I was twenty when I first saw New York, and nothing like this, I felt.
I never happened to anyone before. I was mistaken; it happens to everybody, but only once.

How many miles to Babylon?
Three score miles and ten—
Can I get there by candlelight?
Yes, and back again—
If your feet are nimble and light,
You can get there by candlelight.

It is easy to see the beginnings of things, and harder to see the ends. I can remember now, with a clarity that makes the nerves in the back of my neck constrict, when New York began for me, but I cannot lay my finger upon the moment it ended, can never cut through the ambiguities and second starts and broken resolves to the exact place on the page where the heroine is no longer as optimistic as she once was. When I first saw New York I was 20, and it was summertime, and I got off a DC-7 at the old Idlewild temporary terminal in a new dress which had seemed very smart in Sacramento but seemed less smart already, even in the old Idlewild temporary terminal, and the warm air smelled of mildew, and some instinct, programmed by all the movies I had ever seen and all the songs I had ever heard sung and all the stories I had ever read about New York, informed me that it would never be quite the same again. In fact it never was. Some time later there was a song on all the jukeboxes on the upper East Side that went, but where is the schoolgirl who used to be me? and if it was late enough at night I used to wonder that. I know now that almost every woman wonders it, wherever she is and whatever she is doing, but one of the mixed blessings of being 20 and 21 and even 23 is the conviction that nothing like this, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, has ever happened to anyone before.

Of course it might have been some other city, had circumstances been different and the time been different and had I been different, might have been Paris or Chicago or even San Francisco, but because I am talking about myself I am talking here about New York. That first night I opened my window on the bus into town and watched for the skyline, but all I could see were the wastes of Queens and the big signs that said MIDTOWN TUNNEL THIS LANE and then a flood of summer rain, and for the next three days I sat wrapped in blankets in a hotel room air-conditioned to 35 degrees and tried to get over a bad cold and a high fever. It did not occur to me to call a doctor, because I knew none, and although it did occur to me to call the desk and ask that the air conditioner be turned off, I never called, because I did not know how much to tip whoever might come—was anyone ever so young? I am here to tell you that someone was. All I could do during those three days was talk long distance to the boy I already knew I would never marry in the spring, I would stay in New York, I told him, just six months, and I could see the Brooklyn Bridge from my window. As it turned out the bridge was the Triborough, and I stayed eight years.

In retrospect it seems to me that those days before I knew the names of all the bridges were happier than the ones that came later, but perhaps you will see that as we go along. Part of what I want to tell you is what it is like to be young in New York, how six months can become eight years with the deceptive ease of a film dissolve, for that is how those years appear to me now, in a long sequence of sentimental dissolves and old-fashioned trick shots—the Seagram Building fountains dissolve into snowflakes, I enter a revolving door at 20 and come out a good deal older. But most particularly I want to explain to you, and in the process perhaps explain to myself, why I no longer live in New York. It is often said that New York is a city for only the very rich and the very poor. It is less often said that New York is also, at least for those of us
I was in love with the city, the way you love the first person who ever touches you and never love anyone quite that way again.

I remember once, one cold bright December evening in New York, suggesting to a friend who complained of having been around too long that he come with me to a party where there would be, I assured him with the bright resourcefulness of 23, “new faces.” He laughed literally until he choked, and I had to roll down the taxi window and hit him on the back. “New faces,” he said finally, “don’t tell me about new faces.” It seemed that the last time he had gone to a party where he had been promised “new faces,” there had been 15 people in the room, and he had already slept with five of the women and owed money to all but two of the men. I laughed with him, but the first snow had just begun to fall, and the big Christmas trees glittered yellow and white as far as I could see up Park Avenue, and I had a new dress, and it would be a long while before I would come to understand the particular moral of the story.

It would be a long while because, quite simply, I was in love with New York. I do not mean “love” in any colloquial way, I mean that to charge food at Bloomingdale’s gourmet shop in order to eat, a fact which went unmentioned in the letters I wrote to California. I never told my father that I needed money, because then he would have sent it, and I would never know if I could do it by myself. At that time making a living seemed a game to me, with arbitrary but quite flexible rules. And except on a certain kind of winter evening—6:30 in the 70’s, say, already dark and bitter with a wind off the river, when I would be walking very fast toward a bus and would look in the bright windows of brownstones and see cooks working in clean kitchens and imagine women lighting candles on the floor above and beautiful children being bathed on the floor above that—except on nights like those, I never felt poor; I had the feeling that if I needed money I could always get it. I could write a syndicated column for teenagers under the name “Debbi Lynn,” or I could smuggle gold into India, or I could become a $100 call girl, and none of it would matter.

Nothing was irrevocable; everything was within reach. Just around every corner lay something curious and interesting, something I had never before seen or done or known about. I could go to a party and meet someone who called himself Mr. Emotional Appeal and ran The Emotional Appeal Institute or Tina Onassis Blandford or a Florida cracker who was then a regular on what he called “the Big C,” the Southampton—El Morocco circuit (“I’m well-connected on the Big C, honey,” he would tell me over collard greens on his vast borrowed terrace), or the widow of the celery king of the Harlem market or a piano salesman from Bonne Terre, Mo., or someone who had already made and lost two fortunes in Midland, Tex. I could make promises to myself and to other people, and there would be all the time in the world to keep them. I could stay up all night and make mistakes, and none of it would count.

You see, I was in a curious position in New York; it never occurred to me that I was living a real life there. In my imagination I was always there for just another few months, just until Christmas or Easter or the first warm day in May. For that reason I was most comfortable in the company of Southerners. They seemed to be in New York as I was, on some indefinitely extended leave from wherever they belonged, disinclined to consider the future, temporary exiles who always knew when the flights left for New Orleans or Memphis or Richmond or, in my case, California. Someone who lives always with a plane schedule in the drawer lives on a slightly different calendar. Christmas, for example, was a difficult season. Other people could take it in stride, going to Stowe or going abroad, or going for the day to their mothers’ places in Connecticut; those of us who believed that we lived somewhere else would spend it making and canceling airline reservations, waiting for weatherbound flights as if for the last plane out of Lisbon in 1940, and finally comforting one another, those of us who were left, with the oranges and mementoes and smoked-oyster stuffings of childhood, gathering close, colonials in an exotic country.

Which is precisely what we were. I am not sure that it is possible for anyone brought up in the East to entirely appreciate what New York, the idea of New York, means to those of us who come out of the West and the South. To an Eastern child, particularly one who has always had an uncle on Wall Street and who has spent several hundred Saturdays first at F.A.O. Schwarz and being fitted for shoes at Best’s, and then waiting under the Biltmore clock and dancing to Lester Lanin, New York is just a city, albeit the city, a plausible place for people to live. But to those of us who came from places where no one had heard of Lester Lanin, and Grand Central Station,
first person who ever touches you and never love anyone in quite the same way again.

was a Saturday radio program, where Wall Street and Fifth Avenue and Madison Avenue were not places at all but abstractions ("Money" and "High Fashion" and "The Hucksters"), New York was no mere city. It was instead an infinitely romantic notion, the mysterious nexus of all love and money and power, the shining and perishable dream itself. To think of "living" there was to reduce the miraculous to the mundane; one does not "live" at Xanadu.

In fact it was difficult in the extreme for me to understand those young women for whom New York was not simply an ephemeral storit but a real place, girls who bought toasters and installed new cabinets in their apartments and committed themselves to some reasonable future. I never bought any furniture in New York. For a year or so I lived in other people's apartments; after that I lived in the 90's in an apartment furnished entirely with things taken from storage by a friend whose wife had moved away. And when I left the apartment in the 90's (that was when I was leaving everything, when it was all breaking up), I left everything in it, even my winter clothes and the map of Sacramento County I had hung on the bedroom wall to remind me who I was, and I moved into a monastic four-room floor-through on 75th Street. "Monastic" is perhaps misleading here, implying some chic severity; until after I was married and my husband moved some furniture in, there was nothing at all in those four rooms except a cheap double mattress and box springs, ordered by telephone the day I decided to move, and two French garden chairs lent me by a friend who imported them.

All I ever did to that apartment was hang 50 yards of yellow theatrical silk across the bedroom windows, because I had some idea that the gold light would make me feel better, but I did not bother to weight the curtains correctly, and all that summer the long panels of transparent golden silk would blow out the windows and get tangled and drenched in the afternoon thunderstorms. That was the year, my 28th, when I was discovering that not all of the promises would
It was a very long time before I stopped believing in new faces and began to understand something which looked effortlessly glossy and could be picked up on a newsstand and weighed in the hand. I liked all the minutiae of proofs and layouts, liked working late on the nights the magazine went to press, sitting and reading _Variety_ and waiting for the copy desk to call. From my office I could look across town to the weather signal on the Mutual of New York Building and the lights that alternately spelled out _Time_ and _Life_ above Rockefeller Plaza; that pleased me obscenely, and so did walking uptown in the mauve eight o'clocks of early summer evenings and looking at things: Lowestock turkeys in 57th Street windows, people in evening clothes trying to get taxis, the trees just coming into full leaf, the lambent air, all the sweet promises of money and summer.

Some years passed, but I still did not lose that sense of wonder about New York. I began to cherish the loneliness of it, the sense that at any given time no one need know where I was or what I was doing. I liked walking, from the East River over to the Hudson and back on brisk days, down around the Village on warm days. A friend would leave me the key to her apartment in the West Village when she was out of town, and sometimes I would just move down there, because by that time the telephone was beginning to bother me (the canker, you see, was already in the rose), and not many people had that number. I remember one day when someone who did have the West Village number came to pick me up for lunch there, and we both had hangovers, and I cut my finger opening him a beer and burst into tears, and we walked to a Spanish restaurant and drank Bloody Marys and _gazpacho_ until we felt better. I was not then guilt-ridden about spending afternoons that way, because I still had all the afternoons in the world.

And even that late in the game I still liked going to parties, all parties, bad parties, Saturday-afternoon parties given by recently married couples who lived in Stuyvesant Town, West Side parties given by unpublished or failed writers who served cheap red wine and talked about going to Guadalajara, Village parties where all the guests worked for advertising agencies and voted for Reform Democrats, press parties at Sardi's, the worst kinds of parties. You will have perceived by now that I was not one to profit by the experience of others, that it was a very long time indeed before I stopped believing in new faces and began to understand the lesson in that story, which was that it is distinctly possible to stay too long at the fare.

I could not tell you when I began to understand that. All I know is that it was very bad when I was 28. Everything that was said to me I seemed to have heard before, and I could no longer listen. I could no longer sit in little bars near Grand Central and listen to someone complaining of his wife's inability to cope with the help while he missed another train to Connecticut. I no longer had any interest in hearing about the advances other people had received from their publishers, about plays which were having second-act trouble in Philadelphia, or about people I would like very much if only I would come out and meet them. I had already met them always. There were certain parts of the city which I had to avoid, and I could not go into a Schrafft's; the next day I could not go to Times Square for any reason whatsoever. One day I could not go into a _Schräff's_; the next day it would be _Bonwit Teller_.

I hurt the people I cared about, and insulted those I did not. I cut myself off from the one person who was closer to me than any other, I cried until I was not even aware when I was crying and when I was.
ot, cried in elevators and in taxis and in Chinese laundries, and when
got to the doctor he said only that I seemed to be depressed and
would see a "specialist." He wrote down a psychiatrist’s name and
dress for me, but I did not go.

Instead I got married, which as it turned out was a very good
thing to do but badly timed, since I still could not walk on upper
Madison Avenue in the mornings and still could not listen to people
and still cried in Chinese laundries. I had never before understood
what “despair” meant, and I am not sure that I understand now, but
understood that year. Of course I could not work. I could not even
get dinner with any degree of certainty, and I would sit in the apart-
ment paralyzed until my husband would call from his office and say
mently that I did not have to get dinner, that I could meet him at
Michael’s Pub or at Toots Shor’s or at Sardi’s East. And then one
morning in April (we had been married in January), he telephoned and
told me that he wanted to get out of New York for a while, that he
would take a six-month leave of absence, that we would go somewhere.

It was almost three years ago when he told me that, and we have
lived in Los Angeles since. Many of the people we knew in New
York think this a curious aberration, and in fact tell us so. There is
no possible, no adequate answer to that, and so we give certain stock
answers, the answers everyone gives. I talk about how difficult it
would be for us to “afford” to live in New York right now, about
how much “space” we need. All I mean is that I was very young in
New York, and that at some point the golden rhythm was broken,
and I am not that young anymore. The last time I was in New York
was in a cold January, and everyone was ill and tired. Many of the
people I used to know there had moved to Dallas or had bought
a farm in New Hampshire. We stayed 10 days, and then we took an
afternoon flight back to Los Angeles, and on the way home from the
airport that night I could see the moon on the Pacific and smell jasmine
all around, and we both knew that there was no longer any point in
keeping the apartment we still kept in New York. There were years when
I called Los Angeles “the Coast,” but they seem a long time ago.