

*“I love this dirty town,”*

– JJ Hunsecker in *Sweet Smell of Success*

*Spring* is unloading its steamy, dreamy sunlight on the unsuspecting necks of all the tourists and locals clogging this cut-rate town. *New York is a cheap date these days*, but this island off the coast of America is **still hot**. The parks are full of new plantings, flowers pushing up from earth, to be strangled by the rough hands of Parks Departmental cases. *The temperature rises, the street smells of sexual intercourse*, light bounces off the water and turns the air a deeper blue. Concrete canyons that were such merciless wind tunnels in winter are now filled with glorious sunlight, all that **stone leaking history** onto the tourists who rush below, pockets stuffed with euros.

► In the springtime missing persons finally turn up, surfacing bloated with gas from the depths of the Hudson, bobbing on the water until the Fire Department’s grappling hooks drag them ashore for identification. That’s the sad part of spring, when many people feel the urge to kick off the planet, instead of dealing with their tedious problems. I count myself among those legions with a passing urge to leap swiftly from high ►



CENTRAL PARK, NEW YORK, 1980 © TOD PAPAGEORGE COURTESY PACE/MACGILL GALLERY / MICHAEL HOPPEN CONTEMPORARY

► places and be rendered unto carbuncular ash. This too will pass. The Ides of March will pass, and we'll plough through April, nothing cruel about it, until we reach balmy, sexy May, coolest month, before the summer heat kicks in and everyone, except the poor, runs like lemmings to the Hamptons.

The British were kicked out of New York in no uncertain fashion 200 years ago, but a hardcore Bromley contingent has discreetly slipped back in, and stayed, having discovered that New York is not America. It is one big steaming pot-au-feu, a hundred accents colliding in the multiculti air: Rastaman, Spanish, hip-hop, Afro, Inuit even. The Puerto Ricans on the avenue have been replaced by Koreans, Russians, Estonians, Ghanaians. Most of us Limeys remember a time before chavs in shell suits ruled that sceptered isle, but nostalgia is banned, we just need a few necessary artefacts: black tea, clotted cream, Tiptree jam, Mars bars (oh, Marianne, we know it never happened and the Filth set you up, but that image lodged in a young lad's head like shrapnel).

Time was there weren't that many English here, apart from WH Auden shuffling about St Mark's Place in his carpet slippers, arguing with the Poles in the butcher shops, and later, Quentin Crisp, who also fit so seamlessly into the grain of New York City life. This stately homo's marvellous eccentricity was welcomed, acclaimed or ignored as he went about his business, which seemed to involve a lot of riding on buses. I used to see him at a stop on Second Avenue all the time. You see a lot of famous people here, but their context is just as famous as they are, so they are absorbed into the pattern and texture of their surroundings.

As if to confirm this theory, I took a break from this desk and biked up to Hudson Street last Saturday afternoon to re-load on PG tips and home-made Cumberland sausage at *Myers of Keswick*, a base camp for the hungry Englishman. I paused for a cup of tea and a biscuit at a little cafe on the way. Gabriel Byrne sat reading *The Times* in a corner while everyone pretended to ignore him. I had just watched his new series on HBO the night before, so I couldn't decide if he was a psychiatrist, an actor or just another New Yorker sitting in a coffee shop with a hangover from Friday night.

Since we are in the Village, let's stay here, just down from where Dylan Thomas breathed his last sigh in a crapulous Village pub that's still serving shots and beer. Actually, DT (sic!) croaked in *Saint Vincent's* a few blocks away. As did Kahlil Gibran, another dipsomaniac scribbler, though not quite in the same league in either profession as the little Welshman. Stay here on the bench, for "who is this, what thing of sea or land, that comes this way sailing like some stately ship of Tarsus", bound for the shops of west Bleeker, for Marc Jacobs, Lulu Guinness or Ralph's many emporia? None other than Uma Thurman, striding along on those massive plates of meat that Tarantino, that fortunate little fetishist, captured so well in *Kill Bill*. Her hair is blonde and bouncy like in a commercial, catching the light just right, a Clairol moment. Uma looks positively regal. Now an odd thing happens. You see these famous people and you have a powerful urge to speak to them. You feel like you know them because you've seen them on the cinema screen or on the TV at home. Lou Reed is often around the Village and I always have the urge to pet his rat terrier and tell Lou how listening to Sister Ray changed my life when I was feeding the gas meter in my Camden Town bedsitter with shillings made out of ice, but I restrain myself. You don't know them and they don't want to know you, they have enough friends already, so let them glide by like creatures from a dream.

These days, the true legends are rarer birds, replaced by idiots who think they are famous because they were once mentioned on *Page Six* of the *New York Post*, music promoters, publicists even. They pounce around the town cloaked in an aura invisible to everyone but themselves. Legends in their own minds. This new kind of faux celebrity has definitely downgraded the frequency this town operates on, brought it down two levels of cool. The lifespan of exclusivity is continually shrinking. *Tenjune*, anyone? *Beatrice* out? *Morandi* who? The muse of grooviness is so ephemeral.

New York, say the grizzled veterans of 1980s crack and smack streets, has gotten too clean, too white, and the hordes of kids now pouring in from all those towns across America that drive their misfits early out into the world are not nearly so deranged. Unlike the earlier contingents, they are not coming for art anymore, they are here for commerce. But there is no poetry in money ("there is no money in poetry" is the other half of that epigram) – witness most of the folks who have it, the dealers and thieves and developers who are changing the face of New York, and not necessarily in a good way. New York is Audrey Hepburn, not Donald Trump. The Donald simply has not earned the right to have his moniker on so many buildings. Time was you had to do something heroic to get your name on a street sign, much less a building. Now you just build it and you can stamp your name across the facade in 4ft letters. It's so gauche, so midwestern, so un-New York.

But still, the natives are, for the most part, a boisterous group who know their own minds and, unlike the English, never mind their own business. Our women are beautiful, and on these pearlescent days and the long evenings when the light lingers along the avenue, they shed layers of clothing, revealing well-toned arms and legs, exquisite tattoos and lovely feet, the nails bedecked in many colours, of which red is, and remains, the most alluring, fire-engine red, blood red, opera red, glistening on the slightly soiled sidewalks, in all kinds of skimpy footwear, even flip-flops, whose rubber soles remind me somehow of hanky spanky, that English taste particular as Marmite. May evenings are a splendid time to be alive – now you remember why you didn't kill yourself in April after all! The light changes slowly on the faux campanile tower that used to remind the Italian immigrants crammed into Carmine Street tenements of their homeland. Watch the soft parade as you sit in the trattoria or round the corner at *Bar Pitti*, or *Da Silvano's*, where they'll give you the bill in euros. Further east, *La Esquina* is always a good corner to pick up a taco on the run, or round by *Balthazar*, get your coffee and croissant to go and just sit on the seats outside, let the movie unspool.

Or wander through the parks, starting at Washington Square and going north, Union Square, Madison at 23rd, up to Bryant Park, and on to Central Park, the jewel in the crown. This year, Washington Square Park is partially closed off by rabbit-proof fences. I saunter underneath the arch, atop which Marcel Duchamp once held a dinner party, toward the junction of 8th Street, where an elephantine SUV almost runs me down. Out steps Sam Shepard, cowboy mouth and all. I'm shocked that he would prefer this monstrous Japanese gas guzzler, named after an endangered tree, to the old Ford pickup. It lacks that western flair we've come to associate with Sam. At least he is wearing authentic-looking Wranglers, probably bought in New Mexico or some other corner of the American west. Sam, unaware that he almost felled a fan, walks on in through the elegant portal of his building, a classic pre-war high-rise that is already loaded with Village history. Rene Ricard sliced Victor Bockris's cheek with a wine-glass there, and another Sam, Wagstaff, held court upstairs in the 1970s, when he was fuelling Robert Mapplethorpe's sudden rise and creating a market for modern photographs. He was right about that.

Union Square used to look like a Peter Hujar photograph, dark and empty, with a true edge of malevolent beauty, a wasteland of rats and muggers. Today it's clean and safe, there is even an outdoor restaurant where the junkies once roamed. From a comfortable table you can see the building where scummy Valerie Solanas plugged Andy Warhol for not supporting the arts. Now it's filled with graphic designers. In the greenmarket you can watch models pausing to stroke a potato as they hurry by with their portfolios, gazing longingly at the forbidden carbohydrates.

Continue north along Sixth Avenue, crossing the Disney-fied deuce, 42nd Street, where once a doped-up Larry Clark photographed feral Spanish boys nailing tripped-out mid-western runaways in terrible hippie headgear. That world is gone, but Bryant Park is newly pristine just across the street, where the statue of Gertrude Stein squats between two sycamores behind the Public Library. For luck I fondle Gertrude's orb-like face. I scarcely know her work, but her Buddha-like figure is so reassuring, speaking to me of culture, without forcing me to read that complicated prose. Behind me, the eyes of a thousand discontented Wintourettes in the new Condé Nast building gaze at the walls of their cubicles, wishing they could go out for lunch instead of eating celery with the other stick figures in that backbiting cafeteria. I lunched there once and had to be treated for an oestrogen overdose.

Up Fifth from the Library to 59th Street, the beauty of Central Park. There's plenty of room for families and for cruising homosensualists. On the Sheep Meadow, fragments of underwear fly through the air like errant Frisbees, tossed there by eager beavers joining in unholy liplock without benefit of clergy. The kids are all right, but my nose is bleeding, I've wandered too far north. Uptown was never my beat, but I go there occasionally to spray the dowagers' furs, freelancing for PETA. Notice how fur has just come right back again as if there was no anal electrocution of the little animals that supply the material? Funny that, but in Bushworld the bling is the thing, the pimp is a role model, oil trumps blood. Oh don't make me commence, it's spring and I ain't dead yet. ◀