely no interest in the nightlife, whatever that is. I didn't

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participate in the New York of the collective imagination, which may be one reason that I don't believe in it.

My interactions with people I didn't know were always brief and often painful. One afternoon I crashed my bike into a man just as he stepped off the curb in Chinatown. Our heads slammed together, and I fell onto the sidewalk. For an instant I lay there, looking up at an advertisement for Asian escorts on the side of a building, smelling the reek of the fish market and listening to the humming motor of a tiny scuba diver who swam in a washtub next to me. The man I had hit was holding his forehead and seemed to be getting more and more agitated as people with orange bags of bok choy crowded around me to make sure I was all right while they left him standing alone. Scared and still seeing a few swimming lights from the impact, I got onto my bike quickly and rode away. I stopped after a few blocks and cried hysterically in dismay. No one looked at me. In ways I find hard to explain, most of the interactions I had in New York were like this one. Which may be why I always felt more comfortable simply observing other people's lives.

I watched everything carefully and never quite lost the conviction that I was missing something. So, what's so good about all this? I kept thinking. I suspected that there was a secret I hadn't been told. I was convinced that I had only one chance to do the right things and meet the right people and that I would surely fail. Everything was irrevocable, and nothing was within reach.

The peculiar paralysis I felt when I first came to the city was mostly from the sense that every decision I made would last the rest of my life. I know now that I was right and I was wrong. Success and failure were the terms in which young people who had just moved to the city spoke. It was not a place to live as much as it was a test or a game. I despise both. "Why don't you leave?" I asked people endlessly, even though I could not yet explain why I didn't leave. "Because I don't want to admit that I failed," one friend said. "Because I have to prove to myself that I can do this." By the time I left New York, I knew that success and failure are silly terms in which to speak of living a life.

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I read Joan Didion's essay "Goodbye to All That" before I ever saw the trenches of New York. All I remember of that first reading is that I didn't like the title. I knew nothing at all back then. I did not know that I would

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return to that essay again and again, and that I would eventually feel compelled to rewrite it.

But I remember, distinctly, walking down Fourth Avenue in Brooklyn for the first time, past the car wash and the huge windowless warehouses and the brick buildings bristling with TV antennas and the billboard that read, “Se Hacen.” I looked around and thought, with wonder, I’m going to love all this someday. And I did.

Still, I feel jarred by “I ♡ NY” bumper stickers and repulsed by “I ♡ NY” T-shirts. Especially now that the slogan has become so grossly fetishized, like the flag, I don’t want the New York I loved to be confused with the New York the T-shirts love. That isn’t the same city. I didn’t love the New Yorker’s New York or the New York of the New York Times. I didn’t love Joan Didion’s New York, or anyone else’s fantasy of the place. I loved my own experience of the city, which was rarely what I expected it to be. I loved the people I knew there, who were unlike any character in any TV show or movie set in New York that I have ever seen. I was most comfortable with people for whom New York was not a mirage, and I most trusted people who hated it there.

New York took everything I had. I moved four times, and each time I owned less. I left New York without even a bed. I no longer had potted plants, or framed pieces of art, or a snapshot of my father. I remember the moment when I threw that snapshot out. I was sifting through my things before another hurried move with a borrowed car, and I looked at the photo, thinking, I don’t really need this—he still looks almost the same. That was just before I noticed that my father had gone gray.

In New York, even one snapshot became too much of a burden to carry from one place to another. The mementos of my childhood began to weigh like lead. And so did my adolescent preoccupation with the real. Like many young people who go to college immediately after high school, I had learned to talk about the real world as if it were in an entirely different universe from the one I lived in. With the blind enthusiasm and embarrassing ignorance of a colonial explorer, I left college determined to discover the real world. I didn’t just want to live there—I wanted to be made real myself. This might be the saddest part of my story, because New York did not make me feel more legitimate or real. Actually, it made me feel as if I barely existed. As I wandered through the surprisingly solid streets of that mostly fictitious city, people often bumped into me very hard, as if I were invisible. Now I agree with

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my grandmother, who recently said, “The real question is—what is authenticity, anyway?”

For most of my time in New York, I lived in Brooklyn and worked in Harlem. I considered this a clever evasion of The City. Where I lived was just a place to live, not The Place. And where I worked was just a place to work, not The Place. I rode my bike to work early in the morning, when even the streets of Midtown were still empty. I rattled over the Brooklyn Bridge, looking down through the wooden slats at the water below. I swerved through Chinatown. And then I rode up Mulberry Street, through Little Italy, where the street carnival had been the night before. The strings of lights were still hanging, but not illuminated. The cobblestones were covered with trash. And the sausage vendor was asleep at the wooden counter with his head resting on his folded arms.

The New York I knew was always the city of the morning after the carnival. I rode all the way uptown on First Avenue, from Little Italy to Harlem. I walked from 110th to 140th, from Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. I passed murals painted on the boards that covered the broken windows of the old brownstones—the Virgin Mary on one window, St. Lazarus, with his crutches and his dog, on the other. I read the messages chalked onto the sidewalk by De La Vega every morning: “You are more desirable as a servant of the machine than as a free thinker.” I saw the glorious graffiti on the basketball courts. I stepped over dog shit. I watched the Eastern European woman who worked in the pizza shop grow thin and develop a sore on her face while the boys from the school came in and yelled at her to hurry up with that slice, bitch. I glared at the boys and they didn’t meet my eyes. Almost no one did. I listened to the guys in the bodega betting on the Mets and laughing. I smiled at babies in strollers. I watched kids on bikes ride through traffic and pop up onto their back wheels. Sometimes I ate in the hospital café, because it was the only place I knew I could get spinach for lunch. I watched women in hot, hot dresses, and I watched the men watching them. I listened to Rosie, the police officer, singing Aretha Franklin in the bathroom of the school where I worked. I knew, intimately, the empty lots where grandmas from Alabama grew okra and collard greens. I found a cat that had drowned in a rain barrel and was gathering mold. At the bodega on First Avenue I saw the old man who was always trying to remember my name. “Ida!” he would jump up and yell, “Ursula, Ursula, Ursula!”

This was the New York I loved, with the imperfect, ambiguous, hesitant

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love that I have come to recognize as my own. It was the city that existed on the margins of the story. It was the New York of Harlem and Inwood and Washington Heights. The New York of the outer boroughs. The New York of Brooklyn and Queens and Staten Island and the Bronx.

But see, the name of every place in New York serves as a code word or a racial cue. The code shifts slightly, depending on whom you are talking to, so that at times the word “Harlem” will mean “dangerous” and “tough” and at other times will mean “vibrant” and “real.” But it is always a setting for our same old stories. What an injustice to a place. A place that is, incidentally, real. When I moved to New York, I had the luxury at first of living in a neighborhood that most of the people I met had never heard of. Sunset Park meant nothing. But Fort Greene did, and so did Astoria, and the East Village meant so much that I tried to avoid admitting I lived there. “It’s temporary,” I would say. But so was everything.

My friends often say, “When you come back to New York ...,” assuming, of course, that I will come back. And maybe I will, despite it all. Joan Didion did. But for now I prefer to think that I will go somewhere that is not so overimagined.

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I lived in the city just long enough to see Coney Island begin to be destroyed. The spring I left New York was the same spring I discovered that the old vine-covered roller coaster had finally been torn down. So had the ancient candy shop with the homemade caramel apples. And the burned train station was being renovated.

It has been said that New York is a city for only the very rich and the very poor. Joan Didion suggested that it is a city for only the very young.

In my worst moments, especially when standing on Madison Avenue, I have suspected that it is a city for only the very desperate or the very deluded.

I have at times been mystified by Joan Didion’s ability to tolerate certain myths while she so fiercely and effectively destroys the foundations of many others. But I know now that it is very difficult to dismantle one story without replacing it with another. The romance of narrative is so hard to resist. Like Joan Didion, I made a yellow curtain for my first

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bedroom in the city because I had a romantic notion of light and color.
My curtain also became grimy in the rain.

It is not that the heroine is no longer as optimistic as she once was. It is that the heroine is not convinced she is the heroine or that the story is true. The heroine knows that New York is just a city—just a place to live. And, like any other place, it demands that you make your own story.

I came to New York very young, and I left still young but not the same. The Wonder Wheel is still there, true, but everything else is gone.